

FEMINIST SPACES

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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

Greetings, Readers,

This installment of *Feminist Spaces* is the product of our first open Call for Works. By not limiting the call to a specific theme, discipline, or interest area, we received submissions that focus on issues running the gamut of feminist and liberatory approaches to education, the gender binary, domestic and intimate partner violence, and the legacy of forging spaces for women's writing in literature and mass media. Despite our open call, there was a trend in the submissions we received reflecting the current preoccupation with feminist pedagogy and a commitment to both preserving the vitality of feminist dialogue and activism, and improving those approaches. It is this contemporaneity that inspired us to broaden our call and put forth this issue which we feel represents a dynamic array of interests and topics within the field of contemporary feminist scholarship.



Feminist Spaces began with the intent to ignite social change and inspire provocative critical insights; as we continue to create new issues and grow in readership, it is our sincere hope to never lose sight of that mission and to keep fostering inclusive spaces for our readers and contributors to build communication and solidarity. We therefore dedicate this issue to our contributors, without whom our journal would not be the rewarding project we envisioned; the members of our editorial board, whose collaboration with our contributors has been instrumental to the success of this issue; and to Dr. Katherine Romack, Coordinator of the Women's, Gender, and Sexuality Studies Program at the University of West Florida (UWF) and faculty advisor to the UWF Women's Studies Collective, for her tireless support and encouragement.

As always, we now invite you to turn the page and discover what lies within and beyond these continually growing feminist spaces.

Our very, very best,

Brittany Hammock and Erica Miller
Editors



Contributor Biographies

Danielle Lehuanani Bonderer is a graduate student in the English Department at the University of West Florida. Danielle grew up in St. Petersburg, Florida, where she spent many summers going back to her birthplace, Oahu; she has always had a passion for travel, art, and storytelling. Danielle's artistic style in her photography, art, and writing takes a naturalistic and textured approach that leaves ample room for humor, exploration, and improvement. Her plans for the future involve an inter-disciplinary photography and nonfiction project that focuses on the importance of national parks, world heritage sites, and the outdoors as a space of learning.

Eva Burke recently completed an MPhil in popular literature at Trinity College, Dublin, and is preparing to start a PhD program, focusing on the history and popularity of 'domestic noir' in early 2016. Her research interests include the gendered dynamics of victimhood in popular crime fiction and depictions of the monstrous feminine in horror fiction.

Dr. Kimberly J. Chandler is an Assistant Professor of Communication Studies and Women's Studies at Xavier University of Louisiana. A scholar-activist, she is also a minister, educational and organizational consultant as well as performance artist in pre-production for the premiere of her autocritographical one woman show entitled, Confessions of an exSuperwoman, staged in New Orleans. Her work focuses on the intersection of race, gender, identity and performance. Her latest publication, "Beyoncé and Performing Placage in the New Millennium" is forthcoming in the book entitled, The Beyoncé Effect.

Janessa Duran is a third year student studying Peace, Conflict, and Justice Studies, and Diaspora and Transnational Studies at the University of Toronto. Janessa spent the majority of her life in southern California before moving to Viña del Mar, Chile, at age 17. She eventually made her way to Toronto and, in light of her international and multicultural upbringing, decided to pursue an education to deepen her understanding of the world's complex conflicts. Thus far, Janessa has interned at the US Consulate General in Toronto and is currently Fulbright Canada's 2016 Killam Fellow. Janessa is interested in Latin American development and politics, human trafficking issues, and the nexus of human rights and technology.



Monika Hauck is a graduate student working on her MPH at the University of West Florida (UWF) and graduated with her BA in psychology in 2016. Her undergraduate career was spent advocating for suicide prevention and mental health awareness through her role as president of both Students for Suicide Awareness and Active Minds at UWF. She currently works for the Office of Undergraduate Research at UWF as the social media coordinator. Once she graduates with her MPH, she plans to help design and implement effective suicide prevention efforts in the public school system and within colleges across America.

Staci Jagoe is a graduate student in the Department of Social Work at the University of West Florida. Her research and advocacy interest include dating violence, early intervention for children with developmental delays, and policies impacting individuals with mental illness; as an Infant and Toddler Developmental Specialist, her practice experiences have been focused on working with children with developmental delays.

Dione Moultrie King is an Assistant Professor at the University of West Florida in the Department of Social Work. Her major research interests include dating violence, adolescent risk behaviors with a focus on sexual health and substance use behaviors, and health disparities. Her practice experiences have been focused on working with adolescents and families including those involved in the child welfare and juvenile justice setting.

Tiffany Kinney is a PhD candidate in the English Department with a specialization in rhetoric and writing studies at the University of Utah. She is interested in feminist studies, rhetorical practices, and historiography. More specifically, her work examines how language shapes the everyday lived experiences of women in ways that are both productive and restrictive.

Srishti Krishnamoorthy is a third year PhD student in English at the University of Cambridge, UK. She works on the emergence of a political questioning in the botanical poetics in contemporary experimental poetry by women in Britain and North America from circa 1990 to the present. Her research interests include contemporary poetry and cinema, gender and sexuality (including feminisms, queer theory, body studies, and psychoanalysis), ecopoetics, botanical spaces, critical theory, thanatopolitics, the cultural history of chalk, and boarding school narratives.

Solenne Lestienne dedicates most of her time to art now that she has received an MA in English and finished extensive research on Henry James'



The Portrait of a Lady; her paintings have been displayed at numerous exhibits and have received critical attention and awards. Her current research interests include the various works of Virginia Woolf, mental illness, and the drama of absurdity, and the metamorphoses in a defined corpus in French literature.

Katherine Masters is a resident of Pensacola, Florida. She is currently pursuing an MA in literature at the University of West Florida.

Helmi Ben Meriem is a researcher of Somali literature at the University of Sousse, Tunisia, where he is finishing his PhD dissertation under the direction of American fiction writer and professor of Anglophone studies, Edward Sklepowich. He focuses his creative writings on marginalized segments of the Arab and/or Muslim world such as women, homosexuals, atheists, animals, and religious minorities among others. Ben has an unpublished novel entitled *Good Night Letters: An Epistolary Novel* and is currently working on a new novel by the title *Helmi's Corner*.

Carrie Myers has a PhD in English and American literature from New York University.

She lives in Astoria, Queens, NY, with her husband and three children. She is a faculty member at City Seminary of New York, where she works in writing and literature, development, and the arts.

Jonathan Naveh recently completed his master's degree in film studies at Ohio University. His graduate thesis, "Narratives on the Watch: Bodies, Images, & Technologies of Control in Contemporary Surveillance Cinema," examined surveillance cinema's capacity to critique what Deleuze has described as the "societies of control." Outside of his thesis concentration, Jonathan has written on transgression in the New French Extremity, L.A.'s depiction as an urban dystopia through 1980s sci-fi, and art cinema at the intersection of genre. He has taught courses on the contemporary Western, Cold War film culture, and authorship through John Carpenter. Jonathan has also presented work both domestically and internationally, and has contributed to film and media scholarship through various book review, journal article, and encyclopedia entry publications.

Elizabeth (Lily) Rowen is a doctoral student in political science at Claremont Graduate University. She holds a Master of Arts degree from Claremont Graduate University and a Bachelor of Arts degree from



Occidental College. Her research interests include homelessness, housing policy, and identity politics.

Molly E. Ubbesen is a doctoral student in the rhetoric and composition program at the University of Wisconsin-Milwaukee, and just completed a graduate certificate in Women's and Gender Studies. She enjoys tutoring at the writing center, teaching writing to a diverse population of students, and training and mentoring new teachers as a writing program administrator. Her current research explores how providing the opportunity for the self-identification of preferred names and preferred gender pronouns can create queer rhetorical agency.

Alithia Skye Zamantakis is a queer femme from rural Utah, writing, dreaming, and cuddling their way along with their chosen family and trans femme pup, Totes, toward a better future. They have been published in *Peculiar*, *Scribendi*, and *Hinckley Journal of Politics*, and are a doctoral candidate in Georgia State University's sociology program.



Denise Riley and the Thermodynamics of the Experimental Lyric

Srishti Krishnamoorthy

Experimental Postmodernism dislocates language from the margin to the centre of the field of engagement, opening up the space to grapple with it as metaphor, metonymy and material. The ontologically substantive nature of language enters into discourse through radical reimaginings of its possibility, thus simultaneously making possible a rigorous interrogation of its limits and stretching this textual skin to produce a modal revivification of its nature. In this essay I will attempt to access the kinetics of the experimental tongue through a study of the subverted lyric form that is produced within the British underground poetry revolution. The complexity of the experimental lyric invites critical readings that pursue a decoding of surface reticence through the mechanisms of disorganisation, misspeaking, an awareness of depth/interiority and excess/exteriority, and ironic appraisal. I will examine the work of Denise Riley in order to propose a thermodynamic intervention in our reception of the lyric, thereby examining the copula between coldness, language and the material (maternal) body in her work.

Within the underground corpus, the traditional investment of the lyric on stable subjectivity is thrown into crisis, producing a dense refracted “I” that challenges notions of an unproblematic transition from perception to recollection. And at the heart of Denise Riley’s poetics emerges this tussle with a polyphonous sense of the lyric. I argue that in following the thermodynamic rune present within Riley’s work, one can manage to negotiate the ‘resistance’¹ offered by her textuality in order to pursue the ‘hot information’² that it encodes, a veritable cracking of the icy surface to navigate the feverish endodermis of her poetry.

I think one of the most important ways in which Riley sets up this dialectic is through the representation of the mother. In her complex negotiation with maternity she produces a questioning of body politics, social order, and the problem of definition and constituted subjectivity. The maternal body comes to be paratactically inscribed upon the sexed body, with coldness triangulating this violent collision. The movement is away from an expressive turn³ of using language as an affective medium toward a double-capture of poetry within itself in the cold irony of the reconstituted lyric. In leaving the lyric open to irony, there is a renewed challenge to its contained-being status, a fragmentary possibility of the split self that comes to enter



into a meta-synecdochical relation with the figure of the mother, in Riley – the abject, erotic and incestuously self-referential body in language.

There is an arduous commensurability between the maternal and the linguistic that could form a retrospective bridge between Julia Kristeva's *chora* and the Lacanian desire for the m(O)ther. Kristeva emphasises on the Platonic *chora* as the only possibility of a semiotic 'female' language, outside the patriarchal structure of the syntactic, phallogocentric symbolic order.⁴ Writing then comes to be traced back to the body that has not yet been subjugated by an irrevocably masculine system of signification. In Seminar XX, Lacan explores the concept of *jouissance*, a traumatic experience of pleasure that centres around the desire to keep on desiring. The Other's desire (both the desire of and for the Other) has been previously interpreted as the m(O)ther's desire in order to establish the psychodynamics between two subjects as a parallel of the dyadic relationship between the mother and the child, for Lacan (as for Freud), the first experience of sexual pleasure. The state of maternal plenitude then serves as the retrospective signifier for the experience of wholeness (as against the lack that activates desire).⁵

Central to Postmodern poetics is the revolt against the totalising hold of metaphysics. In Riley, the speaking "I" comes to be constantly ruptured, providing a prismatically-nuanced metaphor of disintegration – the ossified "I" undergoing an entropic diffusion to produce an ex-centric subjectivity where the originary site is now occupied by language as pure referent. This is an important throwback to the maternal imagery that Riley examines – the idea of the multiple contained within the singular, a release that demands the material stress of labour.

She has *ingested her wife*
she has re-inhabited her own wrists
she is squatting in her own temples, the
fall of light on hair or any decoration
is re-possessed. '*She*' is *I*. (*Selected Poems* 13) (emphasis
mine)

This is a particularly representative segment of Riley's poetry for me because it engages with questions of the maternal, the sexual and the textual in a distinctive manner. The image of the (female) individual consuming her wife is perhaps the violent homogenised linguistic capture of a lesbian relationship with a heteronormative discourse, language arbitrating in a prescriptive organisation of sexuality. However, crucially, this is also an image of internalisation, of a mitochondrial containment of the double



within the single – in this it most closely resembles the ‘anomaly’ of the pregnant body. With Riley, there is a perpetual and deliberate homecoming to language. For instance, consider the splintering of reference in the second line – who is ‘*she*’? Whose is ‘*her*’? Riley crumbles the unity of the lyric subject to entropy within language, a position that is perhaps most starkly revealed in last line. The section opens with a clear assumption of subjectivity, the ‘*she*’ that is an as-yet innocent grammatical function, and ends with an ironic look at the “*she*” which occupies an ideological position within language. The dehiscence in the *she*/'*she*' complex mirrors the rupture between the self and the other (the ‘*she*’ and the ‘*I*’) to the point where only language can occupy a subject position. One cannot be a subject but within quotation marks.

How then do we understand the monolithic singularity with which the lyric subject is traditionally invested? I see coldness as a structuring principle in this compositional unity that then comes under duress with Riley’s experimental poetics. There is a textual production of heat, an internal friction that moves the lyric towards its fractal point from where it can resist the violence of a stable subjectivity as the epicentre of poetic knowledge. This is also where Riley opens up the potential for a radical feminist poetics. Rather than locating the torque of her politics in the diffuse pre-lingual space that Kristeva proposes, Riley manages to capture the subversive potential of her material *at the moment of* disintegration, at the limit point of her feminist consciousness. In her theoretical work, she discusses how the challenge before feminism is to examine the category of the ‘Woman’ – and to do so in recognition of the phenomenological instability that it contains.⁶ It is then in a differential of heat – of decay, of an osmotic effervescence of (f)rigid categorisation – that the fluctuating, fluid feminine politics comes into existence.

In her subversive appropriation of the maternal body, Riley proposes a state of flux that frames a critical rejection of fixed femaleness. The mother becomes the original other against which the self is retrospectively defined. However, more than being organised along a fossilised binary, the self/other distinction is drawn into a dialectic of difference that is mediated through a conscious subsumption within language. The mother is located at this aporetic point which absorbs all signification, thus in itself becoming a function of a radical language.⁷ Sexual desire is then dispersed in this moment of coming-into-language rather than being localised in the body or in normative discourse. Riley’s maternal is a polysemic, fragmented and dislocated surrogate that remains perpetually ex-centric to the originary matrix, thus transitioning from the body as matter to language as material.



In the erotic thermodynamics of this displacement conflate three primary trajectories – the projective coming together and separation of sexed bodies, the traumatic pleasure of expulsion of the baby from the mother’s womb, and the disruption of the speaking subject in experimental lyricism.⁸

If Riley’s lyric produces a subtext of heat that threatens perpetual internal erosion of fixity, how then does one argue for the limits of the form itself? Where is a differential of stability and incoherence being produced that would allow the lyric to be more than a transient image that is symptomatic of a fluctuating poetic ideology? I argue that it is at this textual juncture that irony intervenes. The Postmodern lyric resists the absolutism of the singular “I” by allowing the insertion of a cold, impersonal distance between the poetic subject and the speaking lyric voice.

... Writing our
difficulties. I spring open my books. You want something
which will *not* be taken away. Which will fill your heart.

Writhing for the death of my son. They may be allowed
to walk unseen as our guides in this darkness. You lay the book
down as tenderly as if you had handled something alive. (*Mop
Mop Georgette* 14) (italics in original)

The visual twinship of ‘writing’ and ‘writhing’ gets problematised by the deliberate italicisation in the second stanza thus foregrounding the act of composition itself. There is a brutal embodiment involved in the possibility of innocent substitution of the two terms; in her bringing into relief the linguistic passage that her pain takes, Riley manages to both posit a tenuous equivalence between language and somatic experience, and show how the latter comes to be constructed in the cold, sterile gaze of the former.

Riley’s poetry engages with a narrative of maternal grief that both occupies and transcends her historical truth of the loss of a child, but her treatment of tragedy is achingly conscious of a disjointed textual subjectivity rather than being ensconced in the Humanist taxonomy of “mother.” The mother who has lost her child thus becomes paradigmatic of the Postmodern tendency to complicate category by eliding the object of reference. What is a mother when not the mother of a child? There is a violent laceration separating the signifier from its adequated act of reference, leaving only language in its ravaged wake. In Riley, this isn’t ameliorated by a simplistic nostalgia that attempts a metaphorical recovery of the lost love object in poetry. Rather, there is the investment of that moment of ironic self-



consciousness that fragments both the maternal body in the act of interpellation, and the lyric form itself in processes of ‘structuration.’

All the connections of right recall
have grown askew. I know
a child could have lived, that
my body was cut. This cut
my memory half-sealed but glued
the edges together awry (*Mop Mop* 16)

This section from “A Shortened Set” freezes the body (poetic) in the moment of fragmentation. Riley draws attention to the forceful insertion of space after ‘cut’, first semantically and then mechanically parting one word from the next. I would argue that this constitutes a foregrounding of the act of *separation*, a laboured process that involves a tortuous textual passover. The recollection of phenomenal experience in the lyric mode is also questioned when Riley talks about knowing that ‘a child *could* have lived’, thus compromising a simplistic narration of perception in recall. Memory here serves to exhume a painful possibility rather than offering a redemptive right towards recollection. Later in this poem, Riley announces “The bad sutures/ thicken with loss and hope .../ so I’ll snip through the puckered skin/ where they tug for re-aligning” (*Mop Mop* 16). There is an inherent brutality implicit where the child can only come into being through the bloodied re-appropriation of the mother. The production of poetry is already incriminated in this traumatic history as any attempt to ‘suture’ multiple subjectivities into one must irrevocably end in a renewed laceration, an implosive disintegration.

The lyric thus never manages to capture the maternal body (or the absent child) in entirety – it can be imagined only in the language of deferral and constituted as the ‘sinthome’,⁹ the nodal point in which multiple Symbolics intersect. I would argue that it is here that the maternal and the textual become fully commensurable in Riley in that they both enter the field of definition only as the codified possibility of the abject.¹⁰ The maternal body constitutes the vanishing point of discourse, the traumatic black hole to which all meaning returns and that itself remains outside the domain of symbolisation.¹¹ This is then metonymic of the experimental lyric itself that cannot be accessed but as that outside that is retrospectively positioned ‘inside the inside’ of language.¹² It is in irony that this elision transforms into critical fracture; rather than the flagrant incandescence of infinitely receding subject positions, the lyric comes to negotiate itself through the cold, impersonal appraisal of its limits.



The thermodynamics of Riley's poetry get foregrounded in her examination of the cross-fertilisation of coldness and whiteness. At the point of its most telling semantic tincture, milk is placed within a paradigm of strained equivalence with ink, producing at once a new articulation of the female body and a corporeality of language itself.

Don't read this as white ink flow, pressed out
Of retractable nipples. No,
Black as his is mine

Don't read his as white ink flow, shot out
Of retractable. No,
Black as this is mine. (*Selected Poems* 104)

This poem is called "Milk Ink", an immediate privileging of the second term over the first. It opens with an assertive command, perhaps counterintuitively so, asking the reader to *not read* something that she has obviously already started reading. Riley draws attention to the ontics of the act of reading (and by extension, writing) lyric poetry while also transposing a field of sexual difference to this articulation. The coming together of the 'he' and 'I' offers the dialogic possibility of solidarity to difference in the production of a community mediated by the lyric tongue. Although undercut by potential brutality ("pressed out," "shot out"), the textuality of milk taken up within male sexuality ends in a reclamation of the private – "black as *this is mine*." Riley introduces an almost subliminally interstellar space between 'milk' and 'ink' offering the potential for recognition of incommensurability but not the violence of absolute otherness.

There is a radical devolution of phallogocentrism in Riley where she constructs an alternate somatics as the basis of an alternate poetics. Her challenge to the hegemony of the paternal signifier is not mounted through a non-space that exists prior to patriarchal cannibalisation of language but through the production of a distorted mother metaphor. It is the ironic reclaiming of language through maternal loss (rather than the psychoanalytic memory of maternal plenty) that resists the conventional lyric desire for centre and origin, thus rejecting the primacy of the phallus which becomes productive of *logos*. It is not a simple return to the (female) body that Riley advocates here, rather, there is a complex insertion of the body as a trace within language such that the latter represents not just the constative materiality of the maternal but comes to be constitutive of and constituted by it. The white of the milk and the black of the ink pinion the brackets of this



discourse – meaning slips under the space opened up between the body and the word, allowing the lyric to remain intranscribable even in its negotiation with language. If black represents the limit point of absorption, ink becomes a metaphor for the maternal trauma that Riley’s poetry engages with in elision. The performative act of writing enters into a convoluted relationship with its expressive function, the lyric thus already a palimpsest of the tragic that it appears to defer. By extension, milk comes to be tied not just to the female body but to language *as a female production*. In its whiteness milk contains the signifying universe, simultaneously carrying a procreative and a creative charge.¹³

Riley’s play on the figure of the mother as entrenched within prescriptive discourses of patriarchal normativity allows us to access her semantic thermodynamics in the culturally-invested metaphor of the warm womb. There is a reconception of the site of experience of birth trauma – traditionally inscribed upon the body of the child as it is expelled from the protection of the uterus into the cold distress of the external world¹⁴ – Riley’s fractured maternal subjectivity becomes the alternate possibility of encrypting the horror of birth that retrospectively results in the production of an absence. It is then not the world but the mother (and her metonymic womb) that is cold. Riley engages in a meditation on apathy – does the mother lose the right to reference when divorced from the material processes of producing, the ethical responsibility of preserving the child? Does the labour of constructing the lyric and of congealing multiple lyric subjectivities become a textual surrogate for the labour that results in the separation of the child from the maternal body? Can parturition in fact be performed in ink?

The stability of the lyric “I” in its maternal metaphorisation undergoes the most radical experimentation in “A Part Song”, a pastiche of twenty short inter-connected pieces. “You principle of a song, what are you *for* now/ Perking up under any spasmodic light/ To trot out your shadowed warblings?” begins the first section of the poem. This is a rigorous project of ironic self-identification where the materiality of construction (of the lyric/child) is held ‘unfinalisable This slips into a fixative statement – “*What is the first duty of a mother to the child?/ At least to keep the wretched thing alive,*” the italics again serving to produce a critical distance between the poet as poetic subject and as lyric subjectivity. The social construction of the cold mother is here ironically recast in the role of the coldly distant poetic voice that proposes a morality of child-rearing intercut with the raw anguish of the loss of the child. I would argue that Riley engages with a multiple awareness of coldness in this poem – the cold body of the dead



child (in the final part, cradled in the quietude of a frigid sea), the production of the seemingly unfeeling mother who seems to be somehow incapable of feminine warmth, the deadened response to this tragedy when the poet engages in what appears to be a dispassionate commentary on the nature of grief. In one particular section, Riley says “Oh my dead son you daft bugger/ This is one glum mum. Come home I tell you/ And end this tasteless melodrama – quit/ Playing dead at all, by now it is well beyond/ A joke, but your humour never got cruel/ Like this.” The ironic is pigmented with the overwhelming tragic but accessed through an airy, disconcertingly cool sense of humour.

Riley’s engagement with apathetic femininity also provides a crucial segue from the maternal to the sexual. The frigid woman enters discourse in a double-bind that at once controls her eroticism and devalues her maternity, and makes each co-constitutive of the other. If the mother is sexed in her femaleness, how do we re-comprehend the experimental lyric when it is twice accented by the presence of this coldness? Irony then appears to invest the lyric with an excess of coldness that limits desire. I would argue that irony provides not just the content of the experimental lyric but its ontological formal principle. In Riley, language is irrevocably drawn into this dialectic of heat and cold, of passion and unresponsiveness, of expression and experiment that mediates and is retroactively re-enacted by the signifier of the erotic maternal.

The sexual and the textual also converge in Riley when one considers the significance of literature as ‘white space’ within feminist scholarship.¹⁵ If milk produces a specular ink, could one read the blankness of the page as a diffuse projection of itself, a startling double claim towards occupying language? In her early subversion of the act of writing itself as dominantly masculine Riley manages to restore a political articulation of feminism to the production of the lyric. The page is no longer innocently, virginally white; within the experimental lyric, the superimposition of discursive language upon material canvas is not the phallus *inscribing upon* the supplicated female body, but rather a radical resistance where the body *becomes* language and constitutes it in its femaleness. This excess of femininity ostensibly approximates hysteria, indicting the reader within the phallogentrism that Riley then deconstructs in cold irony.

The syntactic challenges produced by Riley’s Postmodern poetics for me compose a deliberate white noise that redefines language. If the lyric form functions as an appropriation of a ‘signal’, attempting to communicate through meaningful unit messages where speaking subjects come to be



localised and coagulated, the experimental movement wrests the materiality of the concealed interstitial spaces that exist in negative presence within language. With Riley's intervention, the lyric is invested with a new tongue that is essentially playful. She allows for the heat of slippage, the erotic energy of amorphous signification that slides beneath claims for calcified sites of subjectivity, while composing a framework of cool, distancing irony from within which the tectonics surface. From the bedrock of this dialectic of collision emerge her revolutionary poetics, as meaning comes to be conceived in the cold throes of a dark, bright language.

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¹ I appropriate the notion that J H Prynne develops in “Resistance and Difficulty” where resistance is seen as a property ontological to reality, “an inescapable sense given (30)” – here, that produced by the lyric – that produces as its analogue, ‘difficulty’ of access.

² Marshall McLuhan’s definition of a hot medium being in high definition, “the state of being well-filled with data (*Understanding Media: the Extensions of Man* 22)”. I intend to propose here that the condition of participating in a hot ‘medium’ such as experimental poetry might be enhanced if one considers a thermodynamic methodology towards approaching it.

³ Linda Kinnahan distinguishes between the expressive and experimental modes of contemporary poetics, asserting “... for those poets claiming to communicate women’s experience in women’s voices, the project of writing ‘she,’ or woman, calls for an accessible language of reportage, an empirical rendering through a transparent medium that enhances self-expressivity. Such a set of assumptions informs the politically valuable work accomplished by women ... who have insisted upon the suitability of women’s perspectives, experiences and expressive modes of poetry (620).”

⁴ The *chora*, a term she borrows from Plato’s *Timaeus*, enables Kristeva to conceptualise this intersection [between the ‘corporeal, linguistic and social forces’] both spatially (as the ‘in-between’ produced by the ambiguous relatedness of two always already socialised bodies: that is, the body of the not-yet subject and that of its [m]other); and temporally (as the beginning before ‘the Beginning’, the mobile origin ‘before’ the imposition of ‘the Word’). Its function, then, is to displace the speaking subject, (re)tracing its emergence not only ‘before’ the *logos* but also, in returning to the maternal body, beyond the Phallus as the structuring principle of the symbolic order. (Margaroni 79)

⁵ Lacan, Jacques. *Encore: The Seminar of Jacques Lacan Book XX*. Tr. Bruce Fink. Norton: NY, 1975.

⁶ “Instead of veering between deconstruction and transcendence, we could try another train of speculations: that ‘women’ is indeed an unstable category, that this instability has a historical foundation, and that feminism is the site of the systematic fighting out of that instability – which need not worry us (*Am I That Name?* 5).” Riley’s acknowledgement of the ‘undecidable’ woman becomes the feminist project of identifying a specular lyric subject that is not limited within definition.

⁷ Susan Stanford Friedman in her discussion on how women’s narratives come to be censored looks at how “... the unplumbable aporia of the dream-text for Freud is the point of contact with the maternal body, the irretrievable site of origins (“The Return of the Repressed” 142).”

⁸ Cf. – Michel Serres in “The Origin of Language” looks at how heat functions as the unifying principle of language. “The homiothermal organism generates the need for communication. It is, in energy or thermal needs, analogous to what will be common speech, in terms of signals and information. I imagine that one of the first forms of behaviour, like one of the first signals may be reduced to this: “keep me warm.” The homiothermal organism initiates touch and contact, erotic communication and language. It is a homoeology. (n.p.)” if heat acts as a cohering factor in primal language, how does this change with Postmodernism? Can the dissociative heat of the underground lyric itself be read as symptomatic of a reversed thermodynamics of modernity?

⁹ At the heart of the Lacanian thesis of symptom is the concept of *jouissance*; Verhaeghe in “Lacan’s Goal of Analysis” talks about how “the symptom is a Symbolic construction built around a Real kernel of *jouissance* (2).” I argue that it is at this vanishing point of symbolisation that the ‘contradictory’ figure of the mother is located. As I discuss briefly below, the child and not the mother can be refigured within this understanding to relocate the site of pure pleasure that retains referentiality.

¹⁰ Kristeva, Julia. *Powers of Horror: An Essay on Abjection*. NY: Columbia UP, 1982.

Also, consider Grosz on Kristeva:



The maternal, for Kristeva, designates both a space and a series of functions and processes. But it must not be confused with a *subject*, for maternity is a process without a subject. While pregnancy is something that 'happens' to a woman (Kristeva never incidentally states this explicitly), it does not involve *agency* or identity, if anything, it is their abandonment. The process of 'becoming-mother' is distanced from subjectivity and identity. (79)

¹¹ I believe that the figure of the absent child functions as the residual 'object a' that resists symbolisation (*Encore*). The child can never be understood in language and comes into existence as the space that exists outside it, the materialisation of that which desire holds back. If the child is then *jouissance*, it would explain why it remains just outside the zone of satiation.

¹² Derrida, Jacques. *Of Grammatology*. Tr. Gayatri Spivak. Maryland: John Hopkins UP, 1997.

¹³ Friedman in "Creativity and the Childbirth Metaphor" states "The historical separation evoked by the childbirth metaphor is so entangled in the language and procreation that the metaphor's very words describe their own linguistic reverberations This wordplay reveals not only currents of unconscious thought as Sigmund Freud has described but also the structures of patriarchy that have divided *labor* into men's *production* and women's *reproduction*" (52).

¹⁴ For a psychoanalytic perspective on birth as trauma and the mother as the primal source of pleasure, please see Otto Rank's *The Trauma of Birth*, NY: Routledge, 1991.

¹⁵ "Because of the forms of self-expression available to women, artistic creation often feels like a violation, a belated reaction to male penetration rather than a possessing and controlling. Not an ejaculation of pleasure but a reaction to rending, the blood on the royal marriage sheets seems to imply that women's paint and ink are produced through a painful wounding, a literal influence of male authority. (Gubar)"



Unrealistic Expectations: Subjugation of the Native Woman and Man through Spanish Interpretations

Janessa Duran

Throughout the Spanish colonial conquest, almost all, if any, information regarding indigenous peoples has been told from a Spanish perspective. What the modern world is left with are biased representations of many distinct cultures. Attempts to peel away colonial conventions, such as the Indian as sexual and savage, are done with immense difficulty but are imperative to find the truth behind the history of the conquest. One aspect of colonial history that remains shrouded in Spanish colonial dogma is the idea of gender constructs, and many stereotypes from this concept have been imprinted in history like the civilized Spanish soldier, to the adulterous native woman. By juxtaposing representations of the ideal Spanish woman and man with colonial representations of the Amerindian woman and man, I will argue that presenting indigenous people as an ‘other’ due to their supposed inability to conform to Spanish norms of femininity and masculinity was one strategy the Spanish used for legitimizing the domination and subjugation of indigenous peoples.

Part I: Spanish vs. Indigenous Woman

In the colonial era, the image of the ideal Spanish woman was a gender construct largely dominated by the church, revolving around a woman’s closeness to God and subjugation to man. As Juan Luis Vives outlines in his manual for European women, *The Education of a Christian Woman*, women were considered to be the secondary sex whose “only concern should be the preservation of chastity.”¹ Sex was strictly looked down upon in the church and by elites of society as evil and beastly. And a woman was only permitted to have sex for the purpose of procreation². Their worth was primarily measured by their ability to remain “ordered, restrained, shy, pious, and affable.”³ From an early age, girls, whose minds were considered to be quite malleable and weak, were supposed to remain in the home and away from boys and men, for fear they would be corrupted. One larger role model for women of this time period was Santa Rosa de Lima, whose vigilant piousness demonstrated what a perfect, godly woman was supposed to be. When examining the life of Santa Rosa de Lima, a lay woman who committed violent acts of devotion and hid her intelligence (because women were forbidden to speak their opinion on matters of political importance)⁴, it is clear that women were held to extremely strict standards. The Christian



church scrutinized every aspect of a woman's life, from sex to marriage to motherhood and expected her to act in accordance with their ideals.

As it turns out, this image of the perfect Christian woman was difficult for Spanish women to embody and, given the circumstances, impossible for native women to implement; holding Indian women to this standard was one way of turning them into "the other." Due to the strict demands of the ideal Spanish woman, "canons of feminine behavior were not necessarily followed by all women⁵," with those of high status allotted more potential to adhere to this lifestyle. Even so, one can assume that a life where every thought and action must be accounted for would be quite difficult or, perhaps, infeasible. What's more, for a woman with lower socioeconomic status, choosing between staying in the home and working to supplement the family's income was not an option⁶. When it came to native women in the Americas, this ideal was impossible to embody. Spaniards during colonization invoked the labor of indigenous women to "[supply] the bulk of the household labor force as cooks, maids, and nursemaids⁷" to Spanish elites. Thus, most native women could not and did not stay in the home. Furthermore, there was a "virtual social prohibition⁸" for Indian women to enter a convent as a nun. So, even if she wanted to imitate the role models of the era, a native woman did not have the opportunity to do so and would not be taken seriously if she earnestly tried. Because of the limitations that the Spaniards put on Indian women, they constantly fell short of the standards for the ideal woman. From this, their differences were highlighted, and the in-group vs. out-group was clearly demarcated.

Due to the Spaniards' harshly demanding expectations, the native woman's life came to be seen as opposite and wrong, allowing for the propagation of gross misrepresentations. While Spanish women were supposed to be pure and chaste, various native cultures accepted or even encouraged premarital sex⁹. Thus, for native women, chastity was not held in such high regard and stereotypes of the Indian woman as hyper-sexualized (because they had sex at all) were born. Furthermore, in some native cultures, the status of a woman and man were balanced or equal,¹⁰ meaning the Indian woman was not consistently subjugated by her male counterparts. This being the case, stereotypes of native women as aggressive and "un-lady-like" were created. One can find these typecasts in much of the literature pertaining to native women in the colonial era, and these works are quite often "both sexist and shallow."¹¹ As members of the conquest, including conquistadors and various holy men, were in communication with their leaders in Spain, what little news was told about native women was negative. With the Spanish in both Spain and the Americas holding onto these representations of



indigenous women, the idea was perpetuated that native women were not feminine and must be changed. Because of these representations of the native woman, the Christian church justified subjugation in order to convert her to the ideals of Spanish femininity, though, much of the time, the Church was the entity responsible for her perceived inability to conform. As previously mentioned, there were large reservations about native women sincerely adopting the Spanish faith and restrictions against these women entering convents. In some instances, when natives adopted Christianity, there was a dispute as to whether or not their practice of this religion was legitimate.¹² By imposing their Christian faith on these women, the Spanish sought to reconfigure them into what they saw fit. However, one can deduce that Indian women had an extremely difficult time navigating through the limitations enforced upon them and an equally challenging time pleasing the Spanish representatives, leading to the perception that they were incapable of doing so.

Furthermore, not all Spanish priests were saintly, and some would use their authority to dominate Amerindian women. These holy men, with such power and backing from Spain, would often take advantage of native women. In many instances, “under the guise of teaching women the catechism or delegating penance, priests forced women to serve them as laborers, mistresses, and prostitutes.¹³” If the men, who were primarily responsible for converting native women to Christianity, were also exploiting them for labor and sex, is it any wonder that these women had a difficult time adopting the faith? In these instances, the teachings of given by the representatives from the Spanish crown were incongruent with their actions. Because of this, it is likely that some native women were dissuaded to adhere to Christianity. Thus, the idea that Indian women *could not* conform to the Spanish ways was propelled, an idea that is partially the fault of the holy men who committed these wrongs.

While some members of the church subjugated these women, the bulk of dominance over this group came from the conquistadors who saw them as subhuman. As discussed earlier, in Spanish culture, women were seen as the lesser sex. Though this idea ran prevalent, men in Spain were still bound by society and law to treat women in a relatively respectable manner. However, in the context of colonial America, there were, initially, no laws, and Spanish conquistadors were not held to any definite standards. Furthermore, as I have argued, native women were seen as opposite of, and lesser than, Spanish women; so if men already held Spanish women in low regard, they would have likely considered native women less than human. Due to the combination of these factors, “with the arrival of Columbus and



the Spanish conquistadores...the rampant rape and abuse of women began.¹⁴ Because they did not see native women as human, rather as a thing to be dominated, the Spanish used rape as a tool to achieve conquest.

Fueled by a blatant disregard for Indian women, indeed, rape and the native woman's domination can be seen as a metaphor for the larger conquest. The Spanish arrival to America, and the violent acts of rape committed "implicitly [say]: I am your master; you must submit to me, or I will force my will upon you,¹⁵" which is what the conquistadors did to both women and the Americas. Moreover, they subjugated the land (and women) with rules that they chose. They controlled every aspect of native women's life, prohibiting them from marriage and subjecting them to sexual slavery.¹⁶ So, as is quite evident, native women were used as an apparatus for the Spanish conquest. Though this is true, they were still expected to conform to the ideals of Spanish femininity. With all these factors going on, it was impossible for a native woman to ever win, and the Spanish conquistador was also largely responsible for this.

Part II: Masculinity Defined

When analyzing the Spanish man, the conquistador was held as the model for masculinity. Emerging from a society where the losers of warfare were seen as "effeminate,¹⁷" the male gender construct encompassed the idea that femininity was at ends with what a man should be. Whereas Spanish women were expected to adhere to numerous strict rules of femininity, the Spanish man's masculinity was defined by his ability to be the general opposite of effeminate. Where women were seen as physically weak and emotional, a man was expected to be vigorous and emotionless. As men whose mission it was to conquer the Americas, masculinity was also redefined as the "permission to rape and abuse, something that was not permitted in Spain,¹⁸" Thus, the ideal Spanish man was seen as someone who could assert his dominance over native men, women, and land.

Because of the conquistador's quest for subjugation, native men, like native women, came to be seen as the opposite of the ideal gender construct; native men were isolated as the "effeminate other," allowing the Spanish to more readily implement conquest. In this particular context, "that which was not 'masculine' or 'hetero' by the Spanish standards was automatically 'feminine' or 'sodomy.'¹⁹" So, by way of being different or having a foreign custom or lifestyle, native men were automatically considered to be peculiar and feminine. Because judgments of native men were made in relevance to the Spanish views, the sight of a man in "woman's clothing" or a man doing



“womanly” chores was judged as effeminate,²⁰ and therefore, part of the out-group during this era. Furthermore, prior to conquest, “despite the fact that most individual males had exercised little or no power...they nonetheless had been part of the dominant group.²¹” After the arrival of the Spanish, however, for purposes of sex or labor within homes, women were more sought out than men for the first time.²² As this happened, the Spanish exploited these feelings of isolation and sought men out to do the labor they themselves did not want to do,²³ such as farming and mining. Spanish conquistadors subjugated native men by giving them no other option but to work like slaves, stripping them of their masculinity and systematically perpetuating the idea that native men were weak.

One particular stereotype that subdued and preserved the idea that the Indian man was effeminate was the image of him as the primitive sodomite, even though this belief stemmed from the actions of the Spanish.²⁴ As Richard Trexler argues, prior to the colonial era, “homosexual rape was...a class of legal punishments... intended to brand other males as akin to women.²⁵” In the early days of conquest, the Spanish are known to have brought this practice to the New World by sodomizing the natives to “punish” them and assert their dominance.²⁶ Interestingly enough, a man who raped was initially held in high regard for his ability to assert his authority, and person being raped, if it was a native man, was seen as powerless and effeminate.²⁷ In this way, in an effort to rule the lands, early conquistadors imparted their domination by emasculating men through rape and sodomy. Because of this, early encounters with native men pictured them to be effeminate with homosexual features. This stereotype was solidified when Gonzalo Fernandez de Oviedo published *General History of the Indians*, and the idea that sodomy stemmed from the Americas became prevalent.²⁸ This added to the suppression of the native man by allowing the Spanish to think of themselves as better than the indigenous population and be convinced that they had an obligation to impart their “civilized” ways. Furthermore, the convention of the native sodomite fueled the Church to take action. It seems that perceived signs of sins, like sex and sodomy, were sought out because the “clergy needed reliable information on Native sexual institutions if they were to conquer these devils and convert these gentiles.²⁹” Any discovery of perceived homosexuality or sodomy gave more reason for priests to convert native men to Christianity and teach them the ways of the Spanish. Because it seemed like men could not conform, their plans to dominate and change the Indians was seen as legitimate and needed.



During this period of colonial conquest, it is largely evident that native men and women did not match up to the ideals of Spanish gender. When analyzing the gender constructs of Spanish men and women in comparison with native men and women, one may find that the literature from this time period often describes these two groups as opposites, usually holding the conquerors of America in higher esteem. In their diverse ways, both Indian men and women were labeled as “other,” and their perceived differences perpetuated subjugation. For Amerindian women, the standard of Spanish femininity was impossible to achieve due to the professed failure to conform that the Spaniards projected onto them. When it came to Amerindian men, they were type-casted from the beginning as feminine and the opposite of what a man should be, leaving an unfair legacy that still exists today. The portrayals of native women and men told by the Spanish were presented in such a manner that assisted in the conquering of the original American people. As history is often told from a biased perspective, understanding these labels of masculinity and femininity ascribed to Indigenous people is important for pushing past the legacy that is often presented and realizing the truth behind the Spanish conquest.

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- ⁴ Myers, "'Redeemer of America,'" 256.
- ⁵ Lavrin, "In Search of the Colonial Woman in Mexico," 29.
- ⁶ Ibid., 30.
- ⁷ Burkett, "Indian Women and White Society," 111.
- ⁸ Ibid. 114.
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- ¹⁰ Ibid.
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- ¹² Clendinnen, "Franciscan Missionaries in Sixteenth-Century Mexico," 241.
- ¹³ Silverblatt, *Moon, Sun and Witches*, 139.
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Gnocchi and Harissa

Helmi Ben Meriem

I, Samah, am a Tunisian woman in her late twenties and married to a man in his early sixties. This is not the story of a desperate woman, who was forced into an arranged marriage by her family; this is rather the story of a woman who found love with a Christian man, and was caught between an intense love and a consuming illness.

My husband—Alessandro—teaches Italian literature at a university in Tunis. It was there that I met him five years ago. I was finishing my MA in English literature. One of my dearest friends was his student. It was in 15 January 2010 that I first talked to him. My Italian was never good—I struggled to say ‘Ciao’; I kept calm and silent throughout the discussion between my friend and my future husband. When they finished talking, ‘Arrivederci’ came rushing from my mouth; I did not even realize that I had said it until he looked at me. How I said that word is a puzzle, which I have never understood.

I studied Italian for only one year—I was absent most of the time. I never liked Italy; the name is reminiscent of death and sorrow. The boats, which leave our coast heading for Italy—the so-called Heaven; I came so close to losing my two brothers on three occasions. The look that takes over my parents’ faces can never be erased from my memory. I remember the time, when there was knocking on our door at 4:30 am. My father opened it only to see a man saying his eldest son has died at sea. And though this was proven to be wrong eventually, my father had a stroke that left him paralyzed on his left side for three years. I blame Italy for his condition; I blame my country as well for it. I do not blame my brothers for trying to escape the tyranny of poverty that has engulfed my country. Tunisia was once called the ‘Breadbasket of Rome’. We were the ‘matmoura’—the basket—of Rome’s food, but now the Mediterranean is where our youth meets its death before they could taste Rome’s Focaccia.

I did not talk to Alessandro again until the end of 2012; I was at a café in the center of Tunis reading a novel, by Ulfet Udlibi, that told the story of Sabriya—a Syrian lady at the turn of the century—who only escapes her repressive brothers by killing herself. It greatly saddens me how we women are treated by even our closest male relatives. I do not wish I was born a man like many other women wish; I am proud of my womanhood. I am life; I carry life inside of me for nine months. I was told by Allah that if I die while



giving birth, I shall go to heaven immediately. Allah even said that heaven is under the feet of mothers, not fathers; treat your mother well and Allah is happy with you.

I am sure that most of you, who may one day happen to read this, are wondering why I am going into detail about things not directly linked to the July afternoon. Patience! One's life is not a group of Lake-Chott-ELDjerid-like unconnected events; it is rather like Lake Victoria linked to a web of other lakes through the Nile.

I was so immersed in the novel's captivating narrative that I did not realize Alessandro was standing by my side. 'Ciao'. That word again came but this time from him. He said that he remembered me as the friend of his best student, Khawla; he asked if he could join me for a coffee. I agreed; I did it for one reason—my psychiatrist had urged me to go out more and to interact with people. I was diagnosed with agoraphobia a year before; I have lived with it for over twenty years, not realizing that my suffering had a cause. Every day, when I wake up, I tell myself the same thing: "Samah, you need to fight it for your own sake. Do not let it take control over your life." Alessandro sat opposite me in his white T-shirt; little did I know then that Alessandro adores the color white—his clothes are mainly white. I thought that I would stammer and stutter as always, but to my surprise it did not happen. We sat at the café talking for over an hour; we spoke mainly in French with some Arabic from time to time. While we were talking, I remembered that I needed to go back to the university to get course notes from a friend; I told him so, and we both left Le Grand Café du Théâtre, each going in a separate direction.

That day, I learned of the death of my young cousin Amira, who was fighting cancer. At night, when I returned from my aunt's house, I sat in my room gazing outside at the stars; I realized that I needed to be true to myself, stop being afraid of new people and new experiences, and to live not merely exist.

In the forthcoming months, I started to see Alessandro more often; he took it as his duty to help me overcome my dislike of Italy, his motherland. If I were to explain what happened in the next year, it would take me years, and I would still need more time to do it properly. Love. That enigmatic feeling summed up in four letters. We fell in love. I decided that I would not rationalize it, because love transcends the mind's capabilities to reduce everything to something else. Falling in love was the beginning of a long journey of struggling with a society that refuses change and is inhabited by an overwhelming fear of people who are different.



On the twenty-fifth of June 2014, at the same café where we used to meet, Alessandro proposed; he asked if I would agree to be his wife. I looked into his eyes and at his white shirt; I did not see a man in front of me—I just saw a partner willing to share a life with me. I kept silent and just looked at him; he asked for my answer. I said: “Silence is the sign of approval. You have been here for a long time; you should know that my silence is synonymous for yes.”

I wish love were just about two people sharing their lives; it is, to some extent, a struggle against others’ unwillingness to see two individuals happy. No one will accept that a Muslim woman might marry a non-Muslim. Not only am I a Muslim, but a veiled Muslim woman, who is both proud of her individuality and religiosity. I know many of my fellow Muslims would not accept the marriage of a Muslim woman to a non-Muslim man; they at times do not accept a marriage between even the two main sects of Islam. While I was considering all of that, Alessandro put his right hand on my right hand and said, “I will take off the cross. Do not worry!”

I was rather surprised by what he said. I did not want him to convert just to marry me. At times, I wished I could have a one-to-one discussion with Allah; I have many questions for Him. Why is a Muslim woman not allowed to marry a non-Muslim man, when a Muslim man can do it? I want to tell Allah this: “They say that it is because women are easily tempted into doing things including converting. Well I think it is nonsense. Man is lured into many abominations by the mere look or touch of a woman’s breast; they are the ones who should be forbidden to marry non-Muslim women—if prohibition is ever to exist. Wo(e) man, I am a woman and I can think for myself.”

After that day, the wedding was organized within two months. My family gladly accepted Alessandro—when he converted to Islam. My father and my two brothers took him to a clinic—where he was circumcised. My religion interferes with everything in the life of its adherents. May we never hear that an uncut penis entered the ‘holy’ vagina of a Muslim woman! A woman’s vagina has become the focus of the whole religion.

The wedding took place in the Ettadhamen neighborhood in front of our house like many Tunisian families. My neighborhood, one of the capital Tunis’ most populated areas, is a middle lower-class quarter. How much I hate using these terms! I was told that the women at the ceremony kept asking the same variations of two questions: ‘Why is she marrying a man the age of her father if not more?’ and ‘Is she doing it for money in order to



help her family?’ I did not answer those question then; I am not going to do it now either. Why should I satisfy the thirst and hunger for gossip? If I were to satisfy their desire for gossip, I might just tell them about my first night with Alessandro. Spice it up for them. Give them something to fill their empty and miserable existence for months. The night of the wedding went smoothly after Alessandro and I went to our home in Le Kram on the eastern side of the capital near the ancient city of Carthage. We spent two hours watching The Simpsons on the internet laughing our hearts out. Then we went to bed. It felt like a father tucking his daughter in for the night.

The next morning, my mother came over, bringing with her plenty of pastries. She asked ‘the’ question. I took one baklava and said faking a blush “Mother. . . I am shy. Y-yes, it happened.” She hugged and kissed me as if I had won the Nobel Prize for Literature. She then said: “Soon you will get pregnant; you might even crave harissa like I did.”

Some days after the wedding, I asked Alessandro to reject Islam and embrace the religion of his parents. He said he would and asked me not to open the question of religion again. My days with him were practically alike. I rarely left the house; I felt like a burden that Alessandro had to carry. Before our first Ramadan together, he told me that he would not eat during the day out of respect.

It was the second of July, towards the end of Ramadan. That day I prepared gnocchi, vegetable soup, and some briks. The main meal was served around 7:30 pm. I came to know and love gnocchi when I married Alessandro. He was still out when I heard the Sunset Prayer announcing the end of day’s fast. When he came back, he only said this: “Samah, I need you to be more engaged with the world. I am tired. I want to rest. I need to rest. Help me, please, help me!” Before I could say anything, he left the kitchen and went to the bathroom. In ten minutes, I followed him to the bedroom only to find him standing in front of a prayer rug saying in his ‘baby Arabic’: “Allah hears those who praise Him. O our Lord, and all praise is to You.”

He did not go back to Christianity. He did it for me, for us. At that moment, I realized that I too needed to change and fight harder. End this ongoing war with my fear of the outside world. Not only for my sake, but for Alessandro’s sake too. We need each other. Suddenly, I wanted to eat harissa right from the jar. My soul was heaving with the warmth of hot peppers. I ran towards Alessandro and embraced him warmly and tenderly. Only then it hit me: I need to do this for my coming child.



The Woman in the (Digital) Keyhole: Techno-Voyeurs, Gendered Bodies, & Contemporary Surveillance Cinema

Jonathan Naveh

Introduction

The problematics and complexities of gender are notably deficient from many discussions of surveillance issues in Surveillance Studies, Gender Studies, and Film Studies. This article responds to this absence by exploring the relationship between video surveillance, voyeurism, and gender in cinema. As Laura Mulvey states, “In reality the fantasy world of the screen is subject to the law which produces it.”¹ Thus, movies present strategies of looking that figure those found outside of the movies, essentially, they thematize structures of control through the figuration of the surveillance image.

The surveillance film has appeared in varied forms, although it has proliferated most in subgenres such as the political/conspiracy thriller and in dystopic science-fiction. These male-centered narratives, such as *The Conversation* (Francis Ford Coppola, 1974), *Blow Out* (Brian De Palma, 1981), *Enemy of the State* (Tony Scott, 1998), and *Minority Report* (Steven Spielberg, 2002), are produced and directed by men and, by the very nature of character identification and the prominence of action spectacle, often targeted towards male spectators. Women exist in these narratives usually as lures of male desire or as figures subject to some degree of control by men. Despite this overwhelmingly masculine focalization, these particular surveillance films focus more on the social and geopolitical ramifications of surveillance’s ubiquity. These films, however, do not approach how the surveillance image produces gendered relations—relations which suggest how lines have been blurred between surveillance, voyeurism, and technological control in the 21st century.

Within the last twenty years, contemporary surveillance cinema has moved beyond the conspiratorial and dystopic mode, in turn showing how surveillance mechanisms exist in a world which has normalized the technologies. A number of films which I discuss in this article, *Sliver* (Philip Noyce, 1993), *Alone with Her* (Eric Nicholas, 2006), *Compliance* (Craig Zobel, 2012), and *Red Road* (Andrea Arnold, 2006) detail what it means when surveillance practices target women, and how the technology is intrinsically (heterosexually) masculinized and sexualized. *Red Road* wages



war on this notion, and thus the common thread running through the aforementioned films, as it illustrates how women can combat their aggressive sexualization when they occupy the surveilling position.

Since surveillance is, rhetorically, a mode of protection and safety, the films I will discuss display how monitoring actually functions as a mode of control when placed in relation to women's bodies. The films locate women as subjects of surveillance technologies, while they themselves have no control over their bodies, look, image, and other facets of technology that surround them. One must ask what the function of surveillance is in these narratives and what types of bodies get to acquire and control technology. In addition, one must explore the conditions of control enacted upon the surveilled parties. I will argue that the gendered surveillance film is often positioned between two poles that inform, conflate, and complicate each other: between a colder form of surveillant control and a titillating voyeurism that complies with how Laura Mulvey discusses the theory of the male gaze.

In the gendered surveillance film, women are frequently represented as victims of a sexualized surveillance look, exploited by the “placelessness” (disembodiment) and “facelessness” (anonymity) of surveillance operators.² While the majority of film examples that I draw on support this symptomatic anxiety of a deviant male looker, we must also account for the ways in which surveillance's mechanization is exploited—specifically with how sexual crimes are passively captured by cameras, as in *Compliance*. Additionally, one must ask what it means when women are permitted to occupy the disembodied surveiller position. Do they use the technology (more often used to control them) to assert their dominance over men? *Red Road* imagines this recasting of power and gender roles. It works against traditional notions of male voyeurism and female victimization, and instead functions to craft female identifications and subjectivities in the surveillance narrative.

Victims of the Technological Voyeur: The Gendered Dimension of Surveillance

Jessica Lake's article “*Red Road* and Emerging Narratives of Sub-veillance” demands to understand the “...kinds of power disparities [that] exist in surveillance situations and how [they] are represented.”³ Lake observes that the “prevailing theoretical model of the panopticon,” dominantly explored in surveillance studies, highlights an imbalance in how power is structured institutionally—between corporations, governments, and the private citizen.⁴ This model tends to ignore the specific race, class, and gender of



that private citizen: “The panoptic paradigm renders bodies and social identities irrelevant to the practice of surveillance.”⁵ In reality, it is *because* “othered” citizens meet at least one of these criteria that they may find themselves under watch. Citing Rosemary Betterton, Lake concludes that “the dominant modes of looking in capitalist and patriarchal culture have been linked to surveillance and control over those perceived as inferior: children, servants, workers, and women.”⁶ Hille Koskela concurs, by stating that, “...women quite often occupy the typical places of surveillance.”⁷

That Lake’s 2010 article interrogates this question at a specific historical moment is not without context. Panopticism is being critically reconsidered, partially in response to the relative exclusion of questions of gender within the discourse.⁸ Additionally, that Lake cites Betterton’s observation on historical control speaks to how they both consider the panoptic disciplinary model to be antiquated, if not entirely inaccurate, “...scholars in surveillance studies often divide the watcher and watched into two oppositional groups, ignoring fundamental differences of gender, race, class, and sexuality between and within those groups.”⁹ In her article, Lake observes a salient fact: that cinema typically places white, middle-class men in the surveilling position, thus these texts affirm the hierarchal structure which panopticism describes. However, not only must we consider those that look, more attention must be brought to the individual subjects that are being looked-at.

Lake’s article does a fine job of describing the correlation between how women have been controlled throughout history to how cinema has traditionally allotted surveillance duties to white men. She does, however, overlook a crucial point: surveillance narratives often illustrate how technologies are manipulated by men so they can derive pleasure from women’s bodies—a fact which has equal social, historical, and cinematic significance. For my argument, the most important thing to gain from Lake’s article is that cinema, and the social spaces and formations that are narratively represented, produces surveillance around women very differently than it does for men. While this imbalance exists, scholars in Media Studies, Gender Studies, and Surveillance Studies have not comprehensively pushed the conversation forward, although Lake’s article, Hille Koskela’s work, and Torin Monahan’s article “Dreams of Control at a Distance: Gender, Surveillance, and Social Control” have contributed vital observations and arguments.¹⁰

Scholars in the intersecting Film and Surveillance Studies fields observe that the discourse surrounding “what it means to look” is well detailed due



to Laura Mulvey's seminal feminist/psychoanalytic article "Visual Pleasure and Narrative Cinema," which was written in 1973 and published in 1975. In her article, Mulvey describes the way in which Classical Hollywood cinema creates a spectacle out of the female form (Fig. 1.01). Building upon this conclusion, Mulvey examines how cinema has historically and misogynistically represented women by elaborating on its formal articulation of women as objects of voyeuristic male pleasure.



Fig. 1.01. Cinema's tradition of voyeurism: Hitchcock's narrative arrest around the female form. (*Rear Window*. Directed by Alfred Hitchcock. 1954. New York, NY: Universal Studios).

For Mulvey, films enact a "male gaze" upon women through an interrelated network of looking. This exemplifies cinema's coding as a socio-patriarchal formation, given its ability to structure social spaces, relations, and hierarchies. Mulvey writes that Hollywood films offer three sources for the look, all of which are coded as male and thus offer pleasure to its male spectators: a look between the spectators and the screen, a look between the camera and the characters, and a look between diegetic male characters. The spectator, regardless of gender, is put into the active masculine subject position. The film, therefore, encourages identification with the male character while negating a viewing position for female spectators.¹¹ Men are then encouraged to indulge in viewing the female body as a spectacle, as a desirable image, while women must watch passively and masochistically as they are relegated to mere images—as objects of the look and as objects of desire that are subject to male voyeurism.

Mulvey's essay also describes what it means for women to look at themselves on the screen. Later, Judith Mayne's work in *The Woman at the Keyhole* would question what it means for women to be both subjects that



look and objects that are looked at, “The question is not only who or what is on either side of the keyhole, but also what lies between them, what constitutes the threshold that makes representation possible.”¹² The very keyhole that Mayne describes in the title of her book can now include the institutionalized security apparatus of surveillance, with the keyhole being replaced by CCTV control centers. However, more often than not, women do not typically comprise the position of surveiller; therefore, surveillance systematizes patriarchal hierarchies similarly to cinema.

Feminist understandings of the power relations inherent in the camera’s look and its relation to bodies were developed as a critique of male hegemony and the cinematic apparatus. Traditionally voyeuristic texts, in which men gaze at women and thus relegate them to a sexual object, inscribe the women as the object of the look in relation to a masculine, active looker. While the surveillance image does not negate this gendered power dynamic, it does call for a reconsideration of the look since the “looker” is disembodied, and the object of the look involves forms of control that include, but are not limited to, gender. Surveillance cinema does not abandon the voyeuristic component of the look, but alters its relation to bodies by dislocating it from the surveilled space.

The nature of surveillance complicates how psychoanalysts and film studies scholars conceptualized and traditionally understood voyeurism. For example, Mulvey’s claims are equally affirmed and complicated by how surveillance films represent looking at women. Her conclusion, that cinematic voyeurism systematically reflects a misogynistic social order, is only applicable to surveillance narratives when they are in themselves traditionally voyeuristic. On other words, when a character manipulates surveillance technologies to gaze at women’s bodies, thus reducing her to a sexualized “object of the look,” then that surveillance situation is tainted with voyeuristic intention and procedure. *Sliver* (1992), which I will discuss below, is an instructive example of such a conflation.

Hidden Cameras and Active (Male) Lookers: Sliver and Alone with Her

“If you cannot see that you are being watched, you cannot act accordingly.”¹³

— Hille Koskela

Sliver’s narrative describes how surveillance technologies are exploited to satisfy a white man’s sexual deviancy. Zeke (William Baldwin), a man who owns a luxurious apartment complex in New York City, monitors the



protagonist Carly (Sharon Stone), as well as many others, through hidden cameras placed all throughout their apartments. Zeke occupies a powerful, privileged, and hegemonic position, not only because he owns the means of surveillance (in addition to the building), but because he is a wealthy white male.

Zeke becomes infatuated with Carly, and watches her extensively through his PTZ (pan/tilt/zoom) CCTV system, whereupon he is able to enter into a closer spatial and affective relationship with Carly with just the tap of a finger onto his computer screen (Fig. 1.02 & Fig. 1.03). An early sequence focuses on Zeke as he watches Carly masturbate in her apartment. By manipulating PTZ's capabilities, Zeke is able to gaze at all points of her body without the risk of himself being seen. When voyeurism alone no longer satiates his appetite, Zeke eventually "breaks the surveillance barrier" by beginning an erotically-charged romantic relationship with Carly in the real world. The rest of the narrative centers on Carly as she slowly becomes aware of the fact that Zeke has been monitoring her as well as dozens of other people throughout his apartment complex.¹⁴



Fig. 1.02. Zeke, the male surveillance operator and looker. (*Sliver*. Directed by Philip Noyce. 1993. Los Angeles, CA: Paramount Pictures).

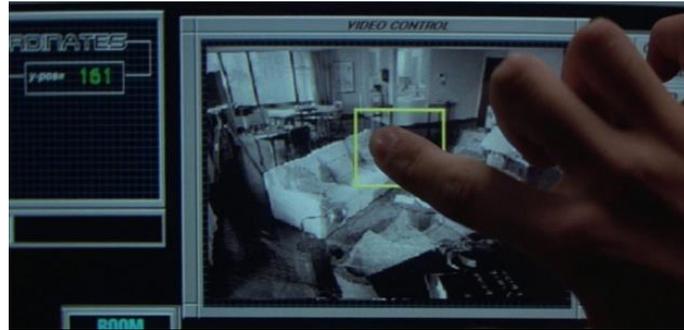


Fig. 1.03. Zeke has the ability to pan/tilt/zoom, thus entering into a closer relationship with those he chooses to look at. (*Sliver*. Directed by Philip Noyce. 1993. Los Angeles, CA: Paramount Pictures).

In *Sliver*, women do not merely signify an absent representational space, which may be most evident in dystopic and conspiratorial surveillance thrillers, but rather, they become subordinated as sexualized “objects-of-the-look.” *Sliver* depicts surveillance’s use to fulfill sexual desire. The diegetic surveillance camera’s look is mediated by Zeke’s, and is therefore made masculine and overtly sexualized. Images of Carly’s naked body often fill the surveillance screen, which reveals Zeke’s voyeuristic motivation as well as video surveillance’s “criminal misuse.”

Scopophilia, for Mulvey, describes the pleasure in looking and how looking in itself is pleasurable as an act of voyeurism. In the Freudian sense, voyeuristic looking supplants normal fulfillment of the aims of sexual gratification; Freud ultimately labels it a perversion in *Three Essays on the Theory of Sexuality*.¹⁵ When surveillance is misused to fulfill the sexual desires of its operators, as in *Sliver* or more recently in Franck Khalifoun’s *P2* (2007), one must consider the ramifications of this misuse in addition to the social and historical determinants that led to such gross exploitation. As Hille Koskela outlines in “Video Surveillance, Gender, and the Safety of Public Urban Space: Peeping Tom Goes High Tech,” very specific questions must be asked:

What is at issue is not just whether a particular space is monitored or not... who maintains surveillance, where, why, how, and with what kinds of consequences? What kinds of power-relationships are embedded within surveillance? Who has the right to look and who will be looked at? What behavior or appearance in a particular context is regarded as “deviant?”¹⁶



One recent incident mirrors the problematic landlord/tenant violation that *Sliver* imagines. In March of 2014, a Kansas City woman found hidden cameras that had been placed throughout her apartment. Some of the cameras were disguised as smoke detectors. In total, eleven were found, with four located in her bathroom and one in her bedroom. The cameras found in the apartment, which was located above a tattoo parlor, uncovered wires that led to the basement. The basement housed a control center that revealed numerous video screens showing the occupant's interior space. The landlord ran the tattoo business, and thus could potentially watch the victim 24 hours a day.¹⁷

This sex crime, as shocking and fictive as it may seem, mirrors *Sliver* in a number of ways. First, there is the inherent disembodiment and distance between viewer and viewed that surveillance technology affords. Additionally, there was no way for the viewed to consent to (or know) that they were being watched. Since this incident occurred in a woman's private space it also suggests Deleuze's characterization of the shift from the "enclosed" or "imprisoning" structures of the disciplinary societies to the "geometry" of forms of control that are no longer located within a particular space.¹⁸ In other words, it is important that CCTV was located not in a prison to monitor criminals, but rather, in the world of privacy (or more generally, of social relations). Most relevantly, the viewer was a male figure interested in monitoring the female body through digital voyeurism—and this is only one incident.

Peter Weibel writes "the pleasure principle of the voyeur, to see everything, and the pleasure principle of the exhibitionist, to show all, have shifted from private drives to public norms."¹⁹ David Bell concurs with this notion, moving one step further by stating that the sexualization of surveillance also offers a mode of resistance.²⁰ Bell analyzes how camgirl websites offer a playful way for women to control the camera that produces the sexual likeness and distribution of their image. However, Camgirl websites also notably diverge from nonconsensual modes of surveillance that seek to capture and capitalize on images of nude bodies.²¹ Moreover, the webcam, the very tool that grants agency to women, can also be manipulated to facilitate the perverted disembodied surveillance gaze.²² In March 2010, a California man was arrested after spying on a young woman through her webcam—a story that influenced the short film *Webcam* (Branden Kramer et al, 2012).



While consent and control define different strategies in the culture of surveillance, the fact remains that episodes of “empowering exhibitionism,” as defined by Hille Koskela, coexist alongside instances that are clearly marked as violations.²³ As such, technology is redirected as a pornographic instrument rather than a safety or security-based apparatus. One may ask, then, what it means when surveillance is used for consumption predicated on desire and control. How are we to make sense of the surveillance gaze as it victimizes in these particular scenarios?

Use of hidden cameras in restrooms, locker rooms, changing rooms, and other spaces that offer the impression of privacy within the public sector have seen similar documentation to the recent case that mirrors *Sliver*. In some instances, surveillance operators, as well as non-professionals who have acquired similar access, have archived, compiled, and even circulated video images of nude women.²⁴ Thus, in a substantial way, the figure of the surveillance operator is also changing in contemporary society and culture. The American surveillance thriller *Alone with Her* (Eric Nicholas, 2006), begins with a relevant warning—an opening intertitle quote by David Wiseman of the U.S. Department of Justice:

Every minute, three people become victims of stalking in the United States.

What concerns us most is that recent technology has created a golden age for predators to track and terrorize.

Hidden video cameras, microphones and other spy equipment can now be purchased for next to nothing and are available through the internet and retail stores everywhere... to anyone.

In *Alone with Her*, Doug (Colin Hanks), an awkward-yet-obsessive tech-savvy man, spies on Amy (Ana Claudia Talancón), an attractive Hispanic woman, by bugging her house with audio and video capturing equipment. The film, similar to another underseen independent surveillance thriller *388 Arletta Avenue* (Randall Cole, 2011), is about digital stalking. Both films are shot entirely through the point-of-view of cameras that are set up and controlled by an antagonist. *Alone with Her*, however, is clearly the more problematic film since it centers on a man’s relentless sexual pursuit (and intent to control) an unassuming woman. Since the *Alone with Her* narrates entirely through the POV of surveillance cameras, the film



demands that spectators align their gaze with the surveillance apparatus—or, more specifically, Doug and his control over technology (Fig. 1.04).



Fig. 1.04. Doug as the new techno-voyeur. (*Alone with Her*. Directed by Eric Nicholas. 2006. New York, NY: IFC Films).

Alone with Her details how surveillant monitoring is no longer confined to a centralized CCTV control room. While *Sliver*'s Zeke is happy to let the mechanized cameras record to video when he is not there, Doug's "technological intrusion" is defined by how he uses both mobile and static cameras. He bugs Amy's house, but also stalks her as he uses handheld video cameras and hidden spy cams which attach to his clothing. Digital stalking is now mobile and can occur ubiquitously in all spaces rather than being confined by it. Consequently, the movie imagines a world which is totally susceptible to a man's will to see and obsessively control. Unlike *Sliver*, which ends with a glimmer of feminist hope as Carly leaves her bugged apartment and destroys Zeke's CCTV room, *Alone with Her* violently ends when Doug murders Amy and subsequently begins to stalk his next prey. Doug is free to pursue his emotional, physical, and technological control over women in a sadistically repetitive manner—one that is alarming, even for the voyeuristic surveillance narrative.

While the plots of *Alone with Her* and *Sliver* share striking similarities, the differences between surveillance practices and technologies in their release years suggests how control can be mediated by any figure with basic technological competency. This stands in contrast to Zeke's unique characterization as an economically-powerful high-value property owner. Today, cameras have become smaller and more accessible, easier to conceal, more ubiquitous in public and private spaces, and thus normalized in contemporary society. Wiseman's warning, then, describes how today



surveillance technology poses a threat when it is so easily available to predators.²⁵

In *Alone with Her*, digital spying leads to rape and murder, linking modes of surveillance to male aggression and the increasing presence of “rape culture” in the 21st century. Common rhetorics against rape culture from groups such as Men’s Rights Activists demands that women dress more conservatively, act more responsibly, learn self-defense, be aware of one’s social media image, and in the case of surveillance, acquaint oneself with the “technological learning curve.” However, these are reactive and reductive requests for a society that condones such cyclical hostility. One should instead consider the complexities of these relationships and ask pertinent questions which will steer the conversation into different directions: how does video surveillance’s normalization inform narrative cinema as it intersects with the topic of rape? More specifically, why have surveillance films primarily prioritized depicting one-sided predatorial actions against women, and what does this reveal about our culture at large?

Classic films such as *Psycho* (Alfred Hitchcock, 1960) and *Peeping Tom* (Michael Powell, 1960) predate *Sliver* and *Alone with Her*’s voyeuristic inclinations. Their bold depictions of perversion, misogyny, and violence notoriously shocked 1960s audiences, yet these films still retain “classic” elements of cinematic voyeurism. In other words, *Psycho* and *Peeping Tom* manage to reinforce how cinema traditionally stages the voyeuristic male look since male characters exercise power through direct rather than mediated looking. In these sequences, the look of deranged men anticipates episodes of extreme violence against women. Thus, the voyeuristic narrative depicts the relationship between looking, female objectification, and violence.²⁶ *Sliver* follows this formula, but updates the way in which the looker interacts with his victims, as he houses himself in a hidden CCTV control center. And while *Sliver* also associates with the voyeuristic narrative, other surveillance narratives centered on women reveal a more complex relationship. In my next section I will discuss *Compliance*, a film which deviates from the aforementioned movies since it complicates the surveillance look’s affirmation of the Mulveyian male gaze. *Compliance* renders the antagonist’s gaze as passive as the film’s mechanized, automated surveillance cameras.

Mechanized Cameras & Economies of Rape: Surveillance Failure in Compliance

“A little young girl standing there naked wasn't a pretty sight.”²⁷

— “A Hoax Most Cruel”



In the docudrama *Compliance*, a sinister prank caller accuses a young white employee, Becky (Dreama Walker), of stealing from a customer at her workplace: a non-descript fast-food restaurant. The caller, a man claiming to be “Officer Daniels” (Pat Healy) (Fig. 1.05), convinces the restaurant’s manager, Sandra (Ann Dowd), to isolate Becky by moving her to the back office. Sandra is ordered by “Officer Daniels” to detain Becky until the police arrive. Over the course of the workday the caller manipulates and controls Becky and Sandra. Becky, an attractive blonde, is subjugated to a strip-search (Fig. 1.06) and other demoralizing commands. Her victimization culminates when Van (Bill Camp), Sandra’s inebriated fiancé, is called upon to guard Becky while Sandra attends to the dinner rush. The caller tells Van first to spank Becky for her insolence and then have her perform oral sex on him (Fig. 1.07); “Officer Daniels” mediates control through Van (his male stand-in) as he rapes Becky. The film resolves after the caller is exposed as a fraud that habitually commits sexually-motivated prank calls; as a result, he is arrested.



Fig. 1.05. The caller, controlling via his telephone. (*Compliance*. Directed by Craig Zobel. 2012. New York, NY: Magnolia Pictures: Fig. 1.05—Fig. 1.10).



Fig. 1.06. Becky forcibly undresses in the restaurant.



Fig. 1.07. Spectators bear witness to the events of the day as they progress from manipulative conversation to a forced strip-search to an undeniable act of rape.

As the plot unfolds, *Compliance* makes it clear that surveillance plays a peculiar role. Spaces within the restaurant are under constant technological watch, as cameras (free from direct human manipulation) record and subsequently archive their visual information onto a computer hard drive. The film documents the transition to mechanized surveillance systems, and how the systems themselves serve a different function when one wants to effect control over another body. During the caller's first accusation against Becky he vaguely (yet assertively) states that he has surveillance evidence corroborating the narrative detailed by the non-existent customer. The prospect that incriminating physical evidence exists looms over Becky and Sandra, however this proves to be both a lie and a manipulative power play. In *Compliance*'s penultimate scene, Becky finally realizes that the space where the rape occurred has been monitored and recorded (Fig. 1.08 to Fig. 1.10).

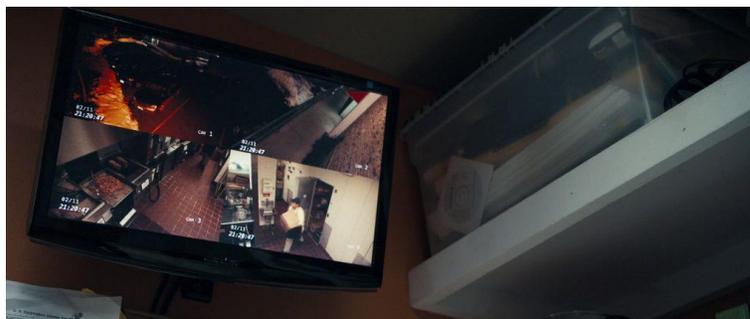


Fig. 1.08. Mechanized cameras passively witness rape in *Compliance*.



Fig. 1.09. Becky appears bewildered that she has been watched and recorded throughout the entire ordeal.



Fig. 1.10. Only after the film's climax do spectators finally see the delayed appearance of the surveillance image.

On a formal level it is important that *Compliance* does not narrate through images produced by surveillance cameras, as *Alone with Her* or Adam Rifkin's *Look* (2007) do. Spectators are put in the space where the rape occurs; they do not view it from the distanced "vantage point" where surveillance cameras are typically placed. Spectators are granted close-ups of Becky's facial reactions and slow tracking shots of her body. The cold surveillance camera is replaced by the wider scope of cinematic language, and thus the multiple affects and embodiments which it generates. Sympathy for Becky is demanded through the organization of point-of-view shots, especially as she is demeaned. The camera's embodiment of the position of those who gain pleasure from her body, in the intermediary between the spectator's gaze and the woman's body, also covers spectators for their complicity.

Ironically, it is now the surveillance video that captured the rape that becomes vital visual and physical evidence, but the fact that this revelation occurs at the end of the film speaks to how automated surveillance can only



passively witness crimes as they occur—often, no one watches the surveillance images except for the surveillance camera. With the process’s mechanization the need for a “human watcher” has been eliminated, but this is what creates vulnerabilities that ultimately affect Becky as a low-wage-earning gendered subject. By the film’s end the recordings are gathered as evidence against the caller’s criminal act while Sandra’s compliance in the affair is questioned.

With mechanized surveillance, notions of security are challenged when considering how surveillance cameras passively record sexual crimes. If a rape is captured by video surveillance, the recording can help identify the victimizer and also serve as a physical recording of the event in trial. However, with mechanization, the absence of the “constant looker” is also exploited. This is one of the failures which *Compliance* describes: since no one sees Becky’s rape through the surveillance footage *as it happens*, surveillance is exposed as a flawed security apparatus and preventative criminal mechanism.²⁸ Koskela elaborates on this notion, writing that:

In relation to property crime the gains of effective response are much more incontestable than in relation to violent crime. Sexual violence is of a different order in this respect: its effects are so serious that prevention is of much more value than any reaction after the violence has taken place. For a victim of violence the help mediated by a camera may come too late.²⁹

The cameras, of course, are not installed for the purpose of preventing sexual violence, and in fact, most rapes occur in spaces which are rarely monitored.³⁰ *Compliance*’s diegetic surveillance cameras hold a very specific function: to protect the storeowner *against* threats from outsiders (those visiting with intent to harm or rob) or even its own employees (for example, Becky as an accused thief). In other words, they are effectively anti-theft not anti-rape devices. In this sense, considering the specific function of video surveillance in the film, the cameras are in active compliance with the rapist.

The writer and director of *Compliance* based the film on a series of real events known as the “strip search phone call scam.” These incidents, which totaled more than seventy over a ten-year period, played out the same game and principally targeted the same lower-wage female workers. The most famous of these incidents, which served as the primary inspiration for *Compliance*, occurred in 2004 at a McDonalds in Mount Washington, Kentucky.³¹ The caller asserted his power by testing the obedience of those



on the other end of the line. As with the aforementioned Kansas City episode that recalled *Sliver*, *Compliance*'s "ripped from the headlines" standing documents how technology has been sexualized by men in order to mediate their control over women. Though vital, gender is not the only concern of the deviant caller. It must be taken into consideration that the targets were those in a specific class and lower-rank occupation. A reading of *Compliance*'s literal rape can also be read figuratively, as commenting on the near-criminal exploitation of labor of low-wage workers. This complicates Becky's "to-be-looked-at-ness," doubling her position as a desirable spectacle.

Traditional voyeuristic narratives produce pleasure by watching women who *do not know* they are being watched—the onlooker gets off on seeing them in natural (though, typically sexual) states or scenarios. This situation plays out in *Rear Window*, *Body Double* (Brian De Palma, 1984), *Blue Velvet* (David Lynch, 1986) and even *Sliver*—although *Sliver*'s inclusion of technological mediation complicates how we historically define the voyeur. In *Compliance*, Becky's body becomes both an investigative surveillance site and a source of desire that the male in control violently and repeatedly shames. Through this complex depiction of mediation, power, and control, *Compliance* details a shift in a mode of looking in the surveillance narrative that is motivated by sexual desire to one that is replaced with control. In other words, the function of sexual pleasure is supplanted by the surveillance function. The male caller is interested not in the sexual component of voyeuristic looking, which he grants to his male stand-ins, but rather with the component of control which is entirely his—and which he manipulates masterfully.

As a manager, Sandra is expected to act and react sensibly, but the caller's ability to manipulate her proves to be too strong. When Sandra is away performing other duties, male stand-ins—Van, Kevin (another young employee), and Harold (an older custodian)—report to the caller, however, the latter two characters do not take part in the caller's game. The caller demands men to comply with his power by having them continually describe Becky's body and maintain her subordinate position. Sandra's inability to take control of the situation signifies her maternal failure toward Becky, and this is one of the film's most important themes, as it structurally reoccurs in the other surveillance narratives of this article. Sandra is complicit with the caller's demands, which are assumed to be extensions of the store's owner's, and thus the demands of store policy and the law. Her compliance results in a failure to properly ensure the protection of her employees.



Hille Koskela's chapter "The Problematic of Surveillance and Gender" considers the conflation of women's "to-be-surveilled" and "to-be-looked-at" bodies. Koskela writes, "While often mediated via technology, surveillance is never purely technical. The presuppositions, experiences, emotions and attitudes of camera operators influence any surveillance practice."³² Human operatives engender the surveillance gaze, and therefore, any and all practices. This affects the primary theoretical function behind video surveillance, which is security. Considering such a conflation, Mulvey and Koskela agree on a fundamental point. Koskela writes:

...the female body is an object of a sexualized gaze in ways that are dramatically different than for male bodies [and this] also applies to women being viewed through surveillance cameras. So, for women in particular, being an object of surveillance does not necessary uniformly foster a reassuring sense of security.³³

Likewise, Koskela observes that the "cop culture" of masculine surveilling produces a mistrust of surveillance, "...women do not rely on those behind the cameras because the guards and the police responsible for the daily routine of surveillance reproduce patriarchal forms of power."³⁴ While *Compliance*'s "Officer Daniels" cannot see Becky, he finds himself able to assert power over her through the false implication that he can. He repeatedly lies that he holds the surveillance recording of Becky's "crime" The film then describes how mechanized surveillance cameras are in compliance with "Officer Daniels" in spite of their passivity, although if the caller had direct access to the visual image, his male gaze would actively permeate and thus totally engender the technology.

Compliance examines the way in which men control women's bodies through surveillant mechanisms despite not having direct visual access to their bodies. In my final section I will explore a different shift: what happens when women are permitted to surveil?³⁵ I will address the following questions: how do women surveil? Do they monitor from an explicitly gendered perspective? How do films imagine this shift in male/female power dynamics? And finally – how does the figure of the female surveiller stand in contrast to the male agents that dominate most surveillance narratives? I will attend to these questions by unpacking the social and political significance behind *Red Road*, whose delicate demonstration of gendered surveillance establishes it as an outlier amongst surveillance cinema canon.



From Big Brother to Little Sister: Red Road's Reclamation of "The Look"

In Andrea Arnold's *Red Road*, Jackie Morrison (Kate Dickie), a CCTV security operator, works in a bustling, lower-income area of Glasgow, Scotland. Glasgow, like many other major cities in the United Kingdom, is one of the most heavily surveilled areas in the Western world. Distant and detached from basic social interaction, Jackie devotes most of her energy to her passive, observational work duties (Fig. 1.11). As the narrative unfolds, the film eventually explains Jackie's detachment and attributes it to the trauma of her daughter's and husband's deaths. Jackie's husband and daughter were killed when a drug-induced Clyde Henderson (Tony Curran) accidentally drove into a bus stop. Jackie represses the subsequent trauma of her family's death, yet her sense of culpability moves to the surface. Jackie's occupation can be read, in part, as a self-inflicted distraction from her empty life.



Fig. 1.11. Jackie's domain: operating the CCTV table in Glasgow. (*Red Road*. Directed by Andrea Arnold. 2006. New York, NY: Tartan Videos: Fig. 1.11—Fig. 1.14).

Clyde, now released from prison, returns to Jackie's life when he appears on her CCTV monitor. Initially, Jackie initially monitors Clyde from a distance, watching him through her surveillance screen as he spends time at his Red Road flat. However, as with *Sliver's* Zeke, Jackie eventually breaks the surveillance barrier and starts to stalk him, physically mapping the spaces which had previously been mediated by her look. Jackie and Clyde enter into a complicated relationship: she stalks him, while Clyde, a womanizer, tries to seduce her. The film withholds Jackie's motives, but ultimately it is revealed that the reason she crossed paths with Clyde was so that she could frame him for raping her. Clyde is arrested, but later released when Jackie, guilty and traumatized, decides not to press charges. *Red Road* ends with



Jackie confronting and forgiving Clyde—she concludes grieving, and consequently reintegrates with society.

Red Road is an important film because it inverts the traditional structure of surveillance: panopticism. Jackie separates herself from the notion of a centralized surveillance apparatus, the panoptic “Big Brother,” and instead monitors from a markedly subjective position; Jackie is, as Ty Burr states, a “Little Sister.”³⁶ Panopticism describes a surveillance apparatus that thrives off of de-subjectification. Foucault’s reading of the model defines power structures that cast aside the individual’s race, class, gender, sexuality, and age. Surveillance is nothing if not the study of relational power; therefore, one must always take into account the specific characteristics of the surveilling and surveilled parties, something which Jessica Lake concludes is accomplished through the notion of “sub-veillance”:

I use the term ‘sub-veillance’ to describe scenarios where the watching is done from below, by those traditionally positioned in social and political relations as subordinate... Thus, the watching done *by* children, *by* women, *by* prisoners, *by* the poor, *by* coloured and colonized people can be considered as scenarios of ‘sub-veillance’ and thus subversion (emphasis in original text).³⁷

With *Red Road*, surveillance cinema edges toward a feminist mode as it gives women the power and narrative agency that coincides with being a surveillance operator. As an operator, Jackie is permitted to physically map spaces without the looming threat of being objectionably surveilled. For Catherine Zimmer, the way in which *Red Road* diverts from the masculine 1970s conspiracy thrillers formula and replaces the non-descript white male surveillors has salient implications:

Were the gender roles reversed, the trope would read as suspense and automatically suggest the model of the voyeuristic predator; by reversing the more expected gender roles, *Red Road* decodes the received understanding of the voyeuristic model of surveillance narratives by highlighting that gendered subject positions determine that reading far more than the surveillance structure ever could...[T]he film’s spectator follows the follower with little understanding of the purpose, or even the affect, of the investigative gaze.³⁸



In fact, overarching references to conspiracy and masculinity are diffused if not entirely supplanted by pressing ambiguities which plague contemporary surveillance. Does an operator have a responsibility to preserve the barrier between surveilling and surveilled subjects? What happens when objective surveillance duties are replaced by subjective notions of security informed by a marginalized perspective? *Red Road* works through these questions, but intentionally avoids answering them clearly.

Additionally, the surveillance narrative's intersection with a different type of genre, the melodrama (also known as the "women's picture"), signals a turning point in the focalization of female subjectivity, salvation, and redemption.³⁹ Mayne writes "... women's cinema may well be characterized, not necessarily by an outright rejection of voyeuristic and fetishistic desires but by the recasting of those desires so as to open up other possible pleasures for film viewing."⁴⁰ Jackie's surveillance and voyeurism of Clyde best exemplifies the "recasting of desire" that Mayne highlights, since it is narratively significant that spectators identify with Jackie, yet also question her look.

In an important way, *Red Road* refuses to grant voyeuristic pleasure to (male) spectators who wish to view Jackie as a spectacularized body. In a controversial sex scene between Jackie and Clyde, Clyde begins by performing cunnilingus on Jackie. On a general level, cinema typically shies away from depictions of cunnilingus in favor of crafting sexual fantasies more explicitly geared towards men. Starting off with this act raises red flags: does Jackie get pleasure from this act since it is Clyde who accidentally killed her family? As the camera's fixates on Jackie's face (shot in close-up) instead of her body while she orgasms (Fig. 1.12), *Red Road* activates her as a subject who can obtain sexual pleasure on her own terms. Although the complex personal relations between Clyde and Jackie complicate the act itself, the film implicitly comments on representations of female pleasure in cinema, which inevitably challenges traditional notions of male spectatorial scopophilia.



Fig. 1.12. The camera fixating on a close-up of Jackie during a sexual encounter.

Moreover, the sex scene is important as it progresses the narrative. It is after this scene that spectators understand Jackie's intentions to frame Clyde for rape. With this information, the sequence opposes how Mulvey describes the visual presence of women as a site of spectacle, which works against the development of the story and freezes the flow of action "in moments of erotic contemplation."⁴¹ Jackie's surveillance of Clyde is directly linked to her faking a rape, therefore *Red Road* comments on how women's surveillance is recast as a problematic and retributive act, yet can also be considered on the side of justice. Ultimately, the film's understanding of rape in relation to surveillance is best illustrated by the way in which Clyde's appearance in the surveillance image mobilizes Jackie's need to dole out justice. While most rape crimes involve men violating women, Jackie's actions, first as a female surveiller, and second as a "false victim" describe a vengeful vigilantism that inverts the traditional power dynamics associated with rape. *Red Road* concludes that with a female surveiller, women's issues will always be a priority, even if it means moving beyond the surveilling position in a complex, and even problematic way.⁴²

While the sex scene in *Red Road* recasts pleasure and restructures power, the film's conclusion resolves Jackie's traumatic isolation by creating a space in which to work through female subjectivity. After she frames Clyde, Jackie attempts to rebuild her life. In a cathartic scene, she retrieves her dead daughter's clothes and forms a child-size doll-like structure; she emphatically grieves while clutching her remains. The camera sympathetically watches her in a static medium-long shot which demands the spectator's emotional alignment (Fig. 1.13). This scene proves vastly more intimate than the sex scene, which the spectator eventually realizes is borne from malicious intent. With this grieving sequence, Jackie's journey edges towards closure. *Red Road's* final shot (Fig. 1.14) formally, narratively, and symbolically works to solidify the aforementioned scene's weight. In yet another static shot, filmed from the familiar perspective of a



surveillance camera, Jackie ceases to separate herself from the world which she views; she is able to re-assimilate herself into the city space, and thus the world of social relations.



Fig. 1.13. Breaking away from the confinement of the CCTV room, Jackie finally mourns the loss of her daughter.



Fig. 1.14. Creating closure through narrative, formal, and symbolic alignment in *Red Road*'s surveillance image. (*Red Road*. Directed by Andrea Arnold. 2006. New York, NY: Tartan Videos).

For *Red Road* to be released at this historical moment, director Andrea Arnold asserts that women do not have to function as voyeuristic objects in cinema and in the social spaces which cinema represents. Women can attain an agency of the look and a subjectivity that has traditionally favored men. This subjectivity extends to other unique surveillance narratives such as *The Ring* (Gore Verbinski, 2002) and *Untraceable* (Gregory Hoblit, 2008), which also center exclusively on women, mothers, and what it means to monitor or be monitored from gendered perspectives. However understated, one of *Red Road*'s most significant aspect is that it was helmed



by a female director in a cinematic mode heavily dominated by (and focalized around) men. And while directors such as Kathryn Bigelow (*Strange Days*, 1995) and Jennifer Chambers Lynch (*Surveillance*, 2008) have released notable surveillance films in their own right, Arnold's narrative stands out due to its groundbreaking feminized focalization.

Concluding Thoughts: On Inclusion and Exclusion

In the months since this article's initial inception as a chapter for my graduate thesis, "Narratives on the Watch: Bodies, Images, & Technologies of Control in Contemporary Surveillance Cinema" (2014), Yasmeen Abu-Laban's article "Gendering Surveillance Studies: The Empirical and Normative Promise of Feminist Methodology" and the comprehensive edited collection *Feminist Surveillance Studies* (2015) have been published. A symposium entitled "Security or Surveillance? Gender, Sexuality, and the Politics of the Internet" was also held by the Saida Waheed Gender Initiative. Additionally, Simone Browne's monograph *Dark Matters: On the Surveillance of Blackness* (2015) has contributed a much-needed intersectional approach, heavily weighing the dimensions of race, class, and gender as they cross with surveillance histories and practices. This follows in the footsteps of articles such as Delia D. Douglas's "Venus, Serena, and the Inconspicuous Consumption of Blackness: A Commentary on Surveillance, Race Talk, and New Racism(s)." ⁴³ In short, conversations are beginning to proliferate, although the need for varied approaches and inclusions continues.

The lack of visibility of women and minorities in surveillance culture (and thus the overarching discourse about such cultural productions) remains an issue, and this article acknowledges its own shortcomings concerning such analyses. On a general level, women still see themselves underrepresented in films and television when the topic concerns surveillance, although post-9/11-national security productions such as *Zero Dark Thirty* (Bigelow, 2012) and *Homeland* (2011—) as well as contemporary thrillers such as David Fincher's *Panic Room* (2002) and *Ex Machina* (Garland, 2015) have focalized them in key roles. Nevertheless, even these productions overwhelmingly fixate on images of white women in (at least) middle-class economic standing. In fact, one of the richest portraits of race, gender, and poverty, with its intersectional critique of surveillance and police control, hails from Haile Gerima's *Bush Mama* (1979), which is about to enter its fortieth year. However, Gerima's film, despite its grave relevance to our current surveillance of minorities and other welfare subjects, stands with *Red Road* as yet another outlier in surveillance cinema. ⁴⁴



Visibility carries with it intrinsic symbolic meaning, and especially within the films I have discussed in this article, seeing and being seen signifies the beginning of a dialogue. It is my hope that by shedding light on *Sliver*, *Alone with Her*, *Compliance*, and *Red Road*, both as they exist separately and as they converse and contrast with each other, that the discourse on film, surveillance, and gender can continue. With movies like *Sliver* and *Alone with Her* we see surveillance technology's evolution and ubiquity, from its use by the privileged few, to its adoption by any and all who seek to manipulate it. The end result between these two films, although their contexts contrast, is the same. With visibility comes vulnerability, and female subjects are subject to particular forms of violence not typically enacted upon men.

However, as *Compliance* illustrates, situations vary, and the violence perpetuated by men onto women may also reinforce the notion that surveillance is a passive rather than active technology. Regardless, the complex figuration of surveillant control described by *Compliance*, underlined by the way in which the film disarticulates the active male looker and his supposed voyeuristic sexual component, teases a tangible problem for the surveillance security apparatus. Finally, with *Red Road*, we see how cinema imagines how female surveillers operate and investigate. Through this film, the surveillance cinema mode has instigated a rarely-sought feminist commentary by prioritizing the complexities and concerns of a woman as she assumes the powerful position of surveillance viewer. In conclusion, while these examples serve to illustrate how surveillance cinema possesses tendencies when the act of surveillance concerns female subjects, the defining aspects lie in the differences between each film, thus they must continue to be explored and fleshed out.

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¹ Mulvey, *Visual and Other Pleasures*, 18-19.

² Koskela, “The Gaze Without Eyes,” 268.

³ Lake, “Red Road (2006) and Emerging Narratives,” 231.

⁴ Lake, “Emerging Narratives of Sub-veillance,” 231-232.

⁵ *Ibid.*, 233.

⁶ *Ibid.*, 231

⁷ Koskela, “The Gaze Without Eyes,” 255.

⁸ As an example of the discourse’s unmitigated need to attend to the issue of gender, one need look no further than a short editorial in 2009 in the journal *Surveillance & Society* entitled “Surveillance Studies Needs Gender and Sexuality.”

⁹ *Ibid.*, 232.

¹⁰ See also: *Surveillance & Society* special issue on “Gender, Sexuality, and Surveillance” 6, no.04 (2009).

¹¹ Mulvey, *Visual and Other Pleasures*, 14-25.

¹² Mayne, *The Woman at the Keyhole*, 9.

¹³ Hille Koskela, “Video Surveillance, Gender,” 271.

¹⁴ The way *Sliver* depicts the imbalances that exist between the male voyeur and the female object-of-the-look mirrors cinema’s history of reinforcing these roles. Producer Robert Evans has said that William Baldwin stated in his contract that he refused to be shown completely nude. This contrasts with Sharon Stone’s exhibitionism; she is repeatedly shown fully nude, recalling her infamous nudity in 1992’s *Basic Instinct* (Paul Verhoeven), also penned by Joe Eszterhas. Evans states, “There isn’t a leading man who will do frontal nudity. And there isn’t a leading lady who won’t.”

Jess Cagle, “Chopped Sliver,” *Entertainment Weekly*, May 21, 1993, Accessed July 8, 2014, http://www.ew.com/ew/article/0,,306611_3,00.html.

¹⁵ Freud, *Three Essays*, 21-26.

¹⁶ Koskela, “Video Surveillance,” 258.

¹⁷ Vendel, “Police Find 11 Hidden Cameras, 2014.

¹⁸ Deleuze, “Postscript on the Societies of Control,” 6-7.

¹⁹ Weibel, “Pleasure and the Panoptic Principle,” 208.

²⁰ David Bell, “Surveillance is Sexy,” *Surveillance & Society* 6, no.03 (2009): 203.

²¹ See also: Hille Koskela’s chapter “The other side of surveillance’: Webcams, power and agency” in the collection *Theorizing Surveillance*, ed. David Lyon, Routledge, 2006/2011.

²² Camgirl websites must also be read through the conditions of labor and capital that underlie the determinants of paid broadcasts. One must consider to what degree Camgirls are financially and sexually exploited even though they consent to being broadcast and viewed.

²³ Hille Koskela, “Webcams, TV Shows and Mobile phones: Empowering Exhibitionism,” *Surveillance & Society* 2, no. 2/3 (2004): 199.

²⁴ Koskela, “Video Surveillance,” 265.

²⁵ For an elaboration on a history of male abuses of technology and women’s fear of being surveilled, see Hille Koskela’s “Video Surveillance, Gender, and the Safety of Public Urban Space: Peeping Tom Goes High Tech.”

²⁶ Zimmer, *Surveillance Cinema*, 42.

²⁷ Wolfson, “A Hoax Most Cruel, 2005.



²⁸ This is ultimately not the goal of surveillance, but it is still an important consequence of the technology. Some dystopic films, namely *Minority Report*, address this notion more directly by narrativizing how the technology has evolved to where it can predict future crimes—it is imagined as a preventative mechanism.

²⁹ Koskela, “Video Surveillance,” 271.

³⁰ Ibid.

³¹ Wolfson, “A Hoax Most Cruel.”

³² Koskela, “You Shouldn’t Wear that Body,” 51.

³³ Ibid., 52.

³⁴ Koskela, “The Gaze Without Eyes,” 255.

³⁵ For analyses predating Judith Mayne’s discussion of female spectatorship and extracinematic “looking,” see: Mary Ann Doane, “Theorizing the Female Spectator,” in *Screen* (1982) & Linda Williams, “When the Woman Looks,” in *Re-vision: Essays in Feminist Film Criticism* (1984).

³⁶ Burr, “In gritty ‘Red Road.’”

³⁷ Lake, “Emerging Narratives of Sub-veillance,” 235.

³⁸ Zimmer, *Surveillance Cinema*, 88.

³⁹ For an elaboration on how *Red Road* functions as melodrama and a “women’s picture” see

“Falling, Looking, Caring: Red Road As Melodrama.”

⁴⁰ Mayne, *The Woman at the Keyhole*, 5.

⁴¹ Mulvey, *Visual Pleasure and Other Pleasures*, 20-21.

⁴² Louise A. Jackson’s *Women Police: Gender, Welfare, and Surveillance in the Twentieth Century* offers a history of women’s role as police. As in *Red Road*, although Jackie is not a policewoman, they enforce and surveil from a markedly gendered perspective and often sting criminals involved in child abuse, those controlling women through prostitution rings, in addition to perpetuating other forms of sexual violence.

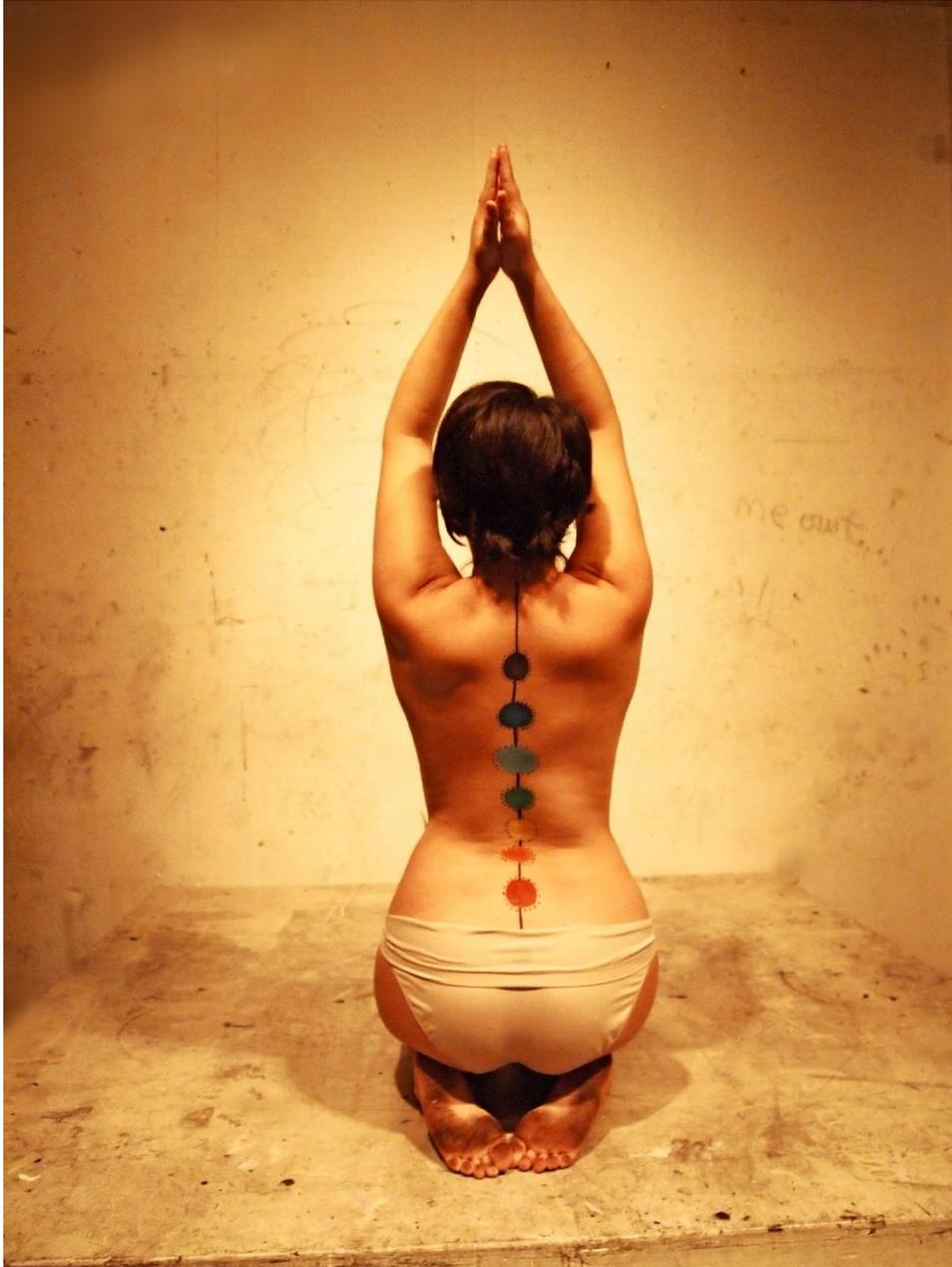
⁴³ See: *Journal of Black Studies* 43, no. 02 (March 2012).

⁴⁴ The dystopic sci-fi thriller *The Purge: Anarchy* (2014) also reads as a commentary on the surveillance of racialized and gendered subjects. The different narrative strategies between the sequel’s focus on the poor and the first film’s focalization on its wealthy protagonists lend itself to a compelling dichotomy.



Untitled

Monika Hauck





Our Lady, Untier of Knots¹

Carrie Myers

Untie from me this striped tail beneath my dress,
this persimmon tree
where I search out my children's shadows
with rough and hairy hands

Don't throw me a rotten rope
as I climb to heaven
leaving me scattered and crushed
like seeds in a millet field

Reel in stone gods towards my offered rice cakes
and wide-brimmed hats;
keep the demons in their boxes
bound up with promises of sparrow's gold

Unleash a summer snowfall
on a hill where I lie down
with ghosts of grass stems
shocked and razed for your devotion

Unspool a bridge across the Milky Way
River that keeps me from my love -
As ravens shed their feathers with my every step
let not my tears drown the villagers where they sleep



¹ Note: Our Lady, Untier or Undoer of Knots is depicted by painter Johann Melchior Georg Schmittner, who was inspired by a saying of Irenaeus: “Eve, by her disobedience, tied the knot of disgrace for the human race; whereas Mary, by her obedience, undid it.” Mary Undoer of Knots is believed to help free her supplicants from intractable knots in their lives – broken relationships, physical ailments, emotional distress, etc. (www.theholynosary.org/maryundoerknots). In this poem, I’ve mixed a prayer to this incarnation of Mary with stories from Japanese and Korean folk-tales. Another Mary, Our Lady of the Snows, is also obliquely referenced in the second-to-last stanza.



eve

Carrie Myers

*He for God only, she for God in him
– Paradise Lost*

He for God made, she for the earth
He grinds her to dust and buys his rebirth,
her skeleton scaffolds his tower of dreams,
her spirit rubbed raw so his conscience will gleam.

He for Man's comfort and she for Man's care;
give her a hand for her hands are bare,
washed of her self with the dishes and dirt
and the knowledge of blame staining her shirt

as the cry of her infant stirs up her shame,
she feeds him bitterness along with his Name,
her only Creation, her only Word,
another desire becoming her Lord.



What Is Needed

Carrie Myers

She's walked for weeks under a formless sky
Devoid of shelter as the ragged earth.
Something inchoate, wild finds its breath
in all the miles, her solitary
push past food, time, her inner voice's pleas.
Sweet water, snake's blood dripping from her knife,
hard-edged sleep – her savage self wakes to life,
her senses sharpened to intensity.

Windbent, twisted, spare, a lone tree beckons.
She approaches it in wonder; her touch
hungry, *almost carnal*, is as urgent
as a newborn's gasping, the brutal punch
of air against closed lungs. Its bark is rough.
Her cheek is scratched. She melds to root, trunk, branch.



Do You Have a *Voice*?
**Publication and Rhetorical Practices of One Feminist
Newsletter**

Tiffany Kinney

Throughout the 1960s, women frequently learned about the Radical Feminist Movement through the publication of small, unassuming newsletters they received during social gatherings such as consciousness-raising sessions, protests, or group meetings. According to feminist historian Susan Brownmiller, one newsletter in particular, *The Voice of the Women's Liberation Movement*, garnered a large readership with “over 800 people subscrib[ing] to *Voice* in its final edition in 1969.”¹ This newsletter was one of the original second wave feminist newsletters to be distributed on a national, as opposed to regional, scale, which may account for its large readership. In addition to its readership, this text is historically and rhetorically significant because it raised the consciousness of many women, and recruited them into the radical feminist movement—a movement that functioned to end gender inequity by critiquing and rebuilding the fundamental structures of society.

Although *Voice* was locally and nationally distributed by Chicago's branch of the Women's Liberation Movement, it is a typical newsletter in that it articulates an objective that governs the ideas published in the newsletter and has a regular staff that contributes recurring pieces. Compared to other newsletters, it is unique because it was frequently published and had a visually coherent format throughout the course of its publication. Although other radical feminist newsletters share the same characteristics, there is no other publication that possesses those traits to the same degree as *Voice*.² *Voice* was published seven times during the height of the Second Wave—once every two-three months from March 1968 until February 1969. It is important to note that while *Voice* may have expanded its page count and included writings that were not strictly political prose during its two-year span, it did not alter its original format or content in any substantial way that could re-characterize this text as anything but a newsletter.

While newsletters produced by other social movements and historical accounts of activism are well documented, the Second Wave feminist newsletter is often ignored. In *Girl 'Zines: Making Media, Doing Feminism*, Alison Piepmeier explores feminist publication practices but presents this genre (the radical Second Wave feminist newsletter) as playing a lesser role to the development of those practices as they are seen to be just



predecessors of the third wave feminist 'zine. Before Piepmeier, Jackie Rhodes takes radical feminist writing as her primary text of analysis in *Radical Feminism, Writing and Critical Agency*. Here, she recovers radical feminist texts for the study of composition and argues that examining these texts can inspire resistant ways of teaching composition. Building on the work of Rhodes, my article involves historiographical research to further recover the specific genre of radical feminist newsletters for rhetoric and feminist studies. I work toward recovering this genre by situating these newsletters inside a historical context, and closely analyzing the linguistic devices used by one feminist group as demonstrated in their newsletter, *The Voice*.

Historical Context of Radical Feminist Newsletters:

Before completing a close reading of the language published in radical Second Wave feminist newsletters, it is important to properly contextualize these documents, including a full view of these newsletters produced in the late 1960s-early 1970s and situating them into the history of feminist participatory media. This contextualization is important because it proves this genre was not a one-time creation, but is instead part of the continuum of feminist literature. In addition, this parsing exposes a genealogy of the feminist newsletter, linking it to other media such as the feminist scrapbooks/'zines; and differentiates it from male produced publication, student movement literature, or corporate newsletters.

From the First to the Third Wave, feminists have routinely experienced exclusion from traditional forms of publication (i.e. newspapers, books). In response, they have cultivated a space – literally – for their feminist ideas by designing, creating and publishing their own form of participatory media. With the term “participatory media,” I specifically mean media that is made by individuals, not by those working in and influenced by a consumer-culture, such as newspaper organizations, political parties or the government. Participatory media has been an important part of women’s and feminist history since the 1850s.³ In terms of genre, women during the Second Wave created and published the radical feminist newsletter—a genre historically situated in between scrapbooks and health booklets that were first created by First Wave feminists and 'zines created by Third Wave feminists.

Although some men create scrapbooks, these one-off products have mostly been designated to a female sphere of production. During the early 1900s, women and girls would compile scrapbooks by gathering collections of



personally significant memorabilia such as calling cards, newspaper clippings, and photographs and assemble them to effectively function as a record of their daily lives and interests.⁴ In the Progressive Era, feminists moved beyond using these scrapbooks as a daily record or journal when they used this genre to document their own work and, in turn, challenge mainstream newspaper coverage of the suffrage movement. These First Wave feminists were contributing and commenting on public life within a genre (scrapbooks) that was accessible to them. Moreover, this form of publication (scrapbooking) forged a community for women to exchange ideas about gender equality whenever they gathered to create and/or trade their handmade works.

With the advent of printing technology such as the photocopier and the mimeograph machine, Second Wave feminists were able to forgo hand-making their publications and instead create documents by machine. The mimeograph machine used a stencil placed on an ink drum, which was turned to press ink onto paper that fed into a machine; this process was easy enough to create multiple copies quickly, and it allowed these small, radical feminist groups to print hundreds of fliers that could then be distributed to women interested in the Women's Rights Movement. Production became so easy that "during the mid-1970s over 500 feminist magazines and newspapers appeared throughout the country—as outgrowths of the popular mimeographed pamphlets."⁵ According to many radical feminists, it was here in these "homespun rags" that one could find creative and cutting-edge theory and commentary. The names of the most influential radical feminist newsletters include: *Voice of Women's Liberation* produced in Chicago, edited by Joreen; *Notes from the First Year, Second Year and Third Year* produced in New York, edited by the New York Radical Women; *Cell 16*, produced in Boston, *Lilith* produced in Seattle; and *Toward a Female Liberation Movement*, produced in Gainesville, Florida.

The modern day equivalents to these "homespun" rags are 'zines developed by Third Wave feminists. Like most participatory media, these 'zines were produced in an expanse of available technologies; 'zines were not written on a typewriter but by on a computer with word processing software, and were mass copied by Xerox instead of a mimeograph. 'Zines are similar to Second Wave, radical newsletters in that they criticize ephemera taken from *their* current culture (1990s-present, 1960s-1970s, respectively), and are usually written in response to a male dominated culture (punk-culture of the 1990s and the student movement of the 1960s, respectively). First Wave Scrapbooks and Third Wave 'zines are materially similar to Second Wave radical feminist newsletters in that they are both handcrafted from paper



and they effectively function as an assemblage of documents comprised of poems, newspaper clippings, photos, drawings, diagrams, and essays. Furthermore, the publications that came out of the three waves of feminism shared a common objective to continue the discussion of feminist ideology—as each question and critique the subordinate role of women in order to promote gender equality.

These feminist publications give women an intellectual and embodied community where they can exchange their ideas. Each of the genres function as a public outlet for women to self-publish their ideas when these ideas do not fit a traditional script and do not conform to established modes of publication. Placing these Second Wave, radical newsletters inside the continuum of participatory feminist media offers a dynamic view of the history of sustained feminist resistance.⁶ And by acknowledging the vast degree to which feminist participatory media inspires and is inspired by the influx of women creating and self-publishing within that genre, the influence of radical, second wave feminist newsletters cannot be minimized as a singular or anomalous.⁷

The Voice of the Women's Liberation Movement

The initial publication of *Voice* was six pages, mimeographed on white paper with purple ink, and included no initial banner or pictures. It resembled an alternative newspaper with its simple design containing two columns, date, issue number, and title. The first edition was free and small enough that readers could slip the copies into their handbags and distribute them with little trouble. All text conformed to the expected 12 point, Times New Roman font, yet the content of the first lines was unexpected. A disclaimer was printed in place of a banner title, unapologetically explaining the absence of the title header, “This is the space for the banner title. We left it blank. Suggestions for the [banner title] will be printed in the next issue. Please send yours in.”⁸ Terse and to the point, this disclaimer contains an unusual invocation asking the reader to participate in the production of the text they are currently reading with “Please send yours in.” Here, the *Voice* again departs from the norms of published media at the end of the front-page disclaimer. In these lines, the editor, Joreen, asks for monetary contributions from the readers to help produce the next edition. She adds a caveat to her request, “If you don't have that much, send what you can. If you can pay nothing, and still want to receive this newsletter, write us a letter claiming poverty.”⁹ This caveat about claiming poverty hints at Joreen and the editorial staff's desire to build a coalition across class lines. Here, both pieces of textual evidence engage the audience in unique ways by



asking them to participate in the publication of the newsletter, even if their resources are slim. Ultimately, the first page of the first edition of *Voice* is characterized by a writing style that is sincere, fair, direct, ambitious, and empathetic, that arguably reflects the shared values that initially brought these radical activists together.

Like most media produced by a group as part of a social movement, radical Second Wave feminist newsletters were published to recruit new members into their group and inspire political action among the established membership. What is interesting about these texts is not their motive—that is simplistic and easy to derive from their historical moment—but the methods they used to accomplish their objective. The writers of *Voice* employ polarizing rhetoric to garner support and inspire political action among their readers. The polarizing rhetoric employed throughout is more specifically considered “attitudinally polarizing” in that it is designed to influence the attitude of readers and to persuade them to join the radical feminist movement. For readers who were already part of the movement, this attitudinally polarizing rhetoric solidified their commitment to the radical feminist cause and inspired a specific form of political action.

Separating the Committed from the Ambivalent by Employing Polarizing Language:

The content within the first edition of *Voice*, which is specifically analyzed in the following pages, was heavily saturated in polarizing rhetoric. By design, this polarity forces the reader to take sides— to either agree or disagree with the arguments made. For many radical feminist newsletters, the polarizing language was so hyperbolic that it not only forced its readers to commit to a side, but it also inspired readers to re-articulate this language and to engage in action that would bring these ideas to fruition. Unlike some work that purposefully separates polarization and solidification as rhetorical devices, such as Bower and Och’s *The Rhetoric of Agitation and Social Control*, I understand the two to be interconnected in that they demonstrate a causal relationship where one (the polarization) influences the other (solidification). Although I concede that solidification can happen by using methods other than polarization, solidification is a common, but not inevitable, consequence of employing rhetoric that polarizes; such rhetoric divides audiences and solidifies the beliefs on either side.

Polarizing language permeates the radical feminist newsletter and is exemplified by a rhetorical device showing up on the opening page of its inaugural issue. One such example can be found on the front page of an article entitled “What is Women’s Liberation,” where editor Joreen writes



that the nature of women's oppression is so "endemic to our social organization, that women can be liberated only with a total restructuring of this society."¹⁰ This radical analysis of women's position is decisive as it depicts only one method of creating change: a revolution to initiate a restructuring of society. This articulation does not consider other ways to facilitate change, such as using the legal system, as advocated by liberal feminists, or a redistribution of wealth, as promoted by socialist feminists. Joreen's prescription implies that all other alternatives that do not involve a radical restructuring are similar to one another because she does not delineate their differences; what is meant is that the alternatives become the unspoken monolithic opposition and for unknowing readers, become the opposite of radical feminism. Since Joreen's declarative prescription does not offer competing recommendations, it implicitly pressures readers to commit to the radical feminist analysis and cause.

In this example, Joreen's rhetoric also functions to shift readers' attitudes by selecting evidence that supports a radical restructuring of society. She claims in the second paragraph of her article, "women's liberation does not mean equality with men. Mere equality is not enough. Equality in an unjust society is meaningless."¹¹ By quickly dismissing what equality with men could mean for women, Joreen is illustrating how she selects her evidence; specifically, she routinely dismisses any alternative, or evidence in support thereof, that advocates for equality in an unjust society because the structures of that current society have hitherto enabled women's subordination. Although many authors tend to be selective about what evidence or support they include in their arguments, Joreen's selectivity represents an extreme in that she does not consider confutation as an alternative or after-thought when making her own arguments. Again, this selectivity highlights the polarizing rhetoric employed in radical feminist newsletters because Joreen presents a fair explanation to bolster one solution as absolute, instead of more fully attending to competing, alternative solutions.

By polarizing radical, socialist, and liberal feminist options, writers simultaneously recruit readers who likely share their extreme viewpoints and alienate those who disagree.¹² As the polarizing rhetoric builds, the readership of *Voice* likely becomes increasingly radicalized until authors and readers are motivated to participate in activism that purposefully aims to deconstruct the roots of patriarchal oppression. Some famous efforts organized by women's liberationists include the protests of the "Miss America Pageant," the "Jeanette Rankin Brigade," and the general boycotting of the patriarchal capitalism of Wall Street.¹³ If the reader of



Voice was not put off by the polarizing rhetoric opening this edition, it would mean she is willing to accept or at least consider a radical ideology as a possible solution to gender inequity. In continuing to read the first edition, the reader becomes one of the group— her membership solidified in the next page with a call to action. The second page explicitly includes this call which asks the reader to consider how the women’s liberation movement should respond to the Democratic National Convention of 1968. In the article, “On the Democratic Convention and What To Do About It,” radical feminist Sue Munaker lays out the types of activism the movement could perform,¹⁴ which include: disruption of the convention; articulating electoral alternatives; and coordinated demonstrations, which would mean organizing a radical conference where all members discuss potential opportunities for activism. Initially, the reader goes from encountering polarizing rhetoric to, if she finishes this text, to considering herself a radical woman who solidified her commitment to the cause – a cause for which she would entertain planning and performing feminist activism.

Conclusion:

Radical feminist newsletters deserve more critical academic attention, specifically as it relates to the unexplored arenas of feminist media production and the rhetorical devices used to persuade audiences that consume these communicative products; some of these unexplored products include other radical feminist newsletters such as *Notes from the First Year*, *Lilith* and *Cell 16*. Outside of the newsletter form, attending to feminist media products such as the manifesto and dictionary would further our understanding of how its producers employed rhetorical devices that were widely used in newsletters to build a coalition (i.e. *The Bitch Manifesto* and the *S.C.U.M. Manifesto*).

This brief article takes a step toward critically analyzing the structure, rhetoric, and historical influence of the Second Wave radical feminist newsletter—a genre that depicts women as being both active creators of feminist participatory publications, and coming from a long lineage of contributors who are invested in the tradition and vitality of these modes of feminist publication. The producers of *Voice* employ attitudinal polarization rhetoric to persuade their readers to join the Women’s Rights Movement and make an important contribution toward women’s liberation. This attitudinal polarization functions to separate those who were genuine radical feminists, ready to sacrifice for their cause, from those who were more ambivalent. It solidifies a coalition of readers who, in turn, work to support a radical analysis of social issues, participate in activism that



opposes the fundamental roots of gender discrimination, and create a space for women.

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¹ Susan Brownmiller, *In Our Time: A Memoir of a Revolution*, 125.

²Newsletters are characterized as a regularly distributed publication that is centered around one topic or issue per published edition. Newsletters are typically published by many groups, including clubs, churches, businesses and organizations. Generally, these newsletters have five common characteristics: 1) they relay news of any upcoming events sponsored by the organization, 2) they give



contact information for general inquiries about the event or organization, 3) they define who is in the organization and the purpose of the organization, 4) they provide a visual coherence between editions as each publication is formatted the same as the first, 5) they are distributed to members free of charge or at a very low cost which means they must be relatively short (usually not more than 20-60 pages) and ultimately 6) they are used to solidify the members' commitment to the organization.

³ Piepmeier, *Girl Zines*, 29.

⁴ Ibid.

⁵ Ibid, 36.

⁶ Ibid, 42.

⁷ A note on methodology: most of my methodology will involve close textual analysis of rhetorical examples. I will only focus on the functioning and influence of one newsletter in particular, *Voice of Women's Liberation Movement*.

⁸ Freeman, "Voice of the Women's Liberation Movement," no.1, 1.

⁹ Ibid.

¹⁰ Ibid.

¹¹ Ibid.

¹² There is no evidence that explicitly documents the race, class, sexuality or even gender of this publication's readership. Yet one can infer from the issues and concerns raised in *Voice*, the demographics of those writing for *Voice* and even those photographed participating in the radical feminist movement during this time, that these readers were primarily white, middle-upper class, heterosexual women. From the length of *Voice* and its rhetorical moves one can also safely assume that these women had leisure time and were well educated. Although *Voice* mentions women involved in the Socialist revolution in Cuba and suggests that women-loving-women could be a short-term strategy to free women from heterosexual sex, there is no substantial examination of issues which were outside the experience of white, middle-class, educated, heterosexual women.

¹³ The protests and the radical ideology from which they were developed is historically documented in various academic texts including Judith Hole and Ellen Levine's *The Rebirth of Feminism* and Susan Brownmiller's memoir *In Our Time*.

¹⁴ Munaker, "Voice of the Women's Liberation Movement," no 1, 2.



Weaned on Poison: *Sharp Objects* and the Politics of Self-Destruction

Eva Burke

This essay will focus on Flynn's debut novel *Sharp Objects* (2006) and the degree to which it presents female characters whose conflicted responses to the pressures of archetypal femininity renders them refreshingly complex even as the novel engenders a toxic milieu in which the virtues of female "likability" are weaponised and exploited. The novel revolves around Camille Preaker, an emotionally troubled young journalist whose return to her parochial hometown of Wind Gap in the wake of the murder of two young girls, Ann Nash and Natalie Keene (both found strangled and with their teeth pried out), results in a destructive family reunion. Camille's mother is the emotionally distant Adora, a faded southern matriarch with a propensity for subtle malice and understated self-harm: "when [Adora] is piqued, she has a peculiar tell: she pulls at her eyelashes. Sometimes they come out. During some particularly difficult years when I was a child, she had no lashes at all, and her eyes were a constant gluey pink, vulnerable as a lab rabbit's. In winter time, they leaked streaks of tears whenever she went outdoors."¹

The memory of Camille's deceased younger sister Marian, whose painful and protracted death seems to have acted as a catalyst for both Adora's and Camille's emotional impairment, permanently hangs between the overheated silences of their Missouri mansion. Marian's successor, a viciously precocious half-sister named Amma² whose demeanour wavers between self-aware juvenility and cultivated brutality, seems an embodiment of the latent toxicity of this place: "what did Amma make of Marian, I wondered? How confusing to live in the shadow of a shadow... [she had] a penchant for doing and seeing nasty things."³ Camille's emotional turmoil has been mapped onto her skin; her predilection for self-mutilation is expressed via the carving of words into her flesh: "my skin, you see, it screams. It's covered with words – *cook, cupcake, kitty, curls* – as if a knife-wielding first-grader learned to write on my flesh... pulling on a sweater and, in a flash of my wrist: *harmful*... it was crucial to see these letters on me, and not just see them, but feel them. Burning on my left hip: *petticoat*."⁴

While Adora's method of self-mutilation renders her plucked, pink, fragile and rabbit-like, Camille's is a potentially subversive form of self-reclamation – she wears her narrative and selectively edits it when she



chooses (words like *wicked*, *whore* and *unworthy* rub against *hurt* and *vanish* on her “screaming skin.”). Camille, of course, writes for a living, and her continuing presence in Wind Gap is ostensibly due to a professional obligation. Although it seems like the entire female population of Wind Gap is adept at exploiting the hurtful power of words, Camille’s ability to manipulate language is both a catalyst for her escape (her journalistic career in Chicago is the foundation for the independent existence she has built there) as well as a means of coming to terms with her destructive impulses. As she becomes re-immersed in the town-wide cycle of passive-aggressive conflict, her self-destructive urges intensify, and she is tormented with violently intrusive thoughts. Her ability to (literally) weaponize language is a perverse rejoinder to the unspoken caveats of female rivalry her words cut in the most literal sense. She is careful not to reveal this narrative of disfigurement in its entirety to those around her, and even the reader is only permitted momentary glimpses of her mutilated skin. Against the toxic backdrop of Wind Gap, a space in which women seem to regard their own physical and psychological submissiveness with a kind of resigned fury (and lash out at each other accordingly), Camille’s obstinate self-possession (perhaps her most effective defence against the deadening tide of nervy egocentrism) is extraordinarily rare. Many of the town’s female inhabitants seem to share a yearning for self-destruction. Adora’s friends use alcohol and prescription drugs to insulate themselves from reality - they exist in soft-focus, off-setting their addictions with cynical attempts at self-awareness: “Oh sure. I’m terribly lucky... OxyContin, Percocet, Percodan, whatever new pill my latest doctor has stock in.”⁵ Camille observes similar patterns of behaviour in their younger counterparts. For example, thirteen-year-old Amma and her friends routinely abuse drugs and socialise with older teenagers Amma confesses that she “acts out” in order to alleviate her anxiety and argues that “sometimes if you let people do things to you, you’re really doing it to them... if someone wants to do fucked-up things to you, and you let them, you’re making them more fucked-up. You have the control.”⁶ By submitting to the destructive desires of those around her, she controls the parameters of her own victimhood while covertly inflicting her own brand of harm – Camille, at one point in the novel, reflects that passively bearing witness to violence “does something to you, makes you less human. Like watching a rape and saying nothing.”⁷ Both she and Amma find catharsis in engaging with their own victimhood via self-harm.

Amma’s ability to manipulate the dynamics of victimhood in such a way crudely reflects the subtler forms of exploitation practiced by Adora and her peers, who wallow in their own discursive powerlessness even as they resent it. Their gestures toward self-destruction are indicative of a conflicted



consciousness – these women are unable to properly assimilate the violent and destructive impulses which they believe are an affront to their femininity, and so they attempt to direct these impulses inward instead. Patricia Pearson notes that self-harm is a type of aggression which fits with the established norms of gendered violence and therefore is an “acceptable” form of female aggression. She states, “women more comfortably label their violent impulses as self-destructive... aggressive gestures are directed by cultural expectation: more often inward if you’re female.”⁸ Self-destruction thus becomes a method of female empowerment or protest – they are prohibited from externalising their sadistic desires and so learn to contain their sadism. Violent physical conflict is traded for silent hostility, public displays of aggression are replaced with covert victimisation (often confined to the domestic sphere). Perhaps much of the professed shock at the physical destruction of Ann and Natalie and the implicit refusal to believe that the attacker may be female are grounded in a certain recognition that this unspoken code of conduct has been violated as this is aggression in its truest and most “masculine” form – not turned inward or channelled into verbal antagonism but expressed via bloodshed. The societal tendency to normalise such violence and project onto it certain “masculine” paradigms (the possibility that these attacks may have been sexually motivated is repeatedly touted by male investigators) facilitates the establishment of a hierarchy of victimhood in which female agency is negligible. Many of the women who populate Flynn’s novels complicate this hierarchy and are thus relegated to the rather ambiguous category of unlikeable or troubling female characters, characters Roxane Gay describes as “[women who] aren’t pretending, [who] won’t or can’t pretend to be someone they are not. They have neither the energy for it, not the desire... unlikeable women refuse to give in to that temptation. They are, instead, themselves.”⁹

Both Camille and Amma express a desire to move beyond the realm of shadowy, underhanded nastiness and into the gendered dominion of bodily violence. At one point in the novel, Camille recalls her first pubescent encounter with violent death:

I wandered into a neighbour boy’s hunting shed... where the animals were stripped and split. Ribbons of moist, pink flesh dangled from strings... the walls were covered with photographs of naked women... [women] held down and penetrated. One woman was tied up... I could smell them all in the thick, gory air. At home that night, I slipped a finger under my panties and masturbated for the first time, panting and sick.¹⁰



Even as a girl, she is able to recognise the link between this forbidden space (a place where the stench of dead, pink, naked flesh hangs over pornographic images of subjugated women) and her own gendered status with regard to such violence. The women visible in this tableau are submissive, opened up, as vulnerable as the butchered rabbits strung from the ceiling. Camille's sexual awakening coincides with her burgeoning awareness of her role in this milieu; she may submit to 'male' violence or live in denial of it, but she is forbidden from engaging with or appropriating such violence. The "sick" sexual pleasure she derives from the experience signifies a conflicted understanding of her own perceived vulnerability (and reflects the mind set of many of her female peers): she is simultaneously repulsed by the visceral reality of such slaughter and intrigued by the taboo nature of it, aware that her only acceptable role in such unadulterated violence is that of victim. Amma similarly indulges in a flirtation with explicit brutality when Camille follows her to the local industrial pig farm (the source of the family's wealth, incidentally).¹¹ Her half-sister's destructive urges are more often turned outward rather than inward; where Camille frequently indulges in self-objectification and allows others to objectify her, Amma finds cognitive release in objectifying and subjugating those around her.

As Amma watches the animals forced to nurse ("strapped to their sides in a farrowing crate, legs apart, nipples exposed. Pigs are extremely smart, sociable creatures, and this forced assembly-line intimacy makes the nursing sows want to die."¹²), she squirms with barely suppressed excitement – Camille is disgusted by the scene and fails to recognise the similarity between her own early encounter with such violence and degradation and Amma's fascination with it. While both are adept at the intricate power-plays and unwritten edicts governing female hostility, they seem to value the comparative honesty of such male cruelty – this is tangible violence; it leaves a mark and a stench and requires no craftiness or duplicity; it is violence that may be owned, by both victim and perpetrator, neither of whom can abjure the repercussions of such violence.

Camille's careful negotiation of the thorny and self-serving female relationships which govern Wind Gap leads to a relapse of sorts – she briefly reverts to the substance abuse and promiscuity of her teenage years in an attempt to assuage her growing awareness of her potentially lethal surroundings. As she begins to investigate the local murders, she becomes increasingly invested in the perverted power dynamics of her family and the town as a whole and is forced to confront the violent reality of her past and her own potentially inherited capacity for malice.¹³ The novel ends on a dual



revelation – Adora’s performance of motherly concern has been used to mask a profoundly disturbed psyche and a series of homicidal impulses, and Amma, in turn, is responsible for the Wind Gap murders which Camille has been investigating. Each of these instances of violence is predicated, to an extent, on a perverse infatuation with victimhood – Adora’s aggression is expressed via Munchausen Syndrome by Proxy (MSBP), a condition which compels her to deliberately induce physical sickness in her daughters, with the “always long-gone Marian”¹⁴ the first to fall victim to this compulsion.

This calculated distortion of Adora’s motherly position may be read as a subconscious attempt to challenge or transcend the gendered confines of her ‘caregiver’ role; her destructive impulses are inextricably linked to the performative maternal identity she has assumed and so her cruelty manifests as a kind of misdirected tenderness. The often overwhelming demands of the maternal role, according to Judith Libow, may be a factor in the development of MSBP:

Motherhood highlights a woman’s experience of finding her own needs increasingly submerged by the pressing needs of another. Her role of caregiver to others is in fact a lifelong expectation, as most women are taught early in life that their destined and most ‘feminine’ role is that of nurturer... it is possible that the caregiving act itself might become distorted or perverted to meet some of a woman’s own ‘unacceptable’ needs.¹⁵

In the case of Adora, the act of caregiving is weaponised as an outlet for her violent desires; her preferred pattern of victimisation involves a cycle of neglect, contamination and nurturance. She is unable to psychologically separate her yearning to inflict pain from her socially inscribed role of nurturer, and so her transgressions are couched in maternal benevolence. The result is a concentric sphere of victimhood in which Adora may garner attention and sympathy from outsiders (“Dr. Jameson is very masterful and kind... said that I was an angel, and that every child should have a mother like me.”¹⁶) while conferring or withdrawing compassion from her own victims as and when she chooses, playing God even as she maintains the pretence of helplessness.

This obliquely malicious behaviour is mimicked, to a greater or lesser degree, by most of the female inhabitants of Wind Gap¹⁷ – when Camille agrees to attend a “Pity Party” thrown by several of her former schoolmates, she bears witness to the latent hostility and indirect aggression at the core



of these relationships. Delicate allusions are made to the precarious social standing of certain members of the group (even as the pretence of sisterhood is enacted, Camille's running commentary, supplemented by the veiled jibes of alpha female Katie Lacey, deftly reworks the charade of female solidarity), and outbursts of self-pity are used to subtly re-establish the hierarchies of power within their small clique: "I had no idea my life was so miserable until I started coming to [these] little get-togethers,' Becca whispered... '... being conflicted means you can live a shallow life without copping to being a shallow person.'"¹⁸ These bouts of aggressive self-pity indicate a conflicted desire to obtain victim status while maintaining social dominance; like Adora, these women aspire to victimhood with a covert intensity which renders their process of victimisation particularly vicious. The initial target is Becca, a member of the group who "just didn't fit in... [she] sat amidst them, looking eager and awkward, dressed almost comically similar to her hostess... she flashed smiles to anyone who caught her eye, but no one talked to her."¹⁹

While Adora²⁰ is unable to emotionally disentangle her destructive impulses from her role of carer (and subsequently falls into a behavioural spiral in which cruelty and kindness are two sides of the same coin), Camille's peers are more adept at compartmentalising their ruthlessness; tearfully extolling the virtues of domesticity and indicting Camille for her lack of feeling in one breath, engaging in a hysterically gleeful itemisation of the murders in the next. They use gossip to vicariously satisfy their craving for brutality and reinforce their own hegemonic power; this is what anthropologist Ilsa Glazer terms "the power of the weak": "the subordinate group [in this case the women of Wind Gap] is itself internally differentiated into dominance hierarchies, and gossip is a means of maintaining dominance within the subordinate group... women have an interest in keeping those beneath them in their place."²¹ The micro-aggressions which mediate their interactions allow them to play with the dynamics of victimhood while paradoxically reasserting their collective power. While one of the women wails "why would someone hurt little girls?"²² another mournfully ponders, "why are girls so cruel to each other?"²³ – after which the group indulges in a detailed enumeration of the nastiness meted out by the young ladies of Wind Gap to their peers. Camille notes that the adolescent torment they describe is reminiscent of the behaviour they themselves engaged in as young women at the pinnacle of the teenage social hierarchy. In this town, it seems, the latent spitefulness of adolescent aggression invariably carries over into adulthood²⁴ the temporal distance separating Katie's clique from Amma and her girl gang is inconsequential.



This wilful contradiction in terms indicates the extent to which these women have internalised the dynamics of female power and victimhood; they are so inured to the ephemeral hostility of half-truths, indirection and nonverbal conflict that the prospect of one girl using physical violence to subjugate another evokes little more than revolted awe; to discuss the possibility of unambiguous female aggression would be to approach a truth that they cannot acknowledge for fear of relinquishing their own appropriated vulnerability and the inverse power it grants them. Patricia Pearson asserts that this dismissal of female aggression contributes to “one of the most abiding myths of our time... literature rejoices in the docility of female flesh, its yielding form, its penetrability... women do not physically thrust and strut and dominate.”²⁵ Toward the end of the novel, Camille wonders if “illness sits inside every woman, waiting for the right moment to bloom. I have known so many sick women all my life... women get *consumed*. Not surprising, considering the sheer amount of traffic a woman’s body experiences. Tampons and speculums. Cocks, fingers, vibrators and more, between the legs, from behind, in the mouth. Men love to put things inside women, don’t they?”²⁶

The “illness” blossoming inside most of these women is grounded in a covert rejection of such symbolic invasion; a semi-conscious reaction against the notion that the female body is merely a receptacle, to be penetrated rather than to penetrate. The fact that neither of Amma’s victims was subjected to sexual assault is repeatedly noted as an anomaly which complicates interpretation of the crime – one of the male investigators wonders if the act of tooth-pulling is analogous: “I think in our guy’s mind, the teeth pulling is equivalent to rape. That’s all about power – it’s invasive, it requires a goodly amount of force, and as each tooth comes out... release.”²⁷ This reflects Pearson’s assertion that instances of overt female aggression offer a profoundly unsettling challenge to the gendered status quo of violence rather than think outside the conventional paradigms of violent crime, he must symbolically reshape the violent act to fit with those paradigms. The pulling of teeth is actually a violent act of reclamation on Amma’s part the stolen teeth have been used to decorate her doll’s house, a miniature reproduction of Adora’s mansion which serves as a macabre testament to her afflicted childhood. It is telling that she obsessively decorates the house to ensure that it reflects its life-sized counterpart – just as she responds to Adora’s abuse by seeking to dominate those around her, she negotiates her own anxiety with regard to the corruption of their shared space by seeking to remake and exert a measure of control over that space. She confesses that she had felt an affinity for both of her victims: “I was friends with them for a while,” she said finally, talking into her chest. “We



had fun, running around in the woods. We were wild. We'd hurt things together... but then [Adora] got all interested in them. I could never have anything to myself."²⁸ The invisibility or impotence of patriarchal figures is particularly conspicuous during Amma and Camille's interactions with Adora this is a venomous matriarchy, guided by the muted rage of women who rail against their internalized gender roles even as they perform accordingly. Early in the novel, Camille wonders if the "extra hormones [they] put in [their] livestock"²⁹ may have exacerbated the precociousness of Wind Gap's young women it seems equally likely that they have absorbed sadism with their breast milk, a strain of toxicity passed unbroken from mother to daughter. Adora is constantly feeding or trying to feed Amma and Camille – during her final interaction with Camille, she forces her daughter to ingest a poisoned meal. Just as she insists that they absorb her tainted sustenance and submit to her lethal mothering, she attempts to impart a kind of learned helplessness, a self-conscious system of malevolent co-dependence.

Amma's decision to inflict violence upon other girls is, to some extent, a futile attempt to escape indoctrination into the Wind Gap rhetoric of victimhood, in which female aggression is only palatable when couched in furtiveness and deflection. She admits that she complied with Adora's venomous mothering on the condition that the secret of her sporadic illnesses remain between them "she demanded uncontested love and loyalty."³⁰ The symbiotic nature of this brutality facilitates a series of continually reoccurring paroxysms of victimhood and victimisation by relinquishing her bodily autonomy, Amma gains power over Adora and contributes to the discourse of female vulnerability (a discourse propagated by other women, in the case of Wind Gap).

Both Ann and Natalie, the girls whose deaths have drawn Camille back to Wind Gap, are noted as having a penchant for "boyish" violence – Ann is reported to have killed a neighbour's pet bird with a stick (sharpened with her father's hunting knife while Camille and Amma derive a kind of complicated gratification from using acts of "masculine" violence against animals to reflect on their own powerlessness, Ann actually participates in such violence), and Natalie to have stabbed a former female classmate in the eye with a pair of scissors. Natalie also has a reputation for being a "biter" – several of the people Camille interviews bear her scars. Natalie's biting is perhaps less a defence and more a pre-emptive rejoinder to the encroaching demands of womanhood although she is remembered at her own funeral service as a sweet, agreeable girl, others remember her as a half-feral child, struggling with the small-town gender politics of Wind Gap – if



the role of the woman is to be ‘consumed’, she prefers to be the one consuming. Most of her victims are older women, paragons of the kind of femininity which threatens to curb her ferocity and render her toothless (literally, as it turns out). Prior to the murders, Amma and her friends take care to “pretty up” Ann and Natalie – both girls are dressed up and have lipstick applied, Natalie’s fingernails are painted and Ann’s legs shaved they are treated as sacrificial offerings.

These small ministrations (initially misinterpreted as repurposed tenderness, of the kind practiced by Adora) are part of a ritual of sorts, a spiteful indoctrination into the cult of femininity which looms large over these girls and heralds the end of their youthful liberty. This cult is described by sociologist Marjorie Ferguson as “a set of practices and beliefs: rites and rituals, sacrifices and ceremonies, whose periodic performance reaffirms a common femininity and shared group membership.”³¹ The mutilated bodies of Ann and Natalie are made totemic, in a sense: they are toothless, speechless, defenceless models of feminine submission, painted and positioned, reduced to props rather than active agents in the narrative of their undoing (not unlike the women in the pornographic images which affected Camille as a young girl). Camille reflects that death has paradoxically consigned them to a kind of discursive limbo between girl- and womanhood, eternally pure, “[never to] find a spouse or a lover”³², unable to engage with or negotiate their own interminable victimhood in the way that their peers (and many of Flynn’s other female characters, particularly *Gone Girl*’s Amy) will learn to. In death, their complexities are reduced to shallow anecdotes, their sharp edges made smooth, the perpetual interplay between victimisation and victimhood simplified by the ultimate act of physical domination. The fact that their bodily and discursive undoing is instigated by Amma is indicative of a confusion or uncertainty with regard to the complicated and often contradictory dynamics of the victim-victimiser relationship although she actively persecuted them while they were alive, and in the presence of her peers gleefully dismisses Ann and Natalie as “freaks,” her final confession is tempered by a wistful acknowledgment of affinity with these girls – their clandestine excursions had allowed them to transcend the well-worn subtleties of female hostility and indulge their thirst for blood and brutality.

The severance of their violent kinship may be read as Amma’s own attempt at sacrificial self-destruction (she disguises herself as Artemis, the blood huntress of Greek mythology, in order to lure Natalie to her death). These girls share her craving for bloodshed and domination, and her decision to enact their destruction in order to satisfy her own craving (while ensuring



that they are adorned with certain aesthetic signifiers of normative femininity) is a surrender of sorts to the status quo, the excision of those parts of her self which can never be understood or accepted. Ironically, in attempting to kill off these parts of herself, she contravenes the unspoken regulations of female conflict and is consigned to a juvenile prison, a place in which such violence is pathologised, observed and controlled: “visitors are allowed twice a month... [I] sat with her in a cheerful playground area surrounded by barbed wire. Little girls in prison slacks and T-shirts hung on monkey bars and gym rings, under supervision of fat, angry female guards.”³³

Like Ann and Natalie, Adora enjoys a proclivity for biting one of Camille’s most vivid childhood memories involves her mother holding a baby, “staring at the child almost lasciviously. She pressed her lips hard against the baby’s cheek. Then she opened her mouth just slightly, took a tiny bit of flesh between her teeth, and gave it a little bite. The baby wailed.”³⁴ Adora’s violence is perhaps a similar but more complex form of protest than that of Ann or Natalie. Her matriarchal role is one she seems intermittently bewildered with, as though she has sleepwalked into motherhood - Camille believes that she regards children with a resentful wariness, and is looking for an escape. The small but shocking act of violence witnessed by Camille seems more instinctive than calculated, almost animal in nature. Like Natalie, she longs to consume rather than be consumed by her own performance of blinkered, gentle womanhood – such outbursts are a cathartic reminder of her true nature. In Wind Gap, female violence, although generally socially unacceptable, is doubly so when directed against a child. To be a Wind Gap woman, after all, is to “want to have children to love them immediately, dearly and always to put their interests first at all times to enjoy every aspect of childcare and domestic responsibilities and to be ever smiling, ever cheerful, all-perfect. And all of this, of course, comes ‘naturally’.”³⁵ The myth of female benevolence and “maternal instinct” ensures that any hostility a mother may feel towards her own children must be repressed and renounced. If actual violence takes place, it must be understood as an act of desperation or insanity rather than one of malice or wilful cruelty: “mothers are strong, long-suffering, altruistic, and resourceful. Mothers are never callous they are not indifferent.”³⁶ As Flynn herself notes, we are all too eager to devour tales of maternal malfunction, but only if they are “rendered palatable. We want somber asides on postpartum depression or a story about the Man Who Made Her Do It. But there’s an ignored resonance. I think women like to read about murderous mothers and lost little girls because it’s our only mainstream outlet to even begin discussing female violence on a personal level.”³⁷



Adora's inability to establish a genuine attachment to her children (one removed from the succession of abusive "treatments" she administers) is grounded in her fractious relationship with her own mother, a monstrous woman who sought to control or destroy every aspect of Adora's life and was undone by her unexpected pregnancy: "That's what killed Joya. Her daughter finally had something in her that Joya couldn't get at."³⁸ Virtually all of the mothers of Wind Gap are guilty of similar conduct to a greater or lesser extent: they are abusive or absent, distracted, self-absorbed and egotistical they are women who haven't allowed motherhood to soften or simplify them but who have learned to offset their powerlessness by weaponising their own maternal role.³⁹ The mothering 'instinct' is intrinsically linked to the myth of female compassion, but the instinct for survival seems to have taken precedence for these mothers, many of whom have been made sharper, harder or increasingly pragmatic by motherhood. Although Camille is subject to some pitying glances when she returns home, unwed and without children (during the "Pity Party," one of her peers observes that "it seems like part of your heart can never work if you don't have kids. Like it will always be shut off... that's what women are made for, right? To bear children."⁴⁰), her capacity for duplicity and manipulation often pales in comparison to that of her peers, all of whom are mothers.

Richard, the lead investigator, voices his suspicion that Adora is responsible for the murders of Ann and Natalie, explaining that her "nurturing instinct [may have] gone awry."⁴¹ His inability to disassociate Adora from the stereotypical feminine impetus toward maternal benevolence ironically echoes her own confusion with regard to her destructive appetites. Neither is willing or able to properly comprehend and articulate the reality of female violence which is driven by a combination of ruthlessness and resentment, and not couched in the "acceptable" narrative of overwhelmed motherhood, psychological fragility or vulnerability to malign male influence. The extent to which this gendered conception of motive has been internalised (personally and culturally) is reflected in the language used to describe Adora's crimes they are "by-proxy," the product of a sick mind rather than a vindictive one. Even after she is found guilty of the first-degree murder of Marian, she is buffered by support from people eager to absolve her of her destructive agency and reduce her, once again, to victimhood. One of the only witnesses to the abduction of Natalie is a young boy, James Capisi, who describes the abductor as a ghostly woman, a spectre lurking in the woods. His reading of Amma/Artemis as fairytale witch rather than huntress suggests that the abjuration and mythologisation of female violence is something that even the youngest boys of Wind Gap are adept at by



reverting to certain popular feminine archetypes, he successfully distances himself from the brutal reality of what is happening.

In conclusion, *Sharp Objects* skilfully examines and deconstructs the illusion of femininity as intrinsically soft, safe, and nurturing through its exploration of the often shockingly spiteful female interactions it depicts. Flynn's female characters are aware of the inverse privilege their perceived vulnerability grants them, and these characters successfully play with the dynamics of victimhood in order to reinforce or redefine their own authority. The imminent threat of female self-destruction is similarly invoked and manipulated, used to counterbalance the weight of potential psychological implosion. The rejection of an essentialist doctrine of female experience and unwavering focus on female characters with whom readers may find it difficult (and at times impossible) to sympathise with is something which recurs in Flynn's work.

¹ Gillian Flynn, *Sharp Objects* (New York: Random House, 2006), p.25.

² Interestingly, Amma's name is both an anagram of 'Mama' (profoundly ironic in relation to her negotiation of such bleak matriarchal terrain) and a variant on a popular colloquial term of endearment in many cultures: the etymological roots of 'ama'/'amma' are linked to motherhood, guardianship and nurturance.

³ *Ibid.*, p.101.

⁴ *Ibid.*, p.60.

⁵ *Ibid.*, p.199.

⁶ *Ibid.*, p.182.

⁷ *Ibid.*, p.99.

⁸ Patricia Pearson, *When She Was Bad: Violent Women and the Myth of Innocence* (London: Virago Press, 1999), p.22-32.

⁹ Roxane Gay, *Not Here to Make Friends: On the Importance of Unlikable Female Protagonists* (New York: BuzzFeed, 2014).

¹⁰ Gillian Flynn, *Sharp Objects* (New York: Random House, 2006), p.14-15.

¹¹ The fact that this flirtation takes place on a pig farm is telling - it evokes both William Golding's feral schoolchildren and their fearful worship of the 'Lord of the Flies', a gory misgendered relic of depravity which mutely sanctions their violence, and the sub-genre of 'hillbilly horror', which often invokes implicit or explicit allusions to pigs and butchery in the context of male depravity (e.g. *The Texas Chainsaw Massacre* (1974) and its depiction of a kind of domestic slaughterhouse, in which the division between human and animal is made indistinguishable). Amma is adjacent to this tradition in that her gender and socioeconomic position should facilitate a detachment from the horror of the abattoir (Camille observes that the porcine stench and bloody clamour of the farm is so pervasive that it amounts to a multi-sensorial assault on the workers, most of whom have been drawn from the lower end of the Wind Gap social spectrum) - she doesn't need to spend time in the brutalising milieu of the factory farm, she chooses to. Linnie Blake (*The Wounds of Nations: Horror Cinema, Historical Trauma and National Identity* (Manchester: Manchester University Press, 2008)) asserts that the frequent exploitation of the slaughterhouse trope in cinematic and literary depictions of the Southern United States allows "the monstrous other [to be] deployed to serve dominant ideologies of class and nationhood." (p.142). In the case of *Sharp Objects*, the pig farm is a space consciously regendered by Adora's governance and Amma's deviance.

¹² Gillian Flynn, *Sharp Objects* (New York: Random House, 2006), p.99.



¹³ William March's 1954 novel *The Bad Seed* explores the idea of evil as a genetically inherited trait – the protagonist, Christine, discovers that her biological mother is a female serial killer and worries that her own daughter, Rhoda, may have acquired a hereditary predilection for homicide. Like Amma, Rhoda offsets her sadism with a performance of girlish benevolence.

¹⁴ *Ibid.*, p.4.

¹⁵ Judith Libow and Herbert Schreier, *Hurting for Love: Munchausen by Proxy Syndrome* (New York: Guilford Press, 1993), p.106-107.

¹⁶ Gillian Flynn, *Sharp Objects* (New York: Random House, 2006), p.242.

¹⁷ Amy, the central female character in Flynn's later novel *Gone Girl*, proves masterful at this kind of malevolent affectation, and believes it to be fundamental female skill. Flynn's preference for female characters who manipulate and implicitly challenge their own powerlessness has drawn some criticism with regard to the potentially problematic implications therein while her depictions of women have been described as "the crystallization of a thousand misogynist myths and fears about female behaviour," (*Gone Girl and the Specter of Feminism* (USA: Interrogating Media, 2012)), it may be argued that in drawing attention to the ways in which women are and are not *allowed* to misbehave she problematises female victimhood as a societal concept.

¹⁸ Gillian Flynn, *Sharp Objects* (New York: Random House, 2006), p.132.

¹⁹ *Ibid.*, p.130.

²⁰ Like that of Amma, Adora's name perversely emphasises her gendered position (she seems to be every inch the 'adoring' mother) and the extent to which certain cultural assumptions with regard to this maternal role may have triggered or expedited her crimes.

²¹ Ilsa Glazer and Wahiba Ras, 'On Aggression, Human Rights, and Hegemonic Discourse: The Case of a Murder for Family Honor in Israel', *Sex Roles*, 30.3/4, (1994), 269-288 (p. 285).

²² Gillian Flynn, *Sharp Objects* (New York: Random House, 2006), p.133.

²³ *Ibid.*, p.133.

²⁴ Rosalind Wiseman argues that when this adolescent aggression is particularly "intense, confusing, frustrating and humiliating... girls can develop patterns of behaviour and expectations for future relationships that stop them from becoming competent, authentic people who are capable of having healthy relationships with others as adults." (*Queen Bees and Wannabes: Helping your Daughter Survive Cliques, Gossip, Boyfriends and the New Realities of Girl World* (New York: Crown Publishing, 2002)), p.3.

²⁵ Patricia Pearson, *When She Was Bad: Violent Women and the Myth of Innocence* (London: Virago Press, 1999), p.7-8.

²⁶ Gillian Flynn, *Sharp Objects* (New York: Random House, 2006), p.204.

²⁷ *Ibid.*, p.111.

²⁸ *Ibid.*, p.250.

²⁹ *Ibid.*, p.114.

³⁰ *Ibid.*, p.250.

³¹ Marjorie Ferguson, *Forever Feminine: Women's Magazines and the Cult of Femininity* (New Hampshire: Heinemann Educational Publishers, 1983), p.184.

³² Gillian Flynn, *Sharp Objects* (New York: Random House, 2006), p.34.

³³ *Ibid.*, p.249.

³⁴ *Ibid.*, p.97.

³⁵ Helen Birch, *Moving Targets: Women, Murder and Representation* (Los Angeles: University of California Press, 1994), p.199.

³⁶ Patricia Pearson, *When She Was Bad: Violent Women and the Myth of Innocence* (London: Virago Press, 1999), p.74.

³⁷ Gillian Flynn, *For Readers* (USA: Gillian Flynn Official Website, 2013).

³⁸ Gillian Flynn, *Sharp Objects* (New York: Random House, 2006), p.201.

³⁹ This is what Adrienne Rich, in her 1976 work *Of Woman Born*, describes as a specifically female ability, the power to rewrite and reclaim the biological imperative to reproduce and "[use] of mothering as a channel – narrow but deep – for their own human will to power... theories of female power and female ascendancy must reckon fully with the ambiguities of our being, and with the continuum of our consciousness, the potentialities for both creative and destructive energy in each of us." (*Of Woman Born: Motherhood as Experience and Institution* (New York: W.W. Norton & Company, 1995,) p.38)



⁴⁰ Gillian Flynn, *Sharp Objects* (New York: Random House, 2006), p.134.

⁴¹ *Ibid.*, p.232.



Sarah

Katherine Masters

It was easy for her to pass—
without pinching her cheeks or cinched in a corset,
with rectangular cheekbones,
nobody would notice the lack of bristles dusking her square jaw.

She was surprised—
She didn't find loneliness
that first night at camp,
in that first Southern July,
cooler in uniform than in a tangle of petticoats.
She found peace in the expanding dark,
the swampy blues of the crickets, the whip-poor-will.

She was shocked—
To be at ease, crouching in the dirt, marching,
The Cause-Neglected grass cool on throbbing blisters.
It came without thought, running into the mass of men,
scattered like a kicked anthill,
with no plan but to keep breathing,
smells of dirty bodies, rotting men,
that rebel yell.
The way the tip of her bayonet slid right through that soft spot between the
boy's ribs,
like back home, splitting the breast of a chicken.
The way her body shuddered with her heart,
but only before and after,
How steady her hands,
loading-loading-loading her musket.

Astonished—
That it felt more natural to fight,
than to roll bandages,
to serve water to the wounded
and listen to their stories.
That it was more natural to focus on survival,
than to sit,
waiting-waiting-waiting for a muddy letter,
any day now



Any lying in response,
everything is fine here...

Resenting
That she was a woman.



Ferret Queen, 2016

Danielle Lehuanani Bonderer

This photo was taken through a shop window in Hay-on-rye (Town of Books) Wales, and it captures the reflection of clouds, text on a delivery van, and a slight glare creating an abstract and surreal dream-world that echoes the woman's sense of space. The Queen's pose, reflective down cast eyes, soft face, and pearl strand are juxtaposed with the hardness of her hinged knees and iron forearms, which work to create both a Renaissance and Post-Industrial feel.

I chose to apply the photo to a wooden panel in order to mirror the blue shutter and the materiality of the Queen herself. This further creates a layered realm of materials and textures that exist in the moment revealed through the lens of the camera. The clouds, which begin at her throat, rise above her eyes and enhance her internal reverie. The blurred text implies an outside rhetoric that is not truly part of her experience, but rather indicative of outside forces. The stained and burned wood works to complicate the Queen's peaceful posture, implying a level of damage and age on an otherwise timeless woman.



*Ferret Queen, 2015.
Photo on wood*



A Comparative Analysis of Dating Violence Gender Norms Among Collegiate Greek Culture and Collegiate Athletes

Staci Jagoe And Dr. Dione M. King

Literature

Dating violence is becoming a well-documented phenomenon among college student populations.^{1,2} Many studies define dating violence as a physical assault and/or psychological aggression within a dating relationship.³ Research has focused on identifying populations that are at increased risk of perpetration and victimization of dating violence.^{4,5} Populations considered high-risk include at risk adolescents,^{6,7} college students,⁸ and those that experienced violence during childhood.⁹ This paper explores dating violence literature to explore gender norms among collegiate athletes and PanHellenic Greek members.

According to Bannon, fraternity and sorority members compose a unique sub-culture on college campuses that have higher rates of both perpetration and victimization.¹⁰ This population is associated with individual risk factors for dating violence such as increased use in alcohol and the expression of ideal gender roles.^{11,12} Although these risk factors are present, they are not well-developed within the collegian athletes' sub-culture.

Gender norms have been found to have a significant impact on the rate of acceptance of dating violence by fraternity and sorority members.¹³ Fraternity members seek to achieve a hyper masculine role which can be characterized by the dominance over females and aggression towards females.¹⁴ Sorority members have an adherence to traditional feminine gender roles including submission to males.¹⁵ The combination of such polarized gender norms has been attributed as a main facilitator of the acceptance of dating violence with in Greek culture on college campuses.¹⁶

Hyper masculinity in the literature has also been extensively associated to male high school athletes.¹⁷ Only recently has research found similarities in the hyper masculinity and perpetration of college athletes and fraternity members.¹⁸ Unlike females with sorority affiliation, female student athletes' gender norms have not been reviewed in association with victimization of dating violence. According to Steinfeldt, female athletes strive for "standards of traditional male athleticism, yet at the same time attempt to manage societal expectations of conforming to traditional femininity"



(410).¹⁹ Research on female athletes has shown that the athletes conform to female gender roles as much as non-athletes.²⁰

Current Research

The Red Flag Campaign, a dating violence awareness program, was introduced at the University of West Florida in 2015. A survey was conducted prior to the campaign's implementation. A secondary analysis of data of five surveys questions indicated that student athletes held a higher acceptance rate of dating violence than members of Greek organization and the student body in general. There were 288 participants of which 65 were students affiliated with a fraternity or sorority and 14 were student athletes (specific sports were not disclosed). Of the five questions analyzed, student athletes scored higher on all test items (see Tables 1 and 2). The findings of the study supported the hypothesis that student athletes had a higher acceptance of dating violence than the general members of the student body. Contrary to the secondary hypothesis, the data indicates that student athletes had a higher rate of acceptance than individuals with Greek affiliation. Due to limitations in the sample size, this study should be viewed as an exploratory work demonstrating the need for future examination into collegian athletic affiliation and a culture of dating violence acceptance.

Table 1

Survey Questions and Answers

Acceptance of General Dating Violence Scale Questions	Possible Responses
Q1 Violence between dating partners can improve the relationship	Strongly Disagree
Q2 There are times when violence between dating partners is okay	Disagree
Q3 Sometimes violence is the only way to express your feelings	Agree
Q4 Some couples must use violence to solve their problems	Strongly Agree
Q5 Violence between dating partners is a personal matter and people should not interfere	

Notes. Table 1 adapted from Foshee et al 1996²¹



Table 2

Likert Scale Scores of Participant Groups

Student Type	Q1	Q2	Q3	Q4	Q5
All Participants	1.22	1.25	1.25	1.24	1.28
Fraternity and Sorority Affiliation	1.25	1.28	1.29	1.31	1.31
Student Athlete.	1.36	1.43	1.64	1.50	1.43

Notes. (N= 288), Greek Affiliation (n=65), Student Athletes (n=14)

Conclusion

This literature comparison and current research points out deficits in the current literature with regards to presence of dating violence within collegian athletic culture. First, more work is needed to understand the gender norms of female athletes within the context of dating violence victimization. Second, research needs to explore how the well documented male athletes' idealized gender norms of hyper masculinity interacts with the unique interpretation of femininity held by female athletes. Thirdly, the existing scholarly literature that explores similar gender norms within Greek culture suggests that collegian athlete interactions should also be further explored to assess their perceived acceptance of dating violence.

There is a growing body of knowledge related to the occurrence of risk factors for dating violence such as hyper masculinity, and unique female gender norms within Greek culture on college campus. Collegian athletes also possess similar factors but further research is needed to assess these risk factors. The utility of such analysis could foster stronger dating violence awareness and prevention campaigns targeted at the athletic population on college campuses.

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- ⁸ Bannon, et al., “Sorority and Fraternity Rape Myth Acceptance,” 72.
- ⁹ Milletich, et al., “Exposure to Interparental Violence,” 628.
- ¹⁰ Bannon, et al., “Sorority and Fraternity Rape Myth Acceptance,” 72.
- ¹¹ Vagi, et al., “Beyond Correlates,” 633.
- ¹² Moore, et al., “Alcohol Use and Intimate Partner Violence,” 315.
- ¹³ Bannon, et al., “Sorority and Fraternity Rape Myth Acceptance,” 81.
- ¹⁴ Murnen, et al., “Athletic Participation, Fraternity Membership, and Sexual Aggression, 145.
- ¹⁵ Bannon, et al., “Sorority and Fraternity Rape Myth Acceptance,” 76.
- ¹⁶ Ibid., 76.
- ¹⁷ McCauley, et al., “Gender Equitable Attitudes,” 1882.
- ¹⁸ Murne, et al., “Athletic Participation, Fraternity Membership, and Sexual Aggression.” 145.
- ¹⁹ Steinfeldt, et al., “Conformity to Gender Norms,” 410.
- ²⁰ Ibid., 410.
- ²¹ Foshee, et al., “The Safe Dates Project.” 39-47.



Evaluating Maternity Group Home Programs Using a Reproductive Justice Framework

Elizabeth (Lily) Rowen

Introduction

According to the Department of Housing and Urban Development and independent researchers, in the United States of America there are approximately 1.68 million runaway and homeless youth under the age of 18, and there are 150,000 homeless young adults between the ages of 18-24¹. These homeless youth face a plethora of sexual and reproductive health challenges. These health challenges include sexually transmitted diseases (STDs), sexually transmitted infections (STIs), and a lack of access to reproductive health care, contraceptives, prenatal care, and maternal care². Homeless youth also experience decreased access to sex education and are more likely than their housed peers to undergo mental and physical health problems from sexual abuse and assault³.

The Runaway and Homeless Youth Act, established in 1974, is a federal law that attempts to prevent initial youth descent into homelessness and to intervene with assistance for youth who are currently homeless. Funded by grants from the Runaway and Homeless Youth Act, maternity group home programs are responsible for facilitating reproductive justice by providing sexual, prenatal, and maternal health services to pregnant and parenting homeless and runaway youth.

Twenty years after the Runaway and Homeless Youth Act legislation, the term “reproductive justice” was coined by members of the women of color delegation to the 1994 International Conference on Population and Development in Cairo, Egypt. The term was developed further by a group of African American women who were caucusing at the Illinois Pro-Choice Alliance Conference in Chicago in 1994. In the twenty-first century, the concept of reproductive justice has been popularized by the grassroots organization SisterSong. SisterSong defines reproductive justice as, “a positive approach that links sexuality, health, and human rights to social justice movements by placing abortion and reproductive health issues in the larger context of the well-being and health of women, families and communities.”⁴

Maternity group home programs funded by the Runaway and Homeless Youth Act would be more effective with increased financial resources and



research efforts that utilize the reproductive justice model for analysis. Currently, the maternity group home program model resembles a traditional interventionist public health model. The interventionist model is based on the idea that social policies (and agents of the state that enforce social policies) should intervene in the lives of citizens of a populace in order to protect their health⁵. The interventionist model has been critiqued for being paternalistic, maternalistic, and lacking in its consideration of preventative measures for health care⁶. With the addition of evaluative methods based on the lived experiences of program targets and increased federal funding that illustrates that the lives of the program targets are valued, maternity group home programs have the potential to emulate the transformative paradigm established by the reproductive justice model of health care.

Policy Background

In 1974 the United States Congress incorporated the Runaway and Homeless Youth Act into Title III of the Juvenile Justice and Delinquency Prevention Act in order “to assist runaways outside of the juvenile justice and child welfare systems.”⁷ Before the advent of the law, state and local governments were in charge of attending to the needs—or more often, attending to the punishments of—runaway youth who were often arrested at high rates for status offenses⁸. The Runaway and Homeless Youth Act represented a major shift in policy. The act has expanded and evolved over time to reflect changing societal attitudes about homelessness, and to address the changing needs of homeless and runaway youth.

Maternity group home programs serve homeless single parents between the ages of 16-22 and their dependents. According to the Runaway and Homeless Youth Act guidelines, maternity group home programs must include, “...child-safe transitional and independent living accommodations, education in parenting, child discipline and safety, mental, physical, and reproductive health care, resources to help youth identify reliable, affordable child care, money management and use of credit, educational opportunities, such as GED preparation, post-secondary training and vocational education.”⁹ Depending on the philosophy of the grantee organization or agency running the maternity group home, sexual and maternal health advice, counseling, and service options that use the framework of the federal “abstinence only” sexual health policy may be favored over other, more reproductive justice-oriented service options that do not conform to this abstinence only policy framework.¹⁰ However, implementation decisions regarding how to provide sexual health services



depend entirely on the philosophy of the grantee organization and are not enforced by the federal government.

Frameworks for Analysis

This report investigates the ways in which the Runaway and Homeless Youth Act grantee organizations are incorporating (or failing to incorporate) the reproductive justice model of health care into their maternity group home programs. It is imperative to examine the impacts of these grant-funded programs on their target population (pregnant and parenting homeless and runaway youth) in order to be able to suggest revisions to the policy¹¹.

This paper employs the intersectional framework for studying health policy that has been established by Schulz and Mulling (2006) for the purpose of applying reproductive justice models to health care interventions. This analysis also draws on the theory of social constructions of target populations developed by Schneider and Ingram (1993), and the work of Rhode (2008) on the sexual politics of teen pregnancy. The theory of social constructions of target populations explicates how various groups in society are framed in political and policy narratives, and how these constructions affect the social power, agency, and political capital of the framed group.¹² This theoretical framework provides a foundation for questioning how runaway and homeless pregnant and parenting youth are constructed by the procedures and protocols of various maternity group home programs, and how these constructions have affected the policy design, implementation, and evaluation of the maternity group home programs.

Rhode's work on pregnant and parenting adolescents contends that analyses of policies for this target population focus on adolescent pregnancy as an individual problem and not as a structural, institutional, or societal issue. Rhode notes that policies related to adolescent pregnancy: "...have frequently misdescribed the problem and have misled to the solution. Too often, decision-makers have located the problem at the individual level, and faulted teens...insufficient attention has focused on the societal level."¹³ Much of the policy narrative surrounding homeless services for adults is based on the language of personal responsibility and individual behavioral changes.¹⁴ Such rhetoric is also used for pregnant and parenting runaway and homeless youth that are targeted by the maternity group home programs.¹⁵ This focus on individual responsibility and self-sufficiency poses problems for the retention of residents in maternity group homes, as



well problems for the overall well-being, healthiness, and happiness of maternity group home program participants.

Policy Recommendations

In order to incorporate the ethos of reproductive justice into the design, implementation, and evaluation of maternity group home programs, it is necessary to consider four transformative policy alternatives and revisions to the present maternity group home program model. These four alternatives, revisions, and actions include: the utilization of the social enterprise approach in career development services; the addition of a mandate for specialized training in serving LGBTQI youth; the assessment of needs of maternity group home program participants; and the increasing of maternity group home program sizes.

The first suggested revision to the maternity group home model involves utilizing the social enterprise approach in the Economic Self Sufficiency and Life Skills program requirements of the model. Currently, the economic self-sufficiency, vocational, employment, and educational aspects of the maternity group home model place mothers in low-wage jobs, despite the emphases on educational attainment and empowering career services that are espoused by many of the grantee agencies.¹⁶ The social enterprise approach proposes applying the social development model of human and social investments to service models for runaway and homeless youth. This approach advocates for the job placement of runaway and homeless youth in “affirmative businesses” that value workers’ service and treat workers with respect and dignity. Examples of such employment environments include non-profit organizations, socially-minded businesses, and “revenue-generating ventures established to create positive social impacts in the context of the financial bottom line.”¹⁷ The maternity group home program provision of the Runaway and Homeless Youth Act should stipulate that grantee organizations must actively try to connect mothers in maternity group homes with “affirmative businesses” for employment and vocational opportunities before connecting them with low-wage jobs. Incorporating the social enterprise approach into the current maternity group home model will increase the quality of jobs for mothers in the programs. Higher quality jobs lead to better health outcomes¹⁸, depicting yet another incentive for incorporating the social enterprise approach into the maternity group home model.

The second suggested alteration requires amending the existing Runaway and Homeless Youth Act to include funding for specialized training for



addressing the sexual and maternal health needs of LGBTQI youth in maternity group home programs. LGBTQI youth have different sexual and maternal health needs that affect their paths to independence, happiness, and well-being.¹⁹ Batko suggests increased support and training to remedy this problem:

Trafficked, exploited and LGBT homeless youth subpopulations require specialized services. RHY providers have cared for these particular young people with limited specialized support, which would include training, funding and other assistance.²⁰

Some LGBTQI youth who are pregnant and parenting face very different challenges than heterosexual pregnant and parenting youth. For example, LGBTQI youth who are experiencing homelessness are more likely than their heterosexual counterparts to engage in survival sex, the practice of exchanging sex for shelter, food, or drugs. In addition, LGBTQI youth often find themselves homeless due to lack of family support and families requiring their LGBTQI children to leave home. LGBTQI youth who are experiencing homelessness have a higher probability of committing suicide than heterosexual youth who are experiencing homelessness.²¹ These issues shape the experiences of homelessness for LGBTQI youth who are pregnant or serving in parenting roles. Training for maternity group home program front line staff on the challenges faced by pregnant and parenting LGBTQI youth should be mandatory. Protocols for such training should be developed by a panel of specialists in the fields of public health, psychology, and public policy, and grant disbursement should be contingent on the grantee's ability and willingness to apply knowledge gleaned from the specialized training.

Furthermore, the guidelines governing maternity group home programs should include a mandatory community needs assessments before opening a new maternity group home. A needs assessment is a methodology that employs a set of procedures that are used to determine needs, examine their nature and causes, and set priorities for future action.²² Abundant turnover in maternity group homes can also be explained by the inaccessibility and the inconvenience of maternity group home locations. In an evaluation of maternity group home programs conducted by the Mathematica Policy Research firm in 2005, researchers found that the location of the programs impacted the usage of the programs by runaway and homeless youth. The researchers proposed the implementation of a comprehensive needs assessment before designing and approving a new maternity group home.

Anecdotal evidence suggests higher demand for maternity group home slots in urban locations...some staff noted that if there is no



maternity group home in a teen's hometown, she typically prefers to move to a home in a larger city, where she may have a relative.²³

Therefore, a needs assessment that focuses on program locations and community needs for services should be required before opening a new maternity group home in a certain location.

In addition, maternity group home programs struggle to retain residents due to strict rules and operating procedures. For example, early curfews have been cited by residents as being overly stringent. Some residents have noted that early curfews and restrictions on visitors have provided barriers to employment and social opportunities.²⁴ The creation of federal guidelines for maternity group home rules, regulations, and protocols should be mandated to decrease problems with resident retention. National guidelines for rules and regulations in the implementation of the maternity group homes will prevent the “strictness of the rules” from continuing to encourage residents to leave the programs. Agreeing on acceptable and unacceptable rules, regulations, protocols, and procedures for maternity group homes at the national policy-making level will allow for less fluctuation and inconsistency in rules and regulations by state, county, and local social services agencies²⁵.

It is also crucial to revise maternity group home size requirements to allow for larger home sizes for maternity group homes for the purposes of serving more pregnant and parenting teens and eliminating the stifling “family” feel of many maternity group home environments²⁶ with a feeling of community. By increasing the size of maternity group homes, more pregnant and parenting teens will be served^{27,28}. High quality maternity group home programs with larger facilities and additional staff members will provide a larger number of homeless pregnant and parenting teens with more comprehensive services. Clients’ perceptions of a fair system of rules and regulations are vital. Thinking of the maternity group home as a community may be more beneficial for clients who feel suffocated by the rules and regulations established by the forced familial environment of some of the maternity group home programs. If this revision to the policy occurs in tandem with the revision of creating centralized standards for maternity group home rules and regulations to decrease strictness and retain more residents, then these programs will begin to resemble the reproductive justice model of health care.



Conclusion

Incremental policy changes to the framework established by the Runaway and Homeless Youth Act are more sensible than creating a new policy entirely because the Runaway and Homeless Youth Act is the only federally funded program that serves this vulnerable population. While vastly underfunded, the Runaway and Homeless Youth Act does receive bipartisan support, so it would be unwise and unproductive to suggest eliminating this policy completely and starting the policy making process from the beginning. Instead, the aforementioned amendments should be carefully considered and the maternity group home program model should be thoroughly revised to better reflect the reproductive justice model of health care.

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¹ Bentley, "Runaway & Homeless Youth."

² Lewis, "Health Care for Homeless Women," 921-928

³ Nyamathi, "Sheltered Versus Nonsheltered Homeless Women," 565-572.

⁴ Ross, "Understanding Reproductive Justice."

⁵ Wittrock, "Social Knowledge and Public Policy," 333.

⁶ Rhode, "Politics and Pregnancy," 201-202.

⁷ P.L., 93-415.

⁸ Fernandes-Alcantara, "Runaway and Homeless Youth."

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¹⁰ Solinger, "Reproductive Politics."

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¹² Schneider, "Social Construction of Target Populations," 334-347.

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¹⁵ Hulsey, "Implementation of Maternity Group Home Programs."

¹⁶ Ibid.

¹⁷ Midgley, "Social Work and Social Development."

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²⁰ Batko, LGBTQ Homeless Youth."

²¹ Kruks, "Gay and Lesbian Homeless/Street Youth," 515-518.

²² Grant, "Learning Needs Assessment," 156-159.

²³ Hulsey, "Implementation of Maternity Group Home Programs."

²⁴ Ibid.

²⁵ It is important to note that while such policy amendments would provide a strong course of action for MGH implementers, considering the current right-wing prevalence of states' rights discourse, centralized regulations for MGH acceptable rules, protocols, and procedures may prove politically unfeasible. Therefore, the use of national guidelines (or a national "framework") that provides a suggested (yet flexible) rubric for rules and regulations for MGH program residents may be more plausible and productive than any rigid national rules.

²⁶ Ibid.

²⁷ Bentley, "Runaway & Homeless Youth."

²⁸ According to the National Alliance to End Homelessness (NAEH), since 2009, the number of homeless and runaway youth seeking services has increased well beyond 550,000, while the number of homeless and runaway youth who have been turned away from services due to budget and program constraints has increased simultaneously. In other words, there are more homeless and runaway



youth that need MGH programs than are currently being served by the existing programs. And, the number of homeless and runaway youth is increasing every year (Bentley 2014).



Teaching to Transform: Voice, Feminist Pedagogy, and the Libratory Classroom

Dr. Kimberly J. Chandler

Introduction

You're a nigger! The day I heard these words, my world changed. It was also the day I began to understand my life purpose as a teacher. I didn't quite know it yet in my 4-year-old mind, but I believe that my feminist pedagogical perspective was born that day. Like a newborn baby that could not walk, speak in sentences, or even negotiate life on my own, I stepped into the light of a day I had no frame of reference for or understanding of as a little kindergarten child. That day started my conscious understanding that the White Supremacist world I lived in would force me to begin my education as a purveyor of social justice. Like many children of color, I faced my identity through the lens of the world that had an extremely skewed understanding of my humanity. How can a little girl negotiate with a world that held a perception that functioned as *their* reality? How can that little girl grow into a woman who simultaneously makes sense of that world while living between the tensions of her authentic self and the self-imposed by others? Moreover, how does an African American woman use these pressures to lead the way for others? The answers to these questions provide a foundation from which to understand my journey as a human living my purpose as an activist-scholar.

What may seem like a unique experience concerning my introduction to a dominant society-conceptualized identity and subsequent educational emancipation is not all that different from that of my elders. African American women have always used their lives in service to others as teachers, mobilizers, carriers of spiritual wisdom and creative forces propelling the fight for social justice in America forward throughout history. When Sojourner Truth exclaimed, "A'int I A Woman," she began a lecture that would transcend its intent, teaching millions throughout history to see the humanity of African American women. It was a necessary response to the oppressive society we continue to face because we live black and female in America. Like Sojourner Truth, it is a role I was also born into by virtue of sharing the identical social location. Our journey does not just inform our feminist pedagogy; it is the foundation from which our feminist pedagogical perspective emanates. It is this collective knowledge and my personal trajectory to intellectual liberation that taught me what, how, and



why I must embrace a theory and practice of education that is transgressive, even transformative.

This essay examines my work as an activist-scholar. In particular, I discuss two significant experiences that shaped the way I approach the significance of *claiming voice* within my feminist pedagogical perspective of education as the practice of freedom. To do so is to distinguish and embrace one's *internal* voice from the plethora of *internalized* voices that seek to extinguish the authentic self. Whether teaching in the classroom or leading students from theory to praxis, these critical reflections offer a glimpse into the challenges, complexities and cautious triumphs inherent in the journey that developed my belief that it is through one's voice that teaching becomes a tool of liberation.

Who Do They Say That I Am? A Feminist Teacher Is Born

You're a nigger!

I am? Oh, okay.

Before that announcement from my new little blonde-haired, kindergarten friend, I thought I was just like all of the white children with whom I went to school. It did not matter that I was the only African American child in the school. I didn't know I was different. I'd never heard the word nigger before. We never used it in my home. In my 4-year-old mind, I could only surmise one definition for that word: friend. I thought the little blond-haired girl wanted to be my friend. We would go to school together, color pictures together, play on the monkey bars together and play duck, duck goose together. When I got home after morning kindergarten, I found out that the word nigger meant something terribly different from a friend. It meant I was different. I was different in a bad way. That day, I not only found out I was different, but I found out how my voice is *heard* in a different way. When I said something, the result was different than the other little children. I didn't fully understand that others felt what I said and did was an example of my race. Up until this time, I thought I was just a little girl. Now, everything about me to everyone around me was, in fact, different. I was just the last to know.

This incident thrust me into the world of teaching and feminist pedagogy by virtue of the skin I was born with. Now, I had to teach people that I might be different, but different didn't mean bad. I had to answer all of the "black" questions: why are you so dark and fat? Why does your hair feel that way?



Why do you have a tan all the time? Of course, I didn't have answers for all of these questions. However, I was expected to have the answers, not just for myself, but also for my entire race! This was a heavyweight for a four-year-old. I had no idea how to respond to these questions in ways they would understand. Why did *I* have to answer these questions in the first place? Looking back, I now understand that this is where racial fatigue starts. It is the constant questioning of an African American's identity as antithetical to dominant society norms that rob little children like me of the opportunity to be just another kid. Even now, African American professors tend to feel this racial fatigue due to a long history of explaining who we are, not in service to promoting understanding, but in defense of our humanity. Back then, I did not know how this weight would impact who I became as a teacher, scholar, minister, and artist. I am now in a position where I can readily explain this phenomenon. However, as a child, I had absolutely no way of knowing that being a social activist who embodies feminist pedagogy comes along with the social location in which I was born. Why would a child have to know about such a weighty obligation? It would seem I was expected to be a little Harriet Tubman when all I wanted to be was a little four-year-old girl with bangs and ponytails.

The burden of answering questions about my Blackness was my first introduction to teaching. As African Americans, teaching others how to respond, treat, and relate to us is, unfortunately, an inherent feature of communication with others. This is why teaching others to answer to my Blackness served as the foundation for my feminist pedagogy. Why must I be the teacher? How does my positioning as teacher render me powerful or powerless? I didn't have these answers, nor did I even know these questions as a young child. As I grew, I was clear that I wanted to disabuse people of the notion that different meant something to be abhorred, disdained or valueless. Just as I wanted to be affirmed, accepted, and embraced for the little human being I was, I wanted others to have that same opportunity. Unbeknownst to me, the day I learned what a nigger was to one little white girl, my parents, my community and the rest of the world, was the day I became a teacher.

In elementary school, we never talked about race. We never talked about being black, white, Hispanic or anything else related to culture. Although I knew I was not a nigger after my conversation with my parents, I often wondered why we never talked about "bad words" in class. We never spoke of the difference. I began to become more aware of the difference, especially in various cultural celebrations we enjoyed at church but not at school. For example, we learned about Martin Luther King, Jr. during Black History



Week (there was no month in the early 1970s). However, at home and church, we also learned about Sojourner Truth, Harriet Tubman, the Civil Rights Movement, and the March on Washington. Studying historical figures such as Thomas Jefferson, George Washington, and Abraham Lincoln was normalized as “American History.” It was the juxtaposition of my experiences at home, church, and school that began my understanding of the power of voice. bell hooks unpacks the power of voice by stating,

The power of...speech is not simply that it enables resistance to White supremacy, but that it also forges a space for alternative cultural production and alternative epistemologies – different ways of thinking and knowing that were crucial to creating a counter-hegemonic world view.¹

The disconnect between what I learned in school as opposed to my home and church reflected the chasm between my experience and hooks notion of resistance. How can one resist White Supremacy or the normalization of a limited view of history and culture when voices are missing from the discussion? Further, the plethora of missing voices from mainstreamed ways of knowing serve to “other” experiences outside a white worldview. The absence of certain voices in the ways in which traditional pedagogy are operationalized renders those voices as different *rather* than diverse.

Through our school celebration Black History Week, the views inherent in the celebration were taught in an “add and stir” manner. As a child, I understood Black History Week as *my* week, not *our* week. During my week, I could hear my voice and see my worth. However, that experience was different from the norm. After my week had concluded, the classroom went back to regular programming. Had I not had home and church to counter my educational experience, I would have adopted the dominant cultural experience as a reflection of the melting pot we were told we were all a part of in America. The subtext suggests that we were one. We were not a unique gumbo of diversity, yet equal in our humanity. Our oneness was determined by Whiteness.

What I learned from that childhood experience is that I must liberate students from prescribed norms often touted in many textbooks. As bell hooks so aptly claims, “The classroom remains the most radical space of possibility in the academy.”² To create such a space, the classroom must be a place where everyone’s unique cultural experiences provide a launching pad from which to understand diverse ways of knowing. These ways of knowing must include the intersectional identities of each person. For



example, as a professor who teaches public speaking courses, I teach students to exhibit correct grammar, not good English. I also include notions of power based on gender within every concept covered throughout the course. These notions are not included in traditional public speaking textbooks. My perspective can be a bit jarring at first for new freshman, but they soon willingly adopt it because their voices are allowed a place within communication. Their colloquialisms are allowed to have meaning in our everyday lexicon. They learn how language can be used to oppress or empower the speaker and the listener. This allows them to navigate the dominant society from a position of power rather than ignorance. They begin to see how the power of voice can render their linguistic productions impotent when commodified for public consumption or empowering when their ownership remains authentic. More importantly, they begin to question why some ways of communicating are rendered substandard or powerless until adopted for use by hegemonic, mainstream America. This is how they understand that language and communication are *always* in flux. The dynamic nature of communication is often determined by who has the power to speak, use language and mute voices.

Feminist pedagogy is necessary to uncover the connection between power, language, and communication. It includes diverse standpoints in the communication process. It exposes the nature and use of language as a tool of power. Most of all, it dismantles the confining contexts traditional pedagogy perpetuates in classrooms across America. Feminist pedagogy allows education and empowerment to occur, making the classroom wall-less rather than a prison that incarcerates the minds of students before they have a chance to understand their voices matter. My early educational experiences coupled with the knowledge taught by my community created hooks “radical space of possibility” for me at a time when textbooks essentially purported my non-existence.

Learning The Power Of A Black Girl's Voice

You better ask until you get an answer you understand! This is the mantra I grew up with at my mother's knee. She understood that the first site of collateral damage within a White Supremacist educational system was a black girl's voice. The ability and opportunity to question, i.e., to critically engage information received in the classroom holds inherent power. Even engaging in the innocuous enterprise of questioning for the sake of understanding can hold enormous power when teaching is a one-way activity. I found out very early that my questions, just like my voice, held connotative meaning that served to reinforce the notion that black girl



students should acquiescence their critical thinking for the sake of uniform conformity. Within the American educational context of my youth, a black girl's voice conveyed her intelligence if she spoke "well." On one hand, our voice could indicate how intelligent we were, but it could also be perceived as conveying aggression or being used as an instrument to instill fear in whites. The voice also held perceived threats of verbal aggression and cognitive violence. Herein is the paradox. To be intelligent was to be perceived as a threat. Add to this seemingly lethal mix was the fact that I was a plus size, dark young girl with a heavy, resonant voice. Considering these characteristics, it would seem it is in a black girl's voice that stereotypes concerning the 'strong black woman' might have its beginnings. This I would soon find out.

It was another challenging day in geometry class. I just couldn't understand what the instructor was teaching. I'd asked questions about theorems, axioms, and postulates, but I couldn't understand the answers I was given. The reason for the mental disconnect could have lied in the fact that the teacher continually gave me the same reply to each question I posed: "Do what I just did on the board and you'll get it." The confusion could have also been caused by the white female teacher's *resistance* to my voice. It seemed as if every time I asked a question, my response came with a side of frustration. Understanding from my mother that I was to ask questions until I gained clarity, one day I decided to stay after class and talk to the teacher. My goal was to convey my continuing problems with understanding the coursework. I simply wanted to ask for help. However, I was met with outrage! It seems that the teacher felt I was trying to make her look bad by continually asking the same questions. When I exclaimed that I just wanted a little help because I wanted to improve my grades, she physically backed me up to the chalkboard, pinning me against it so I couldn't move. I was shocked! I couldn't speak or move. I could only hear her saying that if I didn't quit disturbing the class with my ridiculous questions, I'd be in big trouble! As if all of the rage from her unsubstantiated suspicions came to the fore in one huge rush, she said to me in no uncertain terms that she knew what I was "trying to do."

While this situation was an extreme example of unprofessional teaching or even adult behavior, it taught me a valuable lesson: the voice contains a great deal of power. Questions convey this power by inviting critical exploration; the very antithesis of the goal of public education at the time. What I didn't understand was that my role in the classroom was to memorize, regurgitate and perform within the confines of a receptor of information. The intake of information was to be my only exercise. The



development of knowledge and critical thinking were off limits. If my voice was to be heard, it was only to be articulated through affirmations of my understanding. Why was my voice different than my white counterparts? They had also asked questions but seemed to understand the answers. Why was my teacher's response to my voice so violent? It was only years later that I found the answers to these questions were informed by an American conceptualization of the aggressive nature of black women: the strong black woman concept.

Stereotypes about black women are not new. Many scholars have unpacked the mythologized notion that black women are supernaturally strong, yet inherently deviant.³ History is replete with examples of unsubstantiated white fear in the supposed deviant womanhood of black women. This concept gained enormous traction due to its governmental sanctioning through the infamous United States Department of Labor Report (1965) entitled "The Negro Family: The Case for National Action" also known as The Moynihan Report. The report inserted the concept of the 'Matriarch' into the American lexicon. She was a black woman who enjoyed the advantages of education, gainful employment, access to financial resources, and leadership of the family. However, she also disenfranchised and emasculated black men as the "head" of the black family, severely lessening their prospects for employment and educational opportunities. Black women's status as "breadwinner" caused the family to perpetually exist in a state of dysfunction; it was simply not the "normal" American family. As the report (1965) states:

A fundamental fact of Negro American family life is the often reversed roles of husband and wife. In essence, the Negro community has been forced into a matriarchal structure which, because it is out of line with the rest of the American society, seriously retards the progress of the group as a whole, and imposes a crushing burden on the Negro male and, in consequence, on a great many Negro women as well.⁴

The overall damaging effect of the Matriarch's role in black life was the production of a family structure that could never fully actualize its American-ness because it did not meet the standards normalized by White Supremacist Patriarchy. The power of a black woman came with great destruction. She caused the disintegration of the black family as well as the entire African-American community that was to come. Fast forward this notion to the late 1970s, and you have unsuspecting me: a young teen who did not understand that my *voice* and intelligence had the potential to overthrow classrooms and ultimately the American system of education.



This experience taught me a powerful lesson that I take into the classroom every day: the most powerful tool a person has in her or his intellectual arsenal is voice. The power of voice is central to an agency. While there are always powers one must negotiate in life, to harness and employ personal power through the use of voice is simply one's birthright. In this way, a voice is power.

A pedagogy that honors and affirms voice is a liberatory pedagogy. It is the very nature of feminist pedagogy. It is voice that allows critical thinking to develop. Voice provides a personal barometer through which students can understand themselves in relation to others. It is voice that articulates the perception that creates one's reality. Voice not only produces "the other," but it also challenges contested notions of self because it communicates values, beliefs, and attitudes. For example, as a professor of Communication Studies, it is important that I honor voice within the classroom because I need to know where students stand in relation to the subject matter. While a person's perspective may not always be conducive to their growth and development, I will not be able to offer additional options for expanding that person's capacity if I do not entertain voice. Herein lies the issue that every educator must confront: giving space to voice can be a challenging, discomforting enterprise. Inviting in and giving space for voice de-centers the educator as the ultimate authority. *This* is the fundamental problem with a pedagogy that does not liberate and transform.

I experienced this challenging, discomforting classroom in a poignant way during my early days as a professor. I was lecturing on the Aristotelian notion of pathos – the emotional appeal – and an African American student use the word nigger as an example of a highly charged word. A white student vehemently opposed the use of the word. However, he was angry because he felt blacks could use the word and he could not. I set ground rules concerning respect, the use of "I" instead of "you" statements, and affirmation of experiences. I opened the floor for discussion and let the rousing debate ensue. I only entered the debate to raise questions on both sides of the issue, keep the conversation on topic and call for calm if needed. I also interjected opinions on both sides of the issue to promote thinking beyond one's position. This was a necessary move not just because I was an African-American woman, but because of my feminist pedagogical perspective: to engage students in ways that liberate their thinking.

As a professor, I found this experience enlightening. As a person, I was nervous, cautious, and hopeful. What I knew for sure is that I could not miss



this golden opportunity. I wanted to give my students something I was denied in past educational experiences: a voice! Yes, there were elevated voices and cross talk. There were also painful recollections alongside whimsical memories concerning the use of the word as a term of endearment. There was anger that turned to understanding. There were tears that turned into cathartic relief. Was it challenging? Yes, yes, and yes! However, I understood that I needed to create a protected environment where students could feel comfortable allowing their authentic voices to be heard. I also knew I needed to let this situation play out guided by the students' willingness to listen to each other. There were times I stopped the debate and told students to breathe and listen. In this situation, I needed to be a facilitator rather than an authority. In doing so, I de-centered myself and took the intellectual ride *with* my students. There was simply no time for fear, which would have ultimately left me chained to the same unvoiced perspective my students would have held that day.

Feminist pedagogy and a liberatory classroom require that the educator continuously pursue freedom for learners to boldly pursue their own. Educators of the ilk that I experienced that day back in geometry class are unfortunate, ignorant accomplices in their bondage. As bell hooks declares:

If professors are wounded, damaged individuals, people who are not self-actualized, then they will seek asylum in the academy rather than seek to make the academy a place of challenge, dialectical interchange, and growth.⁵

In teaching to transform, we cannot afford to make the Academy a prison. The elitist, insular behavior often experienced in the ivory tower serves no one but its narrow-minded progenitors. If we are not careful, we will continue this abysmal tradition for no other reason than our fear of failing the architects of our demise: those individuals that continue to carry on the tradition of requiring African Americans to defend their humanity.

A liberatory classroom infused with feminist pedagogy also promotes agency within the learner through voice. Beauboeuf-Lafontant conceptualizes this agency as an attribute of voice-centered redness. In her tome on strength and Black women she states, "Voice-centered women see Black womanhood and strength as plural concepts, not reductively prescriptive ones."⁶ Extending this notion to education, feminist pedagogy does not sacrifice voice for the sake of learning. To mute the voice is to endeavor to kill the person. The exercise of rendering students voiceless adds an internalized voice to their internal voice. These competing voices war within the student until they are liberated from intellectual bondage.



While the brain or a person's intellect is vitally important, the ability to articulate – in verbal or nonverbal form – the substance of that intellect operationalizes the knowledge, wisdom, and experience that allow a person to contribute to humanity. This is why a teacher's act of willfully employing a pedagogy that silences voice is such an insidious enterprise. It is a violent act. It unleashes an intellectual cancer into the minds of students, whether they are targeted for destruction or innocuous bystanders.

The collateral damage from the muting of certain voices has long-range consequences that impact a person over the lifespan. As a student and budding scholar, I had to learn to honor my voice within a chorus of naysayers who delegitimized by experiences. The constant challenging of my voice and value served to build resilience in me, but at a cost. I dealt with constant frustration and anger which unvoiced, turned to depression. The loneliness and isolation inherent in making my way without the eager assistance from teachers and professors that championed the substandard work of students that did not look like me was crushing. However, it was through my sheer persistence to achieve that I found help in unlikely places. I found students, scholars, and mentors that shared my experiences. I found there were many that traveled my same road and were not worse for the wear. It was in reaching across barriers erected to maintain the status quo that I found brothers from other mothers and sisters from different misters! Some of these people shared my cultural background, and others did not. Nevertheless, we all shared one defining characteristic in our educational trajectory and life journey: we all were using our vocation to champion intellectual freedom because we believe it is through one's voice that teaching becomes a tool of liberation.

The Journey Continues: Suggestions for a Liberatory Classroom through Feminist Pedagogy

As an activist-scholar, my experiences have informed my pedagogical perspective. I understand that students must claim a voice within knowledge acquisition so that they may move from passive receptors to knowledge producers. The power of voice is germane to destabilizing White Supremacist pedagogical norms. These norms not only disservice students of color but they also limit all students from experiencing the range of their humanity through the shared power resident in active learning. Adopting this perspective requires an intentional commitment to voice-centeredness. For me, bell hooks in her revolutionary work, *Teaching to Transgress: Education as the Practice of Freedom*, offers two poignant statements that



continue to challenge me to embody feminist pedagogy today. I offer them as suggestions as you continue your intellectual journey:

To engage in dialogue is one of the simplest ways we can begin as teachers, scholars and critical thinkers to cross boundaries, the barriers that may or may not be erected by race, gender, class, professional standing, and a host of other differences.⁷

Progressive, holistic education, "engaged pedagogy" is more demanding than conventional critical or feminist pedagogy. For, unlike these two teaching practices, it emphasizes well-being. That means that teachers must be actively committed to a process of self-actualization that promotes their well-being if they are to teach in a manner that empowers students.⁸

While I could unpack both of these notions in relation to teaching as a tool of liberation, I would rather embody the feminist pedagogy I have espoused within this essay. In so doing, I offer these questions for reflective thought:

1. What have you been taught about your voice?
2. What are you teaching others about their voices?
3. What fears do you personally face every time you walk into the classroom?
4. How have your fears muted your voice in your pedagogical perspective?

These questions offer an on-ramp to critically engaging the notion of voice. They are by no means exhaustive or reflective of the many issues we must face so that we teach to transform. However, it is my hope that these questions probe your thinking, providing a mirror in which you can point your gaze inward as you seek to disseminate that "holistic education" bell hooks challenges us to provide. Teaching to transform is not an effortless enterprise. However, its promise far outweighs its weighty effort. For that four-year-old girl with pigtails and bangs, it has made every challenge intellectually beneficial and every stumbling block a stepping stone to my self-actualization. And the journey continues.



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¹ hooks, *Teaching to Transgress*, 171.

² Ibid., 12.

³ Beauboeuf-Lafontant, "Strong and Large Black Women"; Collins, *Black Feminist Thought*; and Jones, et al., *The Double Lives of Black Women in America*.

⁴ "The Negro Family: The Case for National Action (1967), 16.

⁵ hooks, 165.

⁶ Beauboeuf-Lafontant, *Behind the Mask of the Strong Black Woman*, 136.

⁷ hooks, 130.

⁸ Ibid., 15.



The Death of Hetero and Homo

alithia skye zamantakis

Inextricably linked, desire and socioeconomic politics determine who qualifies as human, who is part of “us,” and even, who lives. This paper examines this linkage in relation to trans/nonbinary/gender-nonconforming individuals. In conversations of lesbian and gay identities, people often state that attraction fixates itself to people of the same-sex, the opposite-sex, or both. Male and female “exist” as opposites, although a multitude of other sexes and genders exist, as well as the abundant ways in which each of these can manifest or express. In the construction of these terms, people lying within or outside of a binary system of gender somehow do not even exist.

Many within academia define sex and gender as separate beings, sex being biological, and gender being within the mind and heart. However, this paper uses the terms “gender” and “sex” interchangeably, except for when differentiating between the act of sex and sex/gender as an identity/assignment. As Judith Butler has also theorized, sex and gender are equally socially constructed.¹ Butler writes, “identity categories tend to be instruments of regulatory regimes.”² They can either function to erase and marginalize or they can operate as a method of creating social justice coalitions, however, they always have a function of control.³ Butler continues on to explain, “these ontologically consolidated phantasms of ‘man’ and ‘woman,’ are theatrically produced effects that posture as grounds, origins, the normative measure of the real.”⁴ In their novel, “Gender Trouble,” Butler writes, “If the immutable character of sex is contested, perhaps this construct called ‘sex’ is as culturally constructed as gender; indeed, perhaps it was always already gender...the distinction between sex and gender turns out to be no distinction at all.”⁵ When looking at the construction of a male/female binary of sex and comparing it with the multitude of genitalia, hormonal balances, chromosomes, and combinations of all three of these things, it becomes impossible apply particular bodily attributes to specific identities. The “natural” attachment of sex to bodies, genitals and chromosomes operates as an artifice used to dictate which types of (a)gendered bodies may exist and which are real enough to exist.

This essay will attempt to discuss current representations, assumptions, and understandings of sexuality as made visible through media, education, and other social institutions as related to a naturalization of a gender binary.



There is some biological/psychological aspect to physical attractions and sexual predispositions. However, this paper discusses, critiques, and ultimately marks for death the gendered ways those attractions map out. The words “homosexuality” or “heterosexuality” are not the problem. The predisposed attraction to a penis, a vagina, a beard, soft skin, or any other physical characteristic faces no critique within this paper. This paper, instead, contests the construction of a “born this way” discourse in which sexuality becomes an indisputable force, assumed through a social discourse that states nothing can change one’s attractions. If one can never know the gender/sex of another human being unless they disclose, it becomes impossible to gender the directions of attractions. This leads to a call for the death of heterosexuality and homosexuality, and a dictate to degender and rethink attractions.

Current Representations/Understandings of Sexuality

The increasing prominence of gay and lesbians in media, and of gay rights movements, has made visible alternatives to heterosexual attraction and identity. However, the media often shows one monolithic way of being gay: white, thin, able-bodied, and cisgender. Additionally, media and celebrities that celebrate gay rights often perpetuate the idea that, as Lady Gaga sings, “I was born this way!” In an article titled, “No One is Born Gay (or Straight): Here Are 5 Reasons Why,” the Social (In)queery highlights an example of such usage. During the 2012 elections, the Human Rights Campaign, one of the largest gay organizations in the United States, “asked their members to ‘Tell Herman Cain to get with the times! Being gay is not a choice!’”⁶. In a 2015 article in *The Guardian*, Dean Burnett, a psychiatrist, asserts that someone would never wake up one day and say, “I am going to be gay from now on.”⁷ Burnett asks, “WHY would they do this?”⁸ In a 2014 Huffington Post article, Noah Michelson, editorial director, claims that defining gayness as a choice is not only incorrect but that it is “dangerous”. The danger lies in the supposed ability to “fix” lesbian and gay identities if no biological justification exists.

There is nothing inherently wrong in believing in some sort of innateness in regards to attraction. I, as a trans/queer person feel something innate in regard to my gender and sexuality—not heterosexual and not cisgender. I argue this innateness, though, is not the attraction to particular genders or gendered, but an attraction to particular body parts and personality traits. Knowing that I like vulnerable, socially just, dog-loving people allows me to find potential partners. However, I could not say whether the person I find that fits those qualifications identifies as a man or a woman or an “other”



unless they disclose to me how they identify. Society and social institutions ingrain an attachment of particular parts and traits to particular (a)genders through the socialization process in order to perceive certain bodies as desirable and certain bodies as abject.

English professor, Sheila Cavanaugh, defines abjection as those “boundaries between the clean and the dirty, the inside and outside, the private and the communal, the intimate and the personal...the male and the female.”⁹ Julia Kristeva, literary critic, writes of abjection in “Powers of Horror: An Essay on Abjection.” Through literary and real life textual analysis, Kristeva theorizes around the horror of the abject.¹⁰ Abjection operates as the disavowal and casting out of that which threatens the status quo and the maintenance of these boundaries. Abjection ultimately equals ambiguity—an ambiguity that causes tension and expulsion. Kristeva states that it is “not lack of cleanliness or health that causes abjection but what disturbs identity, system, order.”¹¹ Abjection seeks to establish clear boundaries and a “proper” self, always under threat since we are permeable, undefined selves. Identity is not fixed or absolute but fluid and changing. Additionally, queer and trans identities highlight themselves as failures of a gendered binary—failures that coexist with the (potential) failures of cisgender, heterosexual people as they also attempt to live up to gendered standards of existence.

Judith Butler discusses how the processes of abjection navigate their way onto social identities. Butler writes, “The category of ‘sex’ is, from the start, normative; it is what Foucault has called a ‘regulatory ideal’”.¹² Categories such as sex and gender become “regulatory ideals” that function not only as a norm. Such regulatory ideals become controls over bodies and have “the power to produce—demarcate, circulate, differentiate—the bodies”¹³ they control. It is critical to understand this in relation to a sexual discourse that relies on gendered norms of male/female. Sex exists not merely as “what one has, or a static description of what one is.”¹⁴ Rather, it stands as “that which qualifies a body for life within the domain of cultural intelligibility.”¹⁵ The successful enactment of a controlled sex and gender materialization dictates whether one is marked for life or death, love or loneliness.

Within the discourse of homosexuality and heterosexuality, trans, nonbinary, and gender-nonconforming people and bi-/poly-sexuals become abjected in attempts to maintain gender boundaries. In both 1995 and 2007, Congress read the submission of a version of the Employee Nondiscrimination Act, which would have protected LGB folks from workplace discrimination.¹⁶ Both times, they either did not include or



ultimately removed gender identity from the text of the bill in order to further its “likelihood” of passing.¹⁷ The Human Rights Campaign, both times, continued to push for the bill to pass and ignored calls to ask for its removal from a vote.¹⁸ Several reasons explain the exclusion of trans folks from gay rights organizing and gay rights legislation. For a long time, gay rights organizations like the Mattachine Society and the Daughters of Bilitis called for homosexual assimilation into the heterosexual “mainstream” (Healey and O’Brien 2015). This call has continued into present day gay rights organizing within marriage equality campaigns that seek relational assimilation. Additionally it continues through organizational use of slogans, such as “love is love,” used by organizations like Equality Utah. Homosexuals cannot equate their identities to heterosexuals if their identities begin to challenge the gender binary and the ideology that attraction only occurs along rigid lines. Alok Vaid-Menon, an activist, poet, and a member of the spoken word duo, DarkMatter, writes, “The separation of ‘gay’ from ‘trans’ and ‘sexuality’ from ‘gender identity’ has a political history. This distinction was a conscious strategy to make the gay movement palatable to straight cis white middle class society.”¹⁹ In the early twentieth century, queer became a word used by men attracted to men to distinguish themselves from fairies—assigned males at birth who identified as femme and attracted to men.²⁰ Chauncey analyzes this as a “a middle-class phenomenon,”²¹ in which such men separated sexuality and gender identity to reassert their masculinity and in order to assimilate into the working structures of middle-class men. The depathologization of homosexuality occurs through the repathologization of gender nonconformity, allowing “the modern gay subject” to emerge “in distinguishing him/herself from gender nonconformity.”²² Through such assimilation, gay rights organizations have been able to achieve marriage equality, legal protection, and profoundly reduce the murder and police brutality rates of (white, cis) gay people.

As noted above, Butler has argued that both gender and sexuality come into existence as performances that must constantly re-perform themselves in order to produce binary genders and sexual identity categories, an act that justifies erasure, violence toward, and death of trans, nonbinary, and gender-nonconforming people. Politicized identities have been hierarchized so as to label some bodies and identities more attractive (and more worthy of survival) than others. Unattractive, unloveable, undesirable bodies do not merit the same protection against homicide, suicide, or a supposed, eventual extinction. They become marked unlovable and untouchable, because of systems of oppression that continue to maintain that the able-bodied, cisgender white person exists as the most attractive



and pure of all, and the rest, second choice, or less. Love can manifest itself beautifully. But love can also enact and perpetuate colonization and eradication.

A Critique of the Status Quo of Sexual Orientation

Racial justice activists have long discussed the political nature of love and desire in regards to desiring bodies of color, especially Black bodies. Black bodies were and still are often marked as undesirable. The authors of “Is Love Colorblind?” find that political orientation does indeed influence attraction to and permitted affection towards Black folks by white folks.²³ The research occurred through two separate studies. The first study included a two-part survey with a Likert scale ranking of how conservative or liberal the participants identified themselves as, and the second had white participants interact with two separate women—one Black and one white. Participants were then asked to fill out a comparative romantic attraction survey. Eastwick et. al. find that strongly or relatively conservative white people stand less likely to date Black people and/or find them desirable than white liberals.²⁴ White liberals desire Black people on paper; however, when interacting with a white person and a Black person, their primary attraction orients itself to the white person.²⁵

In summary, white conservatives remain more than unlikely to even consider dating a Black individual, whereas white liberals remain more likely than conservatives to consider dating a Black person, but often choose a white person over a Black person.²⁶ Additionally, these results may be related to white liberals attempting to save face on paper to appear more progressive. Either way, though, the findings reveal that “political orientation seems to be one factor among both Whites and Blacks that predicts who is willing to venture across racial lines to form romantic relationships.”²⁷ Politics thus have an intimate relationship with love and desire.

This relationship between love, desire, and politics manifests itself through the separation and exclusion of trans queer folks by cisgender queer folks. A separation between love and gender, between marriage equality and trans/queer justice occurred purposefully, as leaders knew “that a politics of love would be much more palatable than a politics of gender.”²⁸ Such a strategy is extremely successful, as in the legalizing of marriage equality in 2015. However, at a time when murder rates for cisgender, white gays remain at a very low level, trans violence continues to increase. A report by the National Coalition of Antiviolence Projects found that “73.1% of all anti-



LGBTQ homicide victims in 2012 were people of color.” Additionally, “53.8% of all anti-LGBTQ homicide victims” identified as trans women and trans femmes (2012). Trans women of color face the most risk in terms of being the victim of physical assault and/or death. No longer do cisgender gays and lesbians face perception as the same pedophilic, destructive threat of yesteryear. However, threat, destruction, and difference have been piled onto trans bodies, exemplified through fear of using even a bathroom or locker room with a trans person present.

This difference and perceived threat situates trans subjects in society. In “Mutilating Gender,” Dean Spade, lawyer, trans activist, and queer studies scholar, explores the ways in which the “mutilation” of gender by nonbinary, gender-nonconforming, and trans individuals is linked to a complication of sexual desires. Spade writes, “Because transsituated identities and bodies are different, sexual desires likewise defy the binary of heterosexual and homosexual and play havoc with the concept of bisexual.”²⁹ Heterosexual and homosexual sexualities and desires are constituted by and through assumptions of “a nontransgendered paradigm.”³⁰ Trans subjectivities question what gay, lesbian, or bisexual mean. Further, trans bodies complicate the notion that one can assume another person’s gender. Women can have beards and calloused hands and men can have long hair and eye shadow. A woman can have a penis and a man, a vagina. Gender and sex become indistinguishable not only for trans bodies, but simultaneously, for all bodies. As bodies become illegible in regards to particular (a)genders, it becomes necessary to identify new ways of identifying attraction. Trans bodies call for a “transsituated language to express multiple ways of being identified, of being embodied, and of being sexual.”³¹ Such a demand—such a reality—makes assimilation impossible.

On November 4, 2015, a petition was created on Change.org, a website used by a multitude of activists to call for change from major leaders. This petition called for major gay rights organizations, such as the Human Rights Campaign, GLAAD, and Lambda Legal, as well as news outposts like The Advocate and Huffington Post: Gay Voices, to “drop the T,” arguing, “We are a group of gay/bisexual men and women who have come to the conclusion that the transgender community needs to be disassociated from the larger LGB community.”³² Their arguments rely on the idea that trans subjectivities pose a threat not only to gaining equality but also to the very existence of cisgender individuals. They specify their reasons as including:

The vilification and harassment of women and gay/lesbian individuals who openly express disagreement with the trans ideology... The infringement of the rights of individuals, particularly



women, to perform normal everyday activities in traditional safe spaces based on sex... The appropriation and re-writing of gay and lesbian history and culture, most notably attempting to re-cast the majority gay white men who participated in the Stonewall riots as transgender...[and] the trans movement is regressive, insisting upon re-asserting and codifying classic gender concepts of what is masculine and what is feminine.³³

The Human Rights Campaign and GLAAD responded in support of trans people. However, within one day, the petition had over 609 supporters. Within two, it had over 940. A mere search of tweets connected to the post highlight the number of lesbians and gays willing to abject trans bodies for the protection of their own rights. One individual wrote, “Well to be fair ‘trans’ is actually a mental illness, it’s called gender dysphoria.” Another asked, “Is transphobic even a valid word spell check says it isn’t?” In direct response to Caitlyn Jenner, one wrote, “You can’t surgically remove the children you fathered. He will always be Bruce.” These individuals not only vilified trans bodies and trans identities but pathologized them and deemed them falsities. A repeat tweeter wrote, “You want to talk about offensive? What about trans telling lesbians they are transphobic if they don’t want sex w/ penis?” This particular tweet gets most at the heart of this essay. Cisgender lesbians have their notions of sexuality and gender complicated when they get into bed with a trans woman and find a penis awaiting them. For some lesbians, they may merely not like penises—not problematic at all. However, for others, the attachment of a penis to a woman’s body erases womanhood and re-identifies it as a “man’s” body—the very body a lesbian does not want to have sex with. The transphobic, gendered ways in which genitals are coded and the disgust of cisgender lesbians and gays when they find their partner with different genitalia than expected exist as inextricable parts of a whole.

Desire and love are not mere arbitrary forces that exist in the world. Their conceptualization as such disguises the reality of their use as weapons to erase, make invisible, and/or eradicate identities that trouble “normalcy” and the status quo. This essay does not find important, necessarily, what role biology and psychology play in attraction or sexual orientation. As Edward Stein notes, it “is not whether biology is involved but how.”³⁴ How does biology act as a way to prevent the questioning of the ways in which individuals enact their sexuality? How do ideas of innateness and immutability prevent the questioning of the racialized and gendered politics of sexuality?



In a 2008 article entitled “Born that Way? Not a Choice? Problems with Biological and Psychological Arguments for Gay Rights,” law professor Edward Stein analyzes the supposed etiology of sexuality as posited by mainstream gay rights movements and individuals. They discuss the range of suppositions involved in arguing that people are “born that way,” and have little to no choice in becoming their sexual selves. In doing so, they analyze the roles that hormones, genes, and heritability contribute to the development of an individual’s sexuality, and finally lay out the ethical, political, and bioethical dilemmas involved with making the claim that folks are “born this way.”³⁵ Stein does not deny the role that biology plays in a predisposition for attraction to particular bodies. However, they write, “Just as every human characteristic is partly biological in nature, so too every human characteristic is partly environmental.”³⁶ The ways in which predispositions become categorized and in which discourses compulsively gender and give meaning to bodies, body parts, and bodily acts through a hetero/homo discourse relying on “known” opposites and sames occurs not biologically but environmentally/sociologically.

Ultimately, “born this way” paradigms manifest as a conscious move to normalize LGB sexualities and to make assimilation and integration easier.³⁷ Through such assimilation processes, LGB sexualities begin to mirror heterosexuality. Heteronormativity becomes homonormativity, and together, they perpetuate both transphobia and cissexism—a system that enforces compulsory cisgender-ness, as well as the idea that bodies are legibly gendered. One can believe they were born gay or heterosexual. However, to constitute their idea of “gay” or “heterosexual” around certain conceptions of gender while using ideas of “innateness” as immunity calls for critique. Sexuality must thus be degendered and the hetero/homo discourse marked for death.

The Death of Hetero/Homo

As stated above, trans bodies have become constructed as the monsters of the LGBT acronym. In 1973, the American Psychological Association (APA) removed homosexuality from the Diagnostic and Statistical Manual. However, that pathologization continued onto trans individuals. In 2015, gender dysphoria remained listed as a mental illness in the DSM, described as “a marked difference between the individual’s expressed/experienced gender and the gender others would assign him or her,” which in reality is just a description of the word transgender. Transgender is defined as an individual whose gender identity does not correlate with their gender assigned at birth. Further, in a 2014 article by Gavin McInnes, co-founder



of Vice, titled “Transphobia is Perfectly Natural,” McInnes mocks transphobia as an actual form of oppression, stating instead that it occurs as a natural response to unnatural people. McInnes writes that, “They [trans people] are mentally ill gays who need help, and that help doesn’t include being maimed by physicians.”³⁸ McInnes continues on to say that, “To fight against transphobia is to justify trannies. To justify trannies is to allow mentally ill people to mutilate themselves.”³⁹ Trans people, then, exist as gays and lesbians delusional enough to need prevention from hurting themselves.

In the construction of trans, nonbinary, and gender-nonconforming people as the dumping ground of the filth and pathologization once attached to gayness, a certain monstrous attribute simultaneously becomes attached to trans identity. Susan Stryker, a professor of Trans Studies, in 1994, wrote “My Words to Victor Frankenstein,” theorizing about the monster attribute attached to and mapped onto trans bodies. Stryker declares, “Like the monster, I too am often perceived as less human.”⁴⁰ Stryker continues on to quote Janice Raymond, a feminist theorist, saying, “The problem of transsexuality would best be served by morally mandating it out of existence,” and they connect this quote to a line directed at the monster in Frankenstein, “Begone vile insect, or rather, stay, that I may trample you to dust.”⁴¹ Statistics on murder and incarceration rates reflect this cultural desire to eradicate trans people. In August 2015, The Daily Dot, reported that twenty-two trans women, primarily trans women of color, had been murdered within the year. These twenty-two were just the ones that were reported, however, as well as only ones in which the victim self-identified as trans publicly. This number seems low to some, however, self-identified transgender people comprise .3 percent of the population (2011). In 1997, when the San Francisco Department of Public Health decided to conduct a study on the criminal legal system, they “found that 67 percent of transgender women and 30 percent of transgender men had a history of incarceration.”⁴²

These issues of hate and oppression are not merely caused by cisgender, heterosexual individuals. As Stryker details, cisgender gays and lesbians, too, have a historical relationship of denouncing and disavowing trans identity. Trans identity, although Stryker speaks specifically of transsexuality, “represents the prospect of destabilizing the foundational presupposition of fixed genders upon which a politics of personal identity depends,”⁴³ which causes complications for cisgender gays and lesbians who often rely on notions of attraction around fixed and legible ideas of gender and sex.



This attachment of “monster” to “trans,” though, has implications beyond death, pathologization, and incarceration. Historically, “monsters, like angels, functioned as messengers, heralds of the extraordinary.”⁴⁴ Trans people, gendered monstrosities themselves, prophesy an extraordinary future where coercive gender assignments do not occur, where people recognize genders, sexes, and genitals that come in all shapes, sizes, and descriptions as valid and beautiful, where people do not murder others during their walk home at night for being perceived as invaders of female/male spaces.⁴⁵ While this attachment of monster to trans leads to isolation, exclusion, and murder, such exclusion also galvanizes a struggle for a more equitable future. Comparing their own loss of community to the monster’s, Stryker writes, “My exclusion from human community fuels a deep and abiding rage in me that I, like the monster, direct against the conditions in which I must struggle to exist.”⁴⁶ Such a struggle includes the push for a new version of a gendered and genderless world. Trans bodies exist as “the transcendence of an absolute limit,”⁴⁷ the transcendence of a binary of reality/imagination: the transcendence of a world that tells people only two options exist of how they may identify/express, that other attempts stand as fictions and immature imaginations of reality, and that love must revolve around the absence, eradication, and erasing of trans, nonbinary, and gender-nonconforming bodies.

This struggle towards a new vision of sexuality, desire, and love, ultimately leads toward the death of a discourse. The death of “hetero and homo” is not the death of homosexual/heterosexual individuals, nor is it the death of their identification categories. Rather, this paper marks for death a gendered discourse that lays the foundation for present and historical conceptions of “same- and opposite-sex attraction.” A death that will end a conception of sexuality that absolves itself of critique, because people were “born this way” and a construction of sexuality that relies on the abjection of trans, nonbinary, and gender-nonconforming individuals. Death, although something every human experiences, has very political implications for marginalized bodies, deemed abject and disposable. Death, as used in this paper, surrounds and centers the concept of necropolitics. Achille Mbembe, a political scientist and theorist from French Cameroun, discusses necropolitics in terms of the political meaning attached to who dies and what happens after they die. Mbembe defines necropolitics as the “power and capacity to dictate who may live and who must die.”⁴⁸ It exists as an ultimate expression of sovereignty; the ultimate capacity to determine who matters and who does not.⁴⁹ While, the Center for Disease Control estimates the average life expectancy of the entire US population as 78.8



years old, (2013) the average life expectancy of a trans woman of color in the United States remains less than half that age—thirty-five.⁵⁰ The National Center for Transgender Equality highlights the suicide rate of forty-one percent among transgender individuals in the United States (2014). Mbembe states that biopower, one of the fundamental components of necropolitics, occurs as “the right to kill, to allow to live, or to expose to death.”⁵¹ They then ask, “Who is the subject of this right?”⁵² Mbembe links necropolitics to colonization and racism in relation to necropolitics, with the latter being “above all a technology aimed at permitting the exercise of biopower, ‘that old sovereign right of death.’”⁵³ Subjects gain control of the “right” to exercise biopower as sovereign beings through the assertion of their own narratives,⁵⁴ often constructed and vetted via a supposed “divine foundation.”⁵⁵ The assertion of narratives of “properly” gendered ways of life thus stand connected to acts of transphobic violence reiterated throughout this paper.

The non-value of trans lives discussed within this essay exists very similar to the non-value of both trans people and gay men during the AIDS epidemic of the eighties. In 1987, Leo Bersani, literary theorist, asked the question, “Is the Rectum a Grave?” Through asking this question, Bersani explains the ways in which disease and social stigma both led to perceptions of the rectum as a self-shattering, self-abolishing grave. Their paper, although racially unaware and cissexist at times, provides an insight into the way in which death serves a political and societal function. Bersani starts the paper discussing the sex lives of gay men. One might compare gay male communities to residence halls in terms of size. As individuals have sexual contact with multiple individuals among a small group of people, the small size of the community begins to serve as a vehicle for high rates of HIV/AIDS, among other sexually transmitted infections. In discussing the violence that AIDS inflicted upon entire communities, Bersani moves on to discuss the ways in which “violence is sex,”⁵⁶ through readings of MacKinnon and Dworkin, two radical feminists who were heavily anti-pornography. Pornography becomes equated with violence through the hierarchization of bodies, identities, and beauty. Cisgender men embody the position of power, and all bottoms become the powerless. As Bersani explains, “To be penetrated is to abdicate power.”⁵⁷

Violence and hierarchy become synonymous, as the penetratee relinquishes their self to the “shattering force” that is the penis, and Bersani perceives sex as an enactor of the death of the self. Bersani writes, “The rethinking among gays...of what being gay...means is a certain agreement about what sex should be.”⁵⁸ If “gay” means to perpetuate violence via sexual



hierarchization through the relationship between two individuals, then gayness exists primarily as a reproduction of heterosexuality. However, as Bersani explains, AIDS has quite literally, symbolically rendered the rectum a biological grave. And “if the rectum is the grave in which the masculine ideal (an ideal shared-differently-by men and women) of proud subjectivity is buried, then it should be celebrated for its very potential for death.”⁵⁹ The rectum then becomes the death of the phallus as a force of control and a vehicle for the assertion of power. Instead, gay sex “never stops representing the internalized phallic male as an infinitely loved object of sacrifice,”⁶⁰ serving as a vehicle for the death of the phallus as power and the rethinking of the phallus an object of sacrifice: giving instead of taking. It is the brutality of AIDS and social conditions that lead to the brutality of the death of “the masculine ideal...of proud subjectivity.”⁶¹

Similarly, the brutality of transphobia leads to the brutal need to mark the hetero/homo discourse for death. It remains necessary to differentiate between two types of death being discussed in this paper: first, the death of marginalized, specifically trans, beings via hate and oppression; second, the death of the discursive means through which such a binary/dichotomy erases, silences, and eradicates those whose identities cannot or will not assimilate. To value trans bodies/identities, transphobic conceptions of gender, sexuality, love, and desire must ultimately die. The marking of this sexual discourse for death and the eventual accomplishment of this death make clear that trans lives hold more value than a violently constructed discourse.

The grave of the discourse of heterosexuality/homosexuality holds in itself sexuality’s future. Death occurs as recognition of the failure of old ways of existing. Social relations, primarily among and between individuals within dominant identities, give rise to the norms of sexuality that create a sexual discourse posited upon the abjection of trans folks. Trans people, in addition to cisgender people, fail at what it means to be an (a)gendered body in this society. As queer folks try to construct a better world in a society never meant for their bodies, ideas, and beings to exist, failure remains a part of the process along the way to rethinking social ideas, structures, and identities. In “The Queer Art of Failure,” Judith Jack Halberstam writes about failure as a productive means of critiquing and resisting heteronormativity. Halberstam discusses how “the queer art of failure...imagines other goals for life, for love, for art, and for being.”⁶² Failure becomes a moment of productive possibility. Halberstam writes, “...Queer, or counterhegemonic modes of common sense lead to the association of failure with nonconformity, anticapitalist practices,



nonreproductive lifestyles, negativity, and critique.”⁶³ Failure becomes a way of critiquing common sense, which Halberstam equates with norms. Failure, on the part of trans folks, has dictated the rethinking of how sexuality, love, and desire can manifest in regards to gender, possibly requiring “imagining, not some fantasy of an elsewhere, but existing alternatives to hegemonic systems.”⁶⁴ As trans people have existed for centuries, so have alternatives existed and embedded themselves in what already exists. Failure creates, in the process of marking a hetero/homo discourse for death, a way of navigating the rethinking of sexuality. Trans, nonbinary, and gender-nonconforming individuals have long critiqued sexuality and to rethought it in terms of their own existence. Trans folks have had to do it for as long as they have existed. However, it is not enough for only trans folks and their partners to rethink sexuality and mark the hetero/homo discourse for death. Ultimately, all of society must also contribute to its death, and historical failure via trans folks provides the map for how sexuality, love, and desire can look after the death.

Re-Thinking Sexuality

There exists no definitive way to prove that the death of hetero/homo that this paper calls for will become reality. It takes more than just a collective of particular queer and trans folks engaging in this ultimate slaughter. It requires that people who would not gain from such a death begin to care, to move from a place of trans-ignorance and/or transphobia to a transsituated place of true accompliceship and caring. Possible realities exemplify themselves through individuals that presently exist and work (either consciously or not) to subvert the status quo of love and desire in relation to gender.

Leslie Feinberg’s *Stone Butch Blues* materializes itself as one such example. This novel is both fiction and nonfiction. However, marginalized groups have often used fiction as a means to understand the oppression they experience, as well as to imagine the reality they desire to exist. In *Stone Butch Blues*, the characters transcend the realm of sex, shattering the idea of man and woman as dichotomous opposites. Feinberg sets the novel in various queer communities and locales, including gay and lesbian bars. Throughout the novel, the protagonist, Jess, remains perpetually unsure as to her gender/sex identity. Before she “transitions,” she does not feel wholly woman, and afterward, she does not feel like a man. When she stops using hormones altogether, she describes herself as falling into a middle ground of man and woman.⁶⁵ After the “transition,” Jess meets Annie, a straight, cisgender single mother who works as a waitress. Jess frequents the diner



with working-class men, and eventually asks Annie on a date. Jess and Annie do not identify similarly, as Jess and the reader are both unsure of her identity.⁶⁶

One then finds it impossible to label this relationship as either a homosexual or heterosexual encounter. On a date with Jess, Annie declares, “I wouldn’t let a faggot near my daughter,”⁶⁷ not knowing that she already did with Jess. Jess at the time was not straight. Nor was Jess a man or a woman. Annie, however, perceived Jess as a man and as straight, and their relationship worked up until this point as they had similar interests and they had similar understandings of working-class experiences. This novel highlights the fact that attractions and desires often constitute themselves on socialized perceptions of arbitrary categories of gender expression rather than the person’s self-identity. Annie made it clear that she would have no relation to a “faggot,” but she did. The relationship between Annie and Jess stands as an example of gender’s illegibility and that the direction of one’s attraction has already crossed over many genders, opening the bounds of sexuality, and marking multiple bodies as desirable and worthy of love.

Outside the realm of fiction, there exist a number of stories of trans people in love with cisgender individuals. During their relationships, a number of people, “come out” to their partners as trans, and in the process of “transitioning,” alter the meaning and definitions of their relationships as well. A BuzzFeed video titled, “Trans People and Their Partners Talk About Their Relationships,” displays three different couples discussing their relationships, exemplifying the fluidity of sexuality in relation to gender. One individual, Miles, states, “We were together almost three years before I started ‘transition.’⁶⁸” His partner mentions that adjusting to having “a male partner was a bit different,” but “I just love him; that’s all I know.”⁶⁹ Another, Ada, mentions that after six or nine months into their relationship she decided that she “really needed to transition.”⁷⁰ Evelyn, an individual in another relationship, asserts, “I don’t think it matters if you’re transgender or if you’re straight or if you’re gay or if you’re somewhere in between. If you find someone you love and you’re happy being who you are, it shouldn’t matter.”⁷¹ Ada’s partner concludes that “This relationship has taught me what love really is.”⁷² Both Miles’ and Ada’s partners entered the relationship with individuals they thought identified as cisgender. Later on, they discovered that their partner identified as trans and wanted to engage in the process of transition, and their definitions of their own sexuality, desires, and love altered as their partners’ bodies altered. People who had identified as solely heterosexual learned that their sexuality could not be constructed on an axis of gender and that gender did not define the



orientation of their love, desire, and attraction. Gender ceases to serve as a legitimate function for organizing sexuality due to its illegibility and constant or perpetual shifting for some individuals.

Cate Gary, on *Everyday Feminism*, writes an article about her partner “coming out” as a transgender women and how they are now “happier than ever,” once again questioning notions of what heterosexuality and/or homosexuality mean when we dispense with fixed notions of gender. When Cate’s partner came out to her, it brought to mind all sorts of questions:

I knew this wasn’t a joke, and I certainly wasn’t laughing. I was scared. I didn’t want to lose what we had. Would Robert still want to be with me? Would I still want to be with Robert? I’d never consciously been in a relationship with a woman before.⁷³

However, eventually, she moved beyond these concerns to feelings of happiness for her partner. She had “signed on” for a heterosexual relationship, but she stayed in the relationship based on her feelings for Robin.⁷⁴ The way she understood her sexuality changed. Her understandings of gender, including her own gender, changed. Robin’s queerness but had a domino effect on Cate’s own identity and on their relationship.⁷⁵ Multitudes of trans people “come out” to their cisgender partners. Some of their partners leave them. However, some like Gates and like Miles’ and Ada’s partners, interrogate their own identities in the process and find new realities of their own perceived and assumed straight-ness. Cate and Robin’s relationship is another example of the ways in which gender rarely remains fixed, and in turn, it complicates sexuality, calling for individuals to rethink what the meanings of their own sexualities.

In 2014, Mike Iamele wrote an article about the shifts in his sexuality within the previous two years. In 2012, “straight” guy Mike Iamele fell in love with his gay best friend. He found himself utterly confused when he, “the unquestionably straight guy — realized that I was in love with my best friend, a man. A man I had known for seven years. A man I had never before even thought of in a romantic way. But, there I was, in love.”⁷⁶ (The summer of 2012, Iamele became sick and his best friend took care of him for over two months. Through the months of daily massages, home-cooked meals, taken-care-of errands, and thoughtful conversations, he began to realize “that I loved him.”⁷⁷ At one singular moment, “one moment when he was cooking me dinner...he looked over and smiled at me. I knew this was it.”⁷⁸ Iamele confessed his love to his boyfriend, and his boyfriend in turn did the same. Iamele’s attraction to his boyfriend transcended socialized assumptions of gender and sexuality:



So, yes, I'm an otherwise straight man in love with a man. But I would never reduce Garrett down to just being a man. Because he's more than that. He's a pharmacist and a good cook and a great cards player. And I love him for all of those reasons and so many more. I love him for who he is, not what he is. We're more than our gender. We're more than one attribute. And sometimes we need to remember that.⁷⁹

Iamele fell in love with personality traits of Garrett's and eventually, physical traits of his not necessarily attached to one particular gender. Their relationship marked for death Iamele's own construction of heterosexuality and further necessitated the need to rethink what it meant for him to be heterosexual. He found it more important to orient his sexuality around what "brought me love,"⁸⁰ and not gender identities.

These couples display the fluidity and dynamic nature of their love, sexuality, and desire. They (minus Mike and Garret) fell in love with individuals who they perceived as one gender but identified as something else. These individuals worked past their fear of what it meant to love a trans person—of what it meant in terms of their own sexuality and gender as well. Rather than abjecting their partners, as many individuals do, they committed themselves not only to their partner, but also to learning more about trans justice and engaging in the fight alongside their partner. All members of society must begin to use these examples and more to rethink their own sexuality.

The death of the hetero/homo discourse necessitates a rethinking of the ways in which people define the particular language of sexuality. For instance, the straight man that fell in love with a gay man continues to identify as straight, but he now defines attraction as more than attraction to one's gender identity. Rather, he orients it around the person's personality traits, their physical traits, and their love of him. Death necessitates the rethinking of words like homosexuality, heterosexuality, bisexual, and queer beyond definitions that posit themselves around gender and instead posit themselves around a word that feels like home to that person—a word that feels a comfortable space to exist. This paper does not call for the obliteration of words like heterosexual, homosexual, lesbian, or gay. Rather, it necessitates a rethinking of what it means to be straight—so that it no longer means attraction to the "opposite" sex, but instead comes to mean something else. What that will mean remains unsure, as it occurs as a process. Society, communities, and individuals must shift to a place where all (a)genders exist in equitable affirmation, no one superimposed over the



other. This means that all members of society must mark for death the hetero/homo discourse that perpetuates an idea of opposite/same in relation to attraction to gender. It means the rethinking of what words mean so that they no longer rely on gender but begin to rely on degendered aspects of bodies and beings. It means the end of a maintenance of sexuality that requires the abjection of trans, nonbinary, and gender-nonconforming individuals.

Conclusion

Love, desire, and attraction situate themselves at the core of social justice movements. In December 2015, Hari Ziyad of Race Baitr interviewed Jamal T. Lewis, the director of an upcoming documentary called *No Fats, No Femmes*. Jamal explains the reasons behind this film: “I was scrolling through Jack’d one evening and found myself completely frustrated by numerous profiles boasting a “masc for masc” bravado and listing “no fats no fems” as their “preference” and something that they didn’t want.”⁸¹ Jamal continues to explain in their interview that the deciding of another’s desirability is indeed political. The forest of headers in dating apps dictating “no fats, no femmes, and no people of color,” occurs as more than just a mess of preferences. Rather, people inform such “preferences” by socialized notions of who is worthy of love, who is desirable, and who is welcome in a community. As Jamal points out, “Whom we decide to (and, not to) lay with (and, love) is political. It is a decision that we all make, myself included. It informs whom we save, whom we fight for, whom we deem worthy, whom we deem disposable, and vice versa.”⁸² Love, desire, and sexuality inform the community one surrounds them self with and with whom they engage in a struggle against oppression.

Socialized notions and prejudices of gender, race, class, and size inform love, desire, and sexuality. The call for the death of the hetero/homo discourse positions itself as the intentional cry against a sexual discourse that individuals and movements use as a weapon of oppression through the abjection of transgender, nonbinary, and gender-nonconforming bodies. It declares an end to sexuality’s supposed immunity from critique. This marking for death recognizes the illegibility of gender, necessitating the rethinking of sexuality, so that society may assert the value of trans individuals over ease, comfort, and prejudice.



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⁵ Butler, *Gender Trouble*, 8-10.
⁶ Ward, “No One is Born Gay.”
⁷ Burnett, “Why Would People Choose to be Gay.”
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⁹ Cavanaugh, “Touching Gender,” 426.
¹⁰ Kristeva, *Powers of Horror*.
¹¹ Ibid, 4.
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¹³ Ibid, 1.
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¹⁶ Vitulli, “A Defining Moment.”
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³³ Ibid.
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³⁵ Ibid.
³⁶ Ibid, 33.
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Alarming Logic: Feminist Poetics as Discursive/Pedagogic Intervention

Madhu Kaza, Sueyeun Juliette Lee, Karen Lepri, Andrea Quaid,
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Introduction:

"Alarms & Excursions," poet Rosmarie Waldrop opens her essay of the same title by stating [alarms and excursions], "is an Elizabethan stage term for off-stage noise and commotion that interrupts the main action."¹ In this piece, we returned to Waldrop's "Alarms & Excursions," published in *The Politics of Poetic Form: Poetry and Public Policy* (1990), to explore how interruption, off-stage-ness, and commotion might inform our writing pedagogy. We considered how the form of Waldrop's essay invites us to reframe our approach to the thesis-based college essay that we teach as scholars and poets working in academia. Waldrop's essay is written in short sections and fragments labeled "Thesis," "Alarm," "Excursion," "Counter-thesis," and so on, which allows her to question, deepen, interrupt, and complicate her own thinking. Through this form that privileges inquiry, not argument, she resists coming to any single conclusion or speaking from one identifiable stance. Waldrop's form occasions a feminist critique of ensconced methodologies based on rationalism, logic, evidence, and single-stance argumentation.

Our piece was originally presented as a creative-critical performance. Our interwoven writings performed *alarms and excursions*, and sought to amplify the presentation's arguments and inquiries. In place of a single-authored and spoken paper, we offered a collaborative poetic essay that embodies the theories and practices discussed therein. Each of us wrote independently to the shared themes presented in Waldrop's essay and from our own teaching experiences. Next we divided each of our essays into ten sections, which were then randomized to produce the performance script.

During the afternoon of the performance in March 2016 at the University of Colorado, Denver, we invited the audience to participate in our presentation. We passed out cards with "alarm," "thesis," "counter-alarm," and "excursion" written on them; invited attendees to write a comment when inspired; and to interrupt by waving his or her card in the air. Upon noting such "wavings" from the audience, we suspended our reading and let the audience member become a participant by reading what was on her



card. Sometimes these comments included questions, while others narrated brief stories, such as relaying a daughter's experience of being told in a job review that "she needed to get a boyfriend." One participant, Petra Kuppers, guided us through physical movement, inviting us, should we wish, to kneel, to breathe. These directives toward the personal, the pause, the unknown, and the literal ground both amplified and diverted the "script."

These audience-participant contributions provided a rich, communally textured, multivocal and embodied experience that interrupted the stultifying binary of the presenters and the audience. In another effort to disrupt the spatial logic of panel v. audience, performers moved around the room; got down on the floor; stood on, under, or straddled furniture; sat in the audience; slid along the wall; faced a particular audience member; perched before the podium; and moved between two seated audience members, bumping her hips between the shoulders of the two along the way. These spontaneous embodiments further pushed the boundaries of acceptable performance.

By writing collaboratively and in addition to Waldrop's form and method, we were able to invoke the possibility of simultaneously inhabiting multiple stances, which invited our audience to challenge the predominant mode of individual intellectual expression. The embrace of numerous voices and positions underscored the feminist poetical politics of our inquiry. Through our presentation, we sought to expose how rhetorical monologues get coded as both masculine and institutionalized in scholarly practice, rhetoric that proved to be both a burden and an opportunity to our multiplicitous and intersectional project. As such, we participated in existing conversations regarding writing pedagogy's Eurocentric logic (heavy on the *logos*) and gendered *aparati*.

Ironically, writing instruction today is predominately carried out by disenfranchised (adjunct) women faculty;² we feel this trend heightens the urgency of new thought experiments that bring critical attention to the troubling divides between poetry and essay, logic and emotion, and feminine and masculine. These divisions pose obstacles to teaching writing as a liberatory and revolutionary practice – a tradition taught by Audre Lorde and Adrienne Rich at CUNY during its period of open admissions in the 1970s³. Instead, our creative-critical text merges these divisions, troubling its imperatives and asking what might happen when an assertion is followed by a pause, poem, swerve, or "excursion," rather than a period.



Madhu:

What is the origin of the academic essay as we know it?

When did the thesis/evidence/conclusion essay become the dominant form of academic writing?

When, where & why does this form of writing work within the academic context?

What work does it not do?

Robin:

I activate my Spell Check, it stops at every instance of the word poethics, flashes "WORD NOT FOUND," and suggests that I must mean pothooks. Maybe I do. --Joan Retallack

Joan Retallack's quote makes legible one of the material ways that writing, teaching, and thinking are enmeshed in a complex network of visible and invisible institutions, cultures, and ideologies; we struggle against the machine's silent, sometimes illegible, "auto-correct." In "The Subject is Discourse," John Clifford writes, "Writing subjects learn that the panoply of discourse conventions are, in fact, the *sin qua non*, that adherence to ritual is the real ideological drama being enacted" (387). How do we re-think and re-write the possible dramas on the page and in the classroom?

First, one needs to be able to locate and to perceive the theater of auto-correct, the rules of adherence, and the dramas that make themselves invisible.

Though, the ruler's correctional smack on the wrist is palpable.

Andrea:

THESIS I

In "Alarms & Excursions," Rosmarie Waldrop describes her work with language as one of discovery and surprise. She writes, "As soon as I start listening to the words, they reveal their own vectors and affinities, pull the poem into their own field of force, often in unforeseen directions, away from the semantic charge of the original impulse."⁴ Composing a poem is a collaboration with and in language; it's an engagement that moves Waldrop and her poem in unknowable ways as the process of writing begins.

I think collaborative writing opens us up to a similar experience. New "vectors and affinities" are created when we work with another, write sentences, think through ideas about language, and compose in "unforeseen directions" that challenge what we came to the page with. In the feminist classroom, I turn to collaborative writing assignments to undo the single-



author model and extend collective classroom learning toward the student writing process. The essay as a “trial attempt” becomes a shared endeavor of thought, decision-making, and composition – with all its wild unruliness amplified as we write together.

Karen:

As long as I have been a student, I have been asked, “Where’s your evidence?” As long as I have been a teacher, I have asked my students, “Where’s your evidence?”

Thesis: Invidience opposes evidence.

Excursion: True, not true, representations of the word “evidence” evade its dismantling. We do not want to break it down. We want to mouth it whole. *Evidence* itself, entire, by 1300 an appearance from which inference may be drawn, by 1400 a ground for belief, obviousness in the late 1600s—but every time I go looking for the meaning, its parts, the *e-* is souped together with “vidence,” despite “e-” being a variant of the Latin prefix *ex-* meaning out, away, outside.

If you go looking for evidence’s opposite- its evil twin, desperate lover- you might find nothing. You might find *invidia* or *invideo*—either way the *videre* is pulled apart from *in-*, the part referring to vision wrenched away from the part pointing inward, into, inside, within. For what would it mean to see in here? Or to prove what you saw if no one else can see it? “Invidience,” as a word on the internet, for the most part does not exist, but sometimes it appears with the meaning “looking too closely at oneself.” What happens in a language when the word for the opposite of evidence is so thoroughly obscured? Evidence itself starts to cloud. I want its *e-* to go floating away, out from it, like it means to.

Juliette:

Excursion

With eyes closed and arms outspread, the endless north Atlantic wind biting at my body, I attempted to *feel* true north as a magnetic pressure intersecting my spine. Slow circular turn to the right, ambient pressure of gray daylight hovering with presence as though *inside* the narrow space of my thoughts. In the interior silence I accomplished, I felt a great vacancy. I could feel no cardinal pull within me.

Thesis

I know where I am.



Margaret:

THESIS:

The poem does not have a sign
The poem does not have instructions
The poem does not have a thesis
The poem does not have five paragraphs

ALARM:

But the poem does have a logic
The poem does have enjambments
The poem (the ghazal) does repeat lines

2

Robin:

Last summer, I worked on an "essay" ["Notes: Fences, Stop Signs, Shifters, or, the Conditions of Community"] that moved by way of contiguity; it was comprised of quotes, close readings of and from a TV series--*Broadchurch*--experience (personal, from others), scientific texts, poems, a writing handbook, a memoir, and Facebook posts. The form--contiguous but discrepant sections--emerged as a way to think about writing, community, racism, pronouns, and ethics. Its desire was commodious; the problems it sought to move among knotty and entangled. I wanted to see where they overlapped, intersected, crossed, met, and stood apart. I wanted readers to have brain, elbow, and leg-room. Yet, I was aware of and worried about the potential for the merely indexical, the too simple. How to hold complexity, but not nail it down?

Juliette:

Excursion

"You can't call that Korean."

My former husband--an ethnic Korean and immigrant--chastised me before our dinner guests because the dish I was serving was not made of "traditional" ingredients. The dish I was serving is called 비빔밥 (bibimbap) and literally means "mixed rice." It's a way to use up any scraps of food left in the house and make them delicious. What was not "Korean" about this dish? Looking over the table, I couldn't see where the failure appeared. Rice. Sautéed vegetables. Eggs. Seasoned seaweed. Seasoned chili paste. My cheeks burned. Looking at the table, I tried to see it through his eyes--and then realized that the fault was not in the cuisine. He saw the failure--"You cannot call that Korean"--in me.



Margaret:

EXCURSION

What if the poem were five paragraphs long?

What if the poem had a signal, an alarm, and a sign?

I desire for the thesis to have something like this too.

(NOTE TO SELF: BE SPECIFIC)

Madhu:

The thesis/evidence/conclusion essay operates as a case before trial, where we state our position, support it with evidence, defend our claims from the opposition, and make concluding remarks before deliberation and judgement (i.e. grading). What matters the most in this kind of essay is that we are strategic-- that we are clear and orderly in our presentation, and that our writing demonstrate confidence and authority.

When students do this type of writing they learn organization, clarity of thought, how to weigh evidence, and how to marshal it in the right moment to produce a logical train of thought. They also learn rightness, obedience to the law, and compliant citizenship.

Andrea:

EXCURSION

In *Teaching to Transgress: Education as the Practice of Freedom*, bell hooks calls for a critical pedagogy that is transformative. hooks claims, "Making the classroom a democratic setting where everyone feels a responsibility to contribute is a central goal of transformative pedagogy."⁵ In the feminist and anti-racist classroom where teaching and learning is always political, teachers and students alike are makers of knowledge, collective work is valued over individual mastery, and process can be disruptive to dominant social narratives and educational structures. When I read transformative, I hear dynamic questioning and questing, and new practices being brought into being.

Karen:

This is how evidence works: you get it out, you show it, you show how sensible it is, you flout its sensibility before the eyes of others. This is how invidience works: you keep it in, you don't show it. Think of how they judged Othello's *invidia*. Think of what they would do to you if you turned your *invideo*, your evil eye, in their direction - if you bewitched them with privacy, coveted what's yours.

This is my invidience-based writing assignment. Here is the blank ream lying on your table, still in its stiff plastic.



Do I look at you askance? Do my words come at you sideways? Where is my obviousness? How will you recognize me? You find me prejudiced? You find I have not considered the consensus of my peers? Do I loath you, or rival you, or you just can't tell? By extension, I appear unwilling; I hide when you look for me, don't come when you call me to witness, deny, hinder, prevent, or aspire to retreat farther than possibly thought.

3

Juliette:

Thesis

I am Korean.

Alarm

This is not a presentation on identity politics. This is an extended thought on the faulty tools we acquire and use to locate and recognize ourselves. One such faulty tool is a nation frame.

Karen:

Alarm: Judith Butler claims that "inner and outer...remain linguistic terms that facilitate and articulate a set of fantasies, feared and desired."⁶ What is it I desire in opposing evidence and invidience? What binary do I extoll by exteriorizing a thought that supposes its own interior? When I say, "Writing cannot hide itself; it is expository, visual," even my exposition gleams with envy. Do I covet the binary's ease? Hold it close? In John Waterhouse's painting *Circe Invidiosa* (1892), Circe stands in a pond pouring water from a bowl she holds near her neck. She pours her envy out. There is no hiding. Envy leaks; it gets out no matter what.

Thesis: Poetry maintains the inside not by cocking the leaks, but by refusing the outside.

Robin:

What about a hall of mirrors: textual, experiential, visual, multimodal, alarms & excursions. Necessarily communal and public.

"Most writing is a mirror in which a reader can recognize himself [sic]without thinking too much about it, but what about erecting a hall of mirrors in which the reader may be both fearful and eager to catch sight of his [sic]own reflection" (Glück 8).



What did he just say? Did she really just say that? He said what? What did she do? Did I hear what I think I heard? Did that just come out of my mouth, his mouth, your mouth?" (Rankine 63).

* * *

How might we as writers and teachers enable the essay and student to experiment, attempt, doubt, and question?

Margaret:

THESIS:

I am a feminist professor; I realize this after again (for the fifth, or more, time because each time it is that good) reading bell hooks on teaching, because to teach is to transgress. I read hooks first when I was a student, and now I read hooks again as a teacher. My job as a feminist instructor is to let the young women, trans, and queer students in my classes know that they are taken seriously. Their ideas, I believe in.

Andrea:

ALARM

Banking corporate humanities, building cooperative culture, cultivating an ethic of contribution, developing processes that enable people to work together in flexible but disciplined projects, creating an infrastructure in which collaboration is valued and rewarded, here's how to map it out for your business: collaborate to make the world a better place, learn to get out of the way, integrate into the flow of work, create a supportive environment, and adapt and evolve. Measure what matters: data, professional, utility, leverage, buy-in, output, productivity, and product - our 21st century classroom-workplace.

Madhu:

Another way of thinking of the essay is to think of it as trial, as attempt, as thought-experiment, as practice; to think of it as an essay in search of truths more so than facts. In more open forms of essay, writing the structure is not given in advance. The essay may be thesis-seeking rather than thesis-supporting.

Karen:

Excursion: In Gertrude Stein's lecture "Poetry and Grammar," she posits categorical relationships between certain parts of speech and forms of writing: poetry is nouns; prose is verbs. But I think she also carves out a grand space for literary criticism in her talk. She invents critical refusal; she



narrates it and performs it by simultaneously asking questions and then not answering them, and by saying what she will now do and then subsequently, expectedly, and decidedly not doing it. Patriarchy figures in as a comma, to which Stein responds, “Let me tell you what I feel and what I mean and what I felt and what I meant.”⁷ Commaless, promptly, she does not.

Again, Stein refuses. Again, Stein asks, “But what is poetry?” She fails in answering, “It is more or less difficult to know what poetry is”⁸—we are twenty pages in and four pages from the end—we want answers, and she goes inside. It reminds me of what Stein writes about in *Autobiography of Alice B. Toklas*, and how she began writing *Tender Buttons* after writing *Making of Americans*—which marks a transition (from narrative to poetry) that this lecture is also trying, and not trying, to explain. In that 1932 book, she writes, “Food, rooms etcetera...were the beginning...of mixing the outside with the inside. Hitherto she had been concerned with seriousness and the inside of things, in these studies she began to describe the inside as seen from the outside”⁹). Stein’s thesis: poem is a study that refuses exposing the inside, but imagines it from the outside, or it gives you the outside with the attitude of insides. What is the evidence that anything is a poem, anyhow?

In dealing with the nouns of *Tender Buttons*, Stein “decided not to get around them but to meet them, to handle in short to refuse them by using them and in that way my real acquaintance with poetry begun.”¹⁰ Refusing by using. Using by refusing. A feeling surfaces and evaporates. Insides note their passage to the outside without exclamation. Because nothing has happened. Grandness smote. Evidence smote.

Robin:

Contiguity, as a textual and social practice, provides the occasion to look beyond the customary categories of the domestic and international, politics, history, aesthetics, philosophy, psychology, sociology and so on. - Erica Hunt "Notes for an Oppositional Poetics"

* * *

Despite Susan Howe's *My Emily Dickinson* in the 80s, and then Erica Hunt's essay "Notes for an Oppositional Poetics" in the 90s; despite having written poetry in an environment of permissions (San Francisco); despite years of academic, doctoral disciplining in an institution that is purportedly more open than others; despite having always begun drafting critical writing with a tapestry of quotes and *then* suturing, it is only, as of late, that



I leap into critical and scholarly writing-gaps legible, slits in mid-air, letting the witches dance in the breach. I am making a show of my breaches.

Madhu:

Another question: who are my students before the law? How do they perceive their relationship to the authority of the state, the authority of the teacher, the authority of the educational institution?

Another question: what is the purpose of their education?

Another question: why do I want them to learn through writing?

In the essay as (legal) argument scenario, the classroom is assumed to be neutral, like a courtroom where justice is blind, and the law applies equally to all.

Juliette:

Thesis

Nations inscribe a powerfully imagined limit around a geographical boundary and our relationship to it. Borders are clearly demarcated in the abstracted space of nation terrains; belonging is conveyed in terms of access and mobility. Belonging--one can pass by adequately performing a system of "natural" and "shared" values; such performances are especially significant in how they compensate for one's racialization, and superficially smooth over deep discrepancies in how one's body conforms, or fails to conform, to the national narrative. I recall my father planting a fifteen foot flag pole in our front lawn in order to fly the stars and stripes.

Margaret:

ALARM:

When I sit in lectures, I am often writing lecture poems.

I gather words from the lectures, and create my own charts.

My rigorous poetic notes. I expect nothing different from my students. I don't

teach them about my cheating, but I hope they are able to play, too,

In this alarm, I write, "suggest a commitment to change,"

I can't, but spell check changes it automatically.

Andrea:

COUNTER ALARM

Waldrop states, "To my mind writing has to do with uncovering possibility rather than with codification. My key words would be exploring and



maintaining: exploring a forest not with timber that might be sold, but to understand it as a world and to keep this world alive.”¹¹

Classroom assignment: Write toward another and toward the unexpected, the desirous, the delirious, the frustrating, and the revelatory. Forget who wrote which sentence. Forget who thought which idea. How does your essay keep this world alive?

5

Karen:

Alarm: You cannot use a thing you refuse. In the editing of Stein’s *Stanzas in Meditations*, Toklas changed every mention of the word “may” to “can.” Stein scholar, Uyla Dydo discovered these edits in Stein’s manuscripts.¹² “May” was May Bookstaver, Stein’s long-lost, young love. *Invidia* drove Alice to slash each mention of the young nymph’s name. Slash and replace one noun for another. If Stein were to live a life with Alice, not May, then “may” could not be used. Stein, or May, had refused the other. Alice was tidying up.

Editing has historic importance, not only in the classroom. Horace declared it was better to die unpublished than to be published, and have to first show one’s work to several masters for their feedback. And surely, should the publishers refuse you, they would become scandalized to then turn and make the said *refuse* – the waste, the thing not wanted - public. “The unpublished may be canceled,” Horace warns, “but a word once uttered can never be recalled.”¹³

Margaret:

COUNTER-EXCURSION:

An assignment to students who

Cannot write a thesis.

Write down your questions, then

Change it into a statement.

Madhu:

I think of Langston Hughes’ Theme for English B:

The instructor said,

*Go home and write
a page tonight.*

*And let that page come out of you—
Then, it will be true.*



I wonder if it's that simple?
I am twenty-two, colored, born in Winston-Salem.
I went to school there, then Durham, then here
to this college on the hill above Harlem.
I am the only colored student in my class....¹⁴

Hughes' articulation of the difficulty of writing -- "It's not easy to know what is true for you or me" -- points to how writing, because it emerges from voice, a point of view, a person embedded in a particular social and historical context, is never quite neutral.

Andrea:
EXCURSION

Jody Greene's connection between etymology and ethics continues to resonate with me. In the classroom, I repeat, I channel, a version of her work on conversation: when we converse, we "vertare" or turn about; we "com" with, we turn about with. A dance: a conversation is a dance with another, and I extend this to collaborative writing. We "labore" or work, we "com" with, we write with others as a dance.

Juliette:

Alarm

What *actually* ties us to the landscapes we inhabit? What *actually* ties us to the landscapes we call--and are called to--"home"?

Robin:

How disciplined our disciplining is. We and our students are to get rid of the holes in our arguments, to cover them up, to be ashamed of them.

What does this remind you of?

Early adolescence. I am at my grandparents'. It is likely a Sunday, maybe even near Easter. I am wearing a powder blue, short-sleeved, and straight, but loose, dress. I am 12? or 11? I am sitting on the couch. From across the room, my aunt signals distress: she puts her two arms out, brings her wrists together, palms out, and folds them in as if they were hinges. Folds them in and out. IN, IN, repeatedly. CLOSE. YOUR. LEGS. BRING. YOUR. KNEES. TOGETHER. Cover up

the gap. Your shame.



6

Andrea:

ALARM

Student: I didn't like the collaborative writing assignment.

Stephanie Young: List the limits of your project.

Angela Davis: Radical as in root as in are you asking the better question?

Karen:

Counteralarm: But can't it? We sometimes want what we say we don't want, and this ghost of desire haunts bad writing. Ultimately, a new edition of *Stanzas in Meditation* was published in 2010, and all the "cans" went back to "mays." May rose. May surfaced. When I teach peer review, students are asked to name "what's lurking"—in other words, what does the writer seem to want, but refuses to admit; what are they uttering without uttering. I tell them that if they don't unearth this lurking ghost of an opinion or idea, it will cloud their meaning, break their trust with the reader. Their readers will feel the words looking askance, looking hard, giving them the evil eye.

Robin:

In *Sorting Facts; or, Nineteen Ways of Looking at Marker*, Susan Howe quotes Sergei Eisenstein from his work, "The Cinematographic Principle and the Ideogram," in which he writes, "So, montage is conflict" (qtd in Howe 46). Howe reminds us "Herman Melville, Emily Dickinson, and Walt Whitman were all using montage before it was a word for a working method. Their writing practice (varied though it was) involved comparing and linking fragments or shots, selecting fragments for scenes, reducing multitudes (chapters or stanzas) and shots (lines and single words) to correlate with one another, constantly interweaving traces of the past to overcome restrictions" (48).

Madhu:

My work with individuals who are ESL learners, first generation college students, adult learners, incarcerated students, and students in authoritarian or democratically constrained contexts has only confirmed for me the need for more engaged pedagogies. I'm thinking, for instance, of bell hooks' feminist reframing of Paulo Freire's ideas of education as the practice of freedom, and notmost importantly, the practice of law. For me, such a pedagogy means thinking as a teacher about how my students and I are doing what we are doing, who we are doing it with, who we are to those who we're doing it with, where we're doing it, who is present, who has not been invited into the space where we're doing it, who we're speaking to, and who we we're not speaking to; what resources and knowledge -or gaps in



resources and knowledge- we bring to what we're doing; and what problems we face in doing what we're doing.

Juliette:

Excursion

At the US/Canadian border while driving to Vancouver, I insisted on stopping and walking along a small trail I had noticed on the side of the road. What would the seam between these territories feel like? With the Border Patrol building in sight, we parked and walked over a worn path through a small copse of trees, into light green, moist grasses before the coastline took over. We observed the sparkling Pacific unfurling before us. I felt quiet inside. A sedate curiosity.

“Get back in your car.” He was armed and frowning.

“I just wanted to see the--”

“Turn around and get back in your car.” He rested his hand on his firearm.

We turned around.

Margaret:

ALARM:

Say, for example, you have a male colleague
And because you've been with women for most of your adult life,
you are used to guy talk, you're comfortable with it

But one day, one of your colleagues, male and straight,
refers to one of his students as a porn star

ALARM:

WTF

7

Madhu:

Excursion:

In many contexts, in the U.S., we might spend all day saying: I think, I think, I think, I feel, I want, I know, I think, I feel, I need, I know, I think, I want, I think, I feel. It's not the biggest leap to find a thesis and support it (even if it takes our students years to learn how to do this well.)



But what does it mean to ask a student in Burma, a country transitioning out of military dictatorship, to do this? The students I worked with in Yangon and Mandalay were among the first to be admitted to the most prominent universities in the country since they reopened in 2013. The universities had been shut down for undergraduate studies following the 1988 Burmese democracy protests.

Karen:

Thesis: It is not possible for a poem to look too closely.

Excursion: Readers of poetry in the 1930s and 40s promoted a rather concrete science of poetry. New Critics such as Brooks and Warren¹⁵ believed that both ordinary and poetic speech were loaded with decodable figures of speech, and that anyone, if taught, could figure them out and literally get the meaning outside of the text's insides. The language would out itself, if you looked closely enough. In this process, the text is both what you saw and the proof that you saw it, but somehow this logic does not collapse for believers.

Andrea:

THESIS II

When I say I want to work against mastery, I mean a masculine, imperialist drive to control and dominate (this also means to work against the liberal subject and its understanding of itself as an autonomous, self-possessed, and rational author of its free will). In *Culture and Imperialism*, Edward Said makes explicit the connection between empire building and intellectual mastery, and states its opposites can be found "in the renewable, almost sporty discontinuities of intellectual and secular impurities – mixed genres, unexpected combinations of tradition and novelty, political experiences based on communities of effort and interpretation ... rather than classes or corporations of possession, appropriation, and power."¹⁶ All this pairing and mixing to move us away from the tyranny of the one - be it a state or a singular one.

Classroom assignment: write multiple genres into your essay, poem, speculative fiction, or first-person narrative that troubles more than it resolves. Begin with a traditional claim and by the end of the thesis: swerve. Trace how we get there while getting there. Swerve again. How have you worked to interpret a question in a manner that asks another question? How have you landed on a claim that is an invitation to interpretation?

Robin:



A leap: this fall, a prompt for first year students - consider the *form* of your essay as a part of its claim or exploration.

To write this assignment, you will bewilder yourself and abandon the 5paragraph and/or usual essay form.

My desire: this assignment will serve as an ALARM--a loud sound that interrupts the drama of the center-staged, ingrained, nailed down, coffin-like, attention restricting (even, attention-negating), five-paragraph essay which prevents what Madhu Kaza calls, " the odd angled."

Verlyn Klinkenborg explains:

The central fact of your education is this:
You've been taught to believe that what you discover by thinking,
By examining your own thoughts and perceptions,
Is unimportant and unauthorized.
As a result, you fear thinking,
And you don't believe your thoughts are interesting,
Because you haven't learned to be interested in them....
what you notice depends on what you allow yourself to notice (36-37)

Margaret:

EXCURSION

You stop for a second, because you are viscerally shaken.
You need to stop that. You say this angrily. You say this with alarm.
You realize you are a mama bear now.
The classroom is a sacred space, and to imagine this young woman
Writing with her pen, and someone characterizing her as such,
thinking about it now, still
Makes your body
Visceral

Juliette:

Thesis

To claim being Korean, is to claim a mode of recognizability. The term isn't one that was selected by the inhabitants of the peninsula we in the US call North or South Korea. It provides a mode of organization, which licenses political power through nation optics, for who are otherwise an indigenous people. It also divides them and disciplines their imaginations as to who they are, how they are, and how they may relate to one other.



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Margaret:

ANGER II:

I am not innocent, but my gaze, I realize, is different.

Juliette:

Alarm

I say “they” because I cannot say “we.”

Karen:

In Ovid’s *Metamorphosis*, Minerva encounters Envy, or *Invidia*, in a “a squalid den that dripped with gore, a filthy, secluded cavern in a deep set valley.”¹⁷ In another translation, “deep in a dreary dale, a gruesome sunless hovel, filled with frost, heart-numbing frost, its stagnant air unstirred by any breeze.”¹⁸ I am too schooled to not look close. Instinctively, I wonder how Envy can be thus hidden and still be the one who looks too closely. Meanwhile, we readers look and look, and in looking couple poison with depth, desire with death, lack with cold, wanting with stuckness. Alarms go off every time I insist that students read or look more closely at a text, and every time I insist that they shine more light into the darkness. What if I said inject some poison into the text, make the text stiffen at their touch, and maintain some mystery as to how the poison works, how the desire holds the text slightly away from us.

Andrea:

EXCURSION In Thesis 2 of “Alarms and Excursions,” Waldrop claims that poetry can “make the culture aware of itself, unveil hidden structures. It questions, resists. Hence it can at least potentially anticipate structures that might lead to social change.”¹⁹ Here, I posit the collaborative essay assignment as poem: as a way of working together that exposes often hidden structures: pedagogical principles, criteria for success and failure, accepted modes of thinking, received practices that replicate those modes of thinking. The collaborative essay as poem anticipating and manifesting other structures for learning.

Madhu:

In the classroom my Burmese students had been very attentive, but (ESL concerns aside) they were generally stiff and didactic in their written work. They had never been asked to express their own ideas or articulate their understanding of texts before. They had written neither thesis supporting nor thesis seeking essays. Writing for these students was very difficult--



sometimes thrilling and usually quite fraught. I knew my students would try to do what I asked of them. But, oddly, if I wanted to teach them something more than compliance I had to be gentle and patient in my encouragement of their thought. If I insisted that they write argumentatively and say what they think, I would simply be introducing a new authoritarian regime of thought – one where we must say what we think, to replace the one where we do not say what we think and we aren't encouraged to think. (It wouldn't have worked either – they know too well how not to say what they think.) With a group of students for whom it might be dangerous to simply assert a belief or a thesis -- exploratory, provisional, thesis-seeking writing was a cautious and productive way to proceed.

Robin:

WHY: This assignment is an experiment in leaving behind your preconceptions of academic writing. It will build your analytical reading skills, enable *you* to work on identifying a text's claims, and assist you in puzzling out what *you* think about these ideas. It will begin to help you, in Verlyn Klinkenborg's words, *notice* what *you* are paying attention to, to begin to think for yourself in greater depth and to explore how to do this in writing.

an open secret: here, in the midst of work, are joy and pleasure.

Doubt: I'm not sure what YOU are looking for....
what do YOU want from us?

Underlying Premise: your job as a student is to give the instructor and the institution what they want.

* * *

HOW?: You've thought about the readings; and we've talked a bit about the forms of the texts we've read so far, including the unusual and disparate formats of Fanny Howe's "Bewilderment," John Cage's "Diary, Emma Lake Workshop, 1965," and Joan Retallack's "Poethics of a Complex Realism." *You* might spend some additional time considering how these forms *work* and what they enable the writers to accomplish. How have *they* used personal anecdote? How do their **chosen forms perform or embody** their claims and arguments? How have *they* used vivid descriptive detail, the diary entry, error? Some use dictionary definitions, cite quotes from other authors and texts; some use personal and artistic biographical information. How might *you* use these strategies?

WHO(m): are *you*
writing for, to?

**Madhu:**

Excursion with many alarms:

On my last day teaching college students at Mandalay University I invited my students to the student canteen for tea in order to have a chance to speak to them informally. I learned that nearly all of the students stayed in the university hostel and that the curfew for the womens' hostel was 6pm. I asked them how they spent their time. I told them a little bit about my life in New York. I asked, "Do you know what "people-watching" is?" I explained the term. My Burmese colleague, an anthropologist, expressed alarm at the idea, though I remember one single student who seemed fascinated..

That afternoon, I began to see that their cloistered lives were linked to how they showed up in the classroom. They had not been encouraged to be intellectually curious and engage the world. They had gone from their parents' home to the hostel. They didn't walk freely in the city. "People watching" was so distant from how they might imagine spending their time. All of this of course, could be linked not only to gender but also to the fact that they had grown up under military dictatorship. What does it mean to "people watch" in a surveillance state? What does it mean to write when one isn't supposed to have thoughts of one's own. So if my students didn't demonstrate (publicly) great intellectual curiosity, if they didn't always have sharp, original insights and produced instead clichés and pre-digested thought, it had a context.

It makes me aware of how much time it takes to develop habits of mind – like a questioning spirit or a self-reflective attitude, but also how our habits of mind are connected to the particular worlds we inhabit and our places in them.

Robin:

Discovery: Some students work to incorporate more questions in their essays, include their own writerly presence in the text; a very few take bold risks and actively seek to consider and activate form. One student, S, takes the diary form from Cage's "Diary: Emma Lake Workshop, 1965" as a way to enact a conversation between her memory of a group event (a school retreat) that entailed a bewildering separation of students from their established friend groups, and an exploration of art's relation to bewilderment and human connection.



In paragraphic intimacy transcriptions from the diary S kept on the retreat, close reading of quotes from Fanny Howe, John Cage, and the French street artist JR, contiguously co-mingled, as S thought and wrote through and with them. " When we began..... I felt discomfort not knowing where we were going." Retreat, diary, readings, essaying.

Another threads the vivid descriptions of ambient noise on campus and in dorms into an essay, "The Art of Distractions" that celebrates, uses, incorporates, and reflects on the possible values of distraction and disruption in content's supposed smooth form.

Margaret:

THESIS:

I am a student. I was a student. You are a student.

THESIS:

In the classroom, let us stay safe from a world that sees us as sex.

Karen:

Alarm: What about community, audience, exchange, conversation? What would evidence-based writing do to the reader's desire to connect with others, or dare I say, to love?

Prompt: The court demands evidence of your love of the poem.

Prompt: Interweave evidence- and evidence-based paragraphs in which you offer an envious reading of a text. You are too jealous of what it does, how it does it.

Prompt: Take each evidentiary quote and the idea you derive there from and argue its opposite, or, alternately, name a thing which the evidence refuses to show or prove that remains relevant to your experience of the text.

Juliette:

Thesis

I prefer to say I am KOREAN.

Thesis

Every border patrol is full of douchebags. At every border.

Andrea:



ALARM

I would sound an alarm about utopian thinking but I like the political challenge to think and to do otherwise from our emplacement, our enmeshment in current conditions. (Fredric Jameson claims: “it has become easier to imagine the end of the world than the end of capitalism.”)²⁰ In *Octavia’s Brood: Science Fiction Stories from Social Justice Movements*, Walidah Imarisha and Adrienne Maree Brown bring together stories that imagine a better, future world that we will come to inhabit by building toward it and away from the inequities of today.²¹ I want the classroom to work this way: as a place to build toward a future that will be met with different beliefs and structures to greet it.

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Robin:

They were not all “A” essays. Some of the leaps were messy. Some sentences entangled forests. These difficulties were recognizable and explicable if not always in the language with which we are familiar: *your topic sentences are facts rather than claims.*

However, the challenges of assessment remain similar: relation, elaboration, attention to form. the beauty of the language, the sentence. not a formula. but out on the high wire. balancing

* * *

Writing practices/pedagogies that reshape attention, enabling a YOU you might have kept buried, presumed. in the context of THEY. The surprise of WE. Doing and undoing, conversing, risking, turning to forms commodious and surprising. complexity's amplitude. letting our gaps show.

perhaps this is where beginning begins.

Andrea:

EXCURSION

I end on love. Collaborative writing as poem, as possibility, as listening, as a way of holding another for the length of a word, sentence, paragraph, idea and form that carries more than one voice into a future beyond itself. In *A Dialogue on Love*, Eve Kosofsky Sedgwick writes about holding relations: “It’s somehow as though the part of you that’s in me will be able to nourish the part of me that’s in you, or – something – I don’t know how to put it. But that there’s some circuit of reciprocity between these holding relations: your ability to hold me inside you, and mine to hold you inside me.”²².

**Juliette:**

Excursion

I kneel slowly, breathing evenly through my slightly open mouth. I attempt to relinquish the weight in my shoulders that digs high up into my back. *Round yourself and be small.* My thigh and knee push into my breast, the nubby terrain pressing through the slate bones of my shin. My hands drag into dry grass stalks. Their wintry heads are somnolent. *In the space of your roundness, assert the planet's solitary trek.* Am I finally listening to the motion--the permanent motion--of an indifferent spin? The weather colludes with this listening; the daylight is pale and thin, generously undemanding in its presence.

With this attentiveness--this solemn planetary amplification--nation frames and cultural assertions melt out of my bones to drip like wet char into the ground. *Transform into the stellar conundrum beyond the veil of "height."* As I walked to the top of the butte, I passed several bleached skeletal remains; the longer bones had been fractured and the spine pulled apart. A new spaciousness continually consumed the remains long after whatever living agent had been sated. *Inhabit the truth of all distances--be alert to the infinite span.* I found satisfaction in the paleness of the bones. Their small insistence.

Karen:

Prompt: Inject the text with your secret power. Tell no one. Show no one. Return with the text changed by the nature of your secret power. If it dies, so be it. If it transforms, show us its new form.

Prompt: Redact the parts of the text that are substantial, substantiating, to your desired experience of it. Leave behind the insubstantial, unsubstantiating, parts. Write directions for how a reader, a lover, should use these remaining parts to process their frustration at not being able to view the substance you have hidden away. This is your poem.

Margaret:

THESIS:

Dear students, I want your essays to roar.

Madhu:

My job was not simply to teach my students how to write, or to convert them into critical and free thinkers (ie. to rescue or save them). I needed to ask them questions and to listen to what they had to say; I needed to listen, too, to their silences, evasions, hesitations, to their indirect ways of speaking; there was no simple path.



Teaching (like writing) is an essaying; the alarms are incessant, but there are many opportunities for unexpected adventures (excursions). I see that my job as a teacher includes learning from my students how to teach them.

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¹ Waldrop, "Alarms & Excursions," 45.

² This statistical trend is not in fact new, as Eileen Schell discusses in *Gypsy Academics and Mother-teachers: Gender, Contingent Labor, and Writing Instruction* (Portsmouth, NH: Heinemann, 1997).

³ See Lost & Found's chapbook *Adrienne Rich: Teaching at CUNY, 1968-1974 (Part I & II)* (New York: Center for Humanities, 2015) and forthcoming companion edition *Audre Lorde: Teaching at CUNY*.

⁴ Waldrop, "Alarms & Excursions," 54.

⁵ hooks, *Teaching to Transgress*, 39.

⁶ Butler, *Gender Trouble*, 134.

⁷ Stein, *Lectures in America*, 220.

⁸ *Ibid.*, 230.

⁹ Stein, *Autobiography of Alice B. Toklas*, 156.

¹⁰ Stein, *Lectures in America*, 228.

¹¹ Waldrop, *The Politics of Poetic Form*, 46.

¹² See Ulya Dydo's *Gertrude Stein: The Language that Rises 1923-1934* (Northwestern University Press, 2003).

¹³ Horace, "The Art of Poetry," 140, in Allan Gilbert's *Literary Criticism: Plato to Dryden*.

¹⁴ Hughes, *Collected Poems of Langston Hughes*, 409.

¹⁵ See Cleanth Brooks and Robert Penn Warren's *Understanding Poetry* (1938).

¹⁶ Said, *Culture and Imperialism*, 335.

¹⁷ Ovid, *Metamorphosis* (trans. Allen Mandelbaum), 68.

¹⁸ Ovid, *Metamorphosis* (trans. A.D. Meville), 47.

¹⁹ Waldrop, *The Politics of Poetic Form*, 47.

²⁰ See Fredric Jameson, "Future City," *New Left Review* 21, May-June 2003, 76.

²¹ Waldiah et al., *Octavia's Brood*.

²² Sedgwick, *A Dialogue on Love*, 164-165.



A Critique of Safe Space Classrooms: A Feminist Pedagogy of Rhetorical Mindfulness as Alternative

Molly E. Ubbesen

Introduction

Declarations of safe spaces are becoming more common on college campuses, and while I appreciate this attention to learning environments, I also question what it means to make a classroom a safe space. As a feminist teacher of writing, I'm interested in exploring what it means to create a safe space within the context of a college course, especially as it relates to a feminist pedagogy that considers student and teacher affect and emotion. As the term "safe space" becomes more common, I examine and enter the ongoing controversial conversation in which some scholars celebrate the term, some question and problematize it, and some offer alternative terms.

Using a rhetorical and intersectional feminist framework, the following questions are a guide through this conversation: What is a safe space? What are the effects of declaring that a space is safe? How does the declaration of a safe space affect all students, and how does it specifically affect marginalized students who often face unsafe situations in society, such as women, people of color, and queer students? Is a safe space inclusive for all bodies and identities? What are alternative terms that might address some of these complications?

The exigency of this exploration is to examine and critique the often taken for granted rhetoric of safe spaces that can unintentionally have disadvantageous effects for students and teachers and to provide an alternative term that is more realistic and useful in fostering productive learning conditions. My exploration of this conversation will later lead to the argument that the term safe space is problematic and inaccurate for the learning conditions that feminist pedagogues are often trying to promote, and I instead argue that college courses should be founded on rhetorical mindfulness.

What is a "Safe Space"?

Within the context of a college course, a safe space is associated with psychological and emotional safety rather than just physical safety. Researchers Lynn C. Holley and Sue Steiner describe a safe space as a "classroom climate that allows students to feel secure enough to take risks,



honestly express their views, and share and explore their knowledge, attitudes, and behaviors. Safety in this sense does not refer to physical safety. Instead, classroom safe space refers to protection from psychological or emotional harm.”¹ This is a typical description of a safe space, but while it may sound ideal, I question what it means for someone to feel “secure enough,” especially if they are being challenged on their views. I also question the ideal of honesty in a safe space classroom because a student’s honest views could be offensive and could easily cause psychological and emotional harm to others. These authors acknowledge that “Encouraging sharing of views that reflect underlying racist, classist, sexist, or homophobic perspectives, for example, might be important in providing the opportunity for the view holder to be challenged to increase self-awareness and to change those beliefs.”² But they also acknowledge how these views can be harmful to other students and make them feel potentially unsafe.³ Hence, encouraging honest opinions from students and still expecting all students to feel safe is a problematic expectation.

To complicate this, the ambiguous line between feeling unsafe and feeling uncomfortable is important to consider. Holley and Steiner point out that, “Safe space does not necessarily refer to an environment without discomfort, struggle, or pain. Being safe is not the same as being comfortable. To grow and learn, students often must confront issues that make them uncomfortable and force them to struggle with who they are and what they believe.”⁴ Intellectual growth and learning are often accompanied by feelings of frustration and discomfort, but students should be encouraged to work with these feelings in order to reach their learning potential. Feminist pedagogue Annette Henry agrees: “I let my students know that they will feel much discomfort, doubt and ambiguity; I tell them that to be shaken up is evidence of learning, of growth and of shifts in thinking. (I believe that uncomfortable situations are more bearable when we know what is happening and that the discomfort will not last forever!).”⁵ Henry makes a valuable point, and so the term safe space is inaccurate here because students could easily equate “uncomfortable situations” with feeling unsafe.

Yet this idea of comfort comes up in other teachers’ definitions of safe spaces. Women’s Studies scholar Betty Barrett suggests that, “the safe classroom is commonly defined as a metaphorical space in which students are sufficiently comfortable to take social and psychological risks by expressing their individuality (particularly their thoughts, beliefs, opinions, experiences, and creativity).”⁶ However, this definition is problematic because how can educators determine what is “sufficiently comfortable” for



all students? How can we assess how comfortable students feel when everyone has varying degrees of comfort levels depending on the context? Teachers can surely encourage and support students to take intellectual risks and discuss controversial issues, but teachers cannot accurately ensure sufficient comfort for everyone.

In addition to troubling the term “safe,” I also offer the term “learning conditions” as an alternative to the notion of a discrete classroom space. The term learning conditions more fully reflects the complex ways that feminist teachers and students interact with each other and course content both in and outside of physical and online classrooms. Ideal learning conditions differ depending on various contexts that are influenced by individual teachers, student populations, and course content each semester. I believe ideal learning conditions promote learning, growth, open-mindedness, and critical thinking; this can be accomplished by teachers fostering trust with their students and promoting respect between everyone in the course. Teachers must learn how to facilitate a course effectively so that students’ voices are heard and that moments of conflict can be handled productively. As an educator, I strive to create learning conditions that students find engaging, applicable, and valuable for their learning and progression.

What are the Problems with the Term “Safe Space”?

The learning conditions that I describe are perhaps not always comfortable or “safe.” While I have already started to critique this term, I further support and expand this critique by examining other scholars’ suggested alternatives in order to further stress why a more accurate term is necessary. Critical pedagogues Kyoko Kishimoto and Mumbi Mwangi agree and argue that “Problematizing such terms as ‘safe’ and ‘trust’ forces us to interrogate the meanings and applications of these terms in our teaching in order to reveal how such terms can be used to perpetuate valued norms of the dominant metanarratives and the assumption that such terms are unproblematic.”⁷ The term “safe” needs to be problematized because it is all too often declared without an agreed upon meaning between teacher and students as well as between students. What does the term *really* mean? *Who* will determine this meaning? And *how* will “safety” be ensured and enforced? Will this term perpetuate valued norms of free speech? Or of political correctness? Whose perspectives are valued and read as safe and whose are devalued and read as offensive?



Interrogating the meaning of “safe space” also entails asking who this space is intended to be safe for and for what purposes. Students have a wide range of identities, backgrounds, and needs, which makes it nearly impossible for an instructor to attempt to ensure continuous safety for all. Instructors would be misleading to indicate a space that can accomplish this. Cultural diversity educator Jeannie Ludlow crucially points out that “The systemic inequalities that shape access to social power and privilege based on identity variables such as race, gender, class, and sexuality also inevitably influence our classrooms... we invoke multiple connotations of safety.”⁸ While a feminist pedagogy is typically student-centered, teachers need to facilitate learning conditions in a way that societal inequalities are not also perpetuated in the class. For a white straight male student, his connotation of safety might be to freely voice his opinion, which may not be the same connotation of safety that a black lesbian female students holds. While I do want all students to participate in my course in various forms, I need to pay careful attention to discussion dynamics to make sure some voices aren’t being overly privileged or overly silenced, giving special priority to undoing the inequalities of the status quo. This practice may not always feel safe and comfortable for those who are used to privilege, and it may also not feel safe and comfortable for those afforded with less privilege who may have to continue to face the hegemonic opinions of their more privileged peers.

Another critique of the term safe space is that it can actually promote the opposite of what feminist pedagogues are attempting to accomplish regarding critical thinking. Educational scholar Robert Boostrom supports this and argues that, “When everyone’s voice is accepted, and no one’s voice can be criticized, then no one can grow... That we need to hear other voices in order to grow is certainly true, but we also need to be able respond to those voices, to criticize them, to challenge them, to sharpen our own perspectives through the friction of dialogue.”⁹ Teachers who declare that their classrooms are safe spaces may be unintentionally sending the wrong message because students may easily mistake a safe space as a harmonious space that discourages any kind of conflict. Feminist pedagogue bell hooks explains how “The pressure to maintain a non-combative atmosphere, however, one in which everyone can feel safe, can actually work to silence discussion and/or completely eradicate the possibility of dialectical exchange.”¹⁰ Many students are already afraid of confrontation, and to declare a course a safe space may only reinforce this fear.

This issue is relevant to my own teaching. Within the context of my own feminist and queer composition pedagogy, I incorporated a text that includes feminist and queer issues by a transgender author, and students



were required to discuss this text and write reflective and interpretive essays on it. Before delving into this, I prepared my students by explaining that this text includes some controversial issues, and that I expected my students to discuss it in a respectful manner. I was at first surprised that students seemed to be accepting of the text in class discussions; however, there were a couple of students who wrote offensive comments about LGBT people in their writing assignments. All of my students were required to share an idea from their writing assignments in class, but these students chose not to share specific ideas in order to not offend other students, which was also implied in their written work. While I respect their consideration, I have to wonder if my respectful space precedent discouraged potentially productive moments of dialogue.

What are Alternatives to this Term?

As the term “safe space” proves to be problematic, what are some alternative terms that are more accurate for feminist learning conditions? Several scholars offer alternative terms, but I critique where they fall short of a feminist pedagogy that promotes critical thinking, dialogue, and conflict in productive ways.

I return to Ludlow as she calls “for an understanding of the classroom as an inherently ‘contested space’.”¹¹ She describes a “contested space” as “a space that is not necessarily defined by conflict, but which includes room for conflict.”¹² Including room for conflict is valuable, but the term “contested space” sounds intimidating and combative. This term may also evoke the connotation of a contest, which is not at all in line with the ideals of a feminist pedagogy. Few may feel comfortable in participating in such a contested space.

Barrett offers a different suggestion and argues for the term civility:

Classroom civility differs from the common conceptualization of classroom safety in that civility is primarily concerned with the exhibition of particular behaviours, whereas safety is primarily concerned with the presence or absence of certain psychological states (e.g., comfort) in the learning environment. While educators may not be able to directly observe, monitor, or enforce intrapersonal states, they can indeed observe, monitor, and enforce student behaviour in the classroom.¹³



As mentioned, learning may include elements of discomfort, and while teachers cannot guarantee a comfortable learning environment, by promoting civility, they can assure students “that they will not be subjected to certain behaviours on the part of their peers that threaten the social and physical integrity of the learning environment.”¹⁴ Barrett describes that the goal of a civil classroom is “to engage students as citizens of the space, and to encourage behaviour that promotes the collective good of that space.”¹⁵ Educators would need to enforce a code of conduct consistent with civility and model civility in their own interactions with students.¹⁶ Barrett’s idea is intriguing because she is realistic in what educators can expect from students based on a model that focuses on behavioral observations rather than psychological assumptions, and I appreciate that she values the collective good of a group. However, the term “civility” as an alternative is problematic because while teachers cannot control students’ psychological states, this doesn’t mean that emotion should all together be discouraged in speaking and writing, as emotion is often an inevitable part of these practices as well as a potentially productive part. A state of constant “civility” to me connotes a mannered politeness and cooperation that doesn’t leave much room for valuable emotion and productive conflict. The term also brings up questions and concerns of hegemonic forces of western civilization that do not coincide with contemporary feminist practices.

Holley and Steiner offer another alternative. After a thorough research project of analyzing student perspectives on safe spaces, these authors suggest that “Possibly the best that instructors and students can strive for is the creation of *safer* space. The process of the creation of safer space could begin with classroom conversations about what it means for students and instructors to feel safe, and the acknowledgment that given conflicting needs, complete safety for all may be unrealistic.”¹⁷ I appreciate this alternative because it’s realistic as it suggests that safety is not an absolute, but that “safer” is an attempt to make it more safe. However, I also question what “safer” connotes, as in, safer than what exactly? And is “safer” good enough for those who may endure unsafe conditions outside of the classroom every day? While it’s more realistic, this term feels like *too* much of a compromise for feminist learning conditions.

bell hooks suggests that we need to rethink notions of safety in the first place: “if we rather think of safety as knowing how to cope in situations of risk, then we open up the possibility that we can be safe even in situations where there is disagreement and even conflict.”¹⁸ hooks argues that trust should be the foundation of productive learning conditions: “trust must be cultivated in the classroom if there is to be open dialectical exchange and



positive dissent. It is helpful to explain to students from the start of a new class the importance of trust and the ways we link it to accountability. To trust means having confidence in one's own and another person's ability to take care, to be mindful of one another's well-being."¹⁹ Her definition of trust is intriguing. I was originally conflicted with her definition because while I try to be flexible and fair to all my students so they will trust me, I'm not sure I can honestly say I readily trust all my students or that they can trust each other after just a few weeks of classes. However, what I do find useful is hooks's concept of being mindful, as it does not promote censorship, but it instead promotes consideration. She further explains that choosing to be mindful requires "that we think carefully about what we say and how we say it, considering as well the impact of our words on fellow listeners."²⁰ Her emphasis on care and consideration also coincides with common connotations of mindfulness including attentiveness and awareness.

I include all of these connotations in my definition of mindfulness, but I propose the term "rhetorical mindfulness" to emphasize the attentiveness to rhetorical practices and to detach this practice from the often associated exercises of relaxation and meditation. While I still acknowledge the value of the latter connotation, I want to use the term rhetorical mindfulness to teach students how to be more aware of their rhetorical practices in discussions, writing assignments, and any other forms of communication. This includes being attentive listeners and readers as well as being careful with how the language we use can impact others as even simple words can easily be inspiring, hurtful, or influence a wide range of other responses. Being rhetorically mindful includes being aware of how we use language to construct our own identities, meanings, and realities. Language can open or narrow the way we perceive the world and project this meaning on ourselves and others in productive or harmful ways. Rhetorical mindfulness entails attempting to not only be a good listener but also trying our best to understand the perspectives of others in order to create productive dialogue and ideally mutual understanding and respect, which makes the practice an ethical way of thinking and acting. This practice is essential for being a thoughtful and informed citizen, and I argue that rhetorical mindfulness should be taught in all learning contexts, especially within a feminist pedagogy.

A feminist pedagogy founded on rhetorical mindfulness can help students carefully craft rhetoric, especially when grappling with sensitive or controversial issues in course content and discussions and when paying attention to affect and audience in their writing. Rhetorical mindfulness



encourages students to be honest and open instead of feeling censored, but it requires them to practice this in a way that holds them accountable for their rhetorical choices and the impact these choices can have on others. This term should be used and explained explicitly in the first weeks of learning, and students should be reminded continuously of its purpose and value. I'm concerned that students are often overly trained to focus on how to most persuasively prove their own point of view, often without consequence, and so the practice of rhetorical mindfulness will be a necessary but perhaps a new practice for many of them. Teachers and students need to be patient with each other while still holding each other accountable. Participants should learn how to practice rhetorical mindfulness in a way that takes care to teach others why their rhetorical choices are potentially problematic through an approach that minimizes making them feel attacked and ostracized while encouraging them to learn and grow. This practice is not focused on the elimination or policing of language, but rather the awareness and consideration of rhetoric and its effects inside and outside of the classroom.

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¹ Steiner, et al., “Safe Space,” 50.

² Ibid., 52.

³ Ibid.

⁴ Ibid., 50.

⁵ Henry, “There Are No Safe Places,” 4.

⁶ Barrett, “Is ‘Safety’ Dangerous?,” 3.

⁷ Kishimoto, et al., “Critiquing the Rhetoric of ‘Safety,’” 88-89.

⁸ Ludlow, “From Safe Space to Contested Space,” 45.

⁹ Boostrom, “‘Safe Spaces’: Reflection on an Educational Metaphor,” 407.

¹⁰ hooks, *Teaching Critical Thinking*, 86.

¹¹ Ludlow, “From Safe Space to Contested Space in the Feminist Classroom,” 47.

¹² Ibid.

¹³ Barrett, “Is ‘Safety’ Dangerous?,” 10.

¹⁴ Ibid.

¹⁵ Ibid.

¹⁶ Ibid.

¹⁷ Steiner, et al., “Safe Space,” 61.

¹⁸ hooks, *Teaching Critical Thinking*, 87.

¹⁹ Ibid.

²⁰ Ibid.



Writing: A Space to Survive? Virginia Woolf's Life and Work

Solenne Lestienne

“For most of history, anonymous was a woman”
—Virginia Woolf

Does the act of writing necessarily imply the act of being read? Does it make a critical junction between the being and the real, the ego and the other, “the interior life and the life of society”?¹ Is writing supposed to be automatically shared with a reader? May the cooperation of the interlocutor, as defined in *Lector in Fabula* by Umberto Eco, be put aside to privilege the author’s private interests? May writing be quintessentially a space of privacy and self-achievement, an ontological shelter, a place for a woman of the beginning of the twentieth century to survive through the personal transposition of her realm into words? May writing allow her to decipher more acutely her own identity and her true being, to fathom her complexity and to attain a useful reprieve? Is the world outside a perturbation plaguing creation as in *Between the Acts* when war menaces the pageant? Are internal and external spheres interlaced compulsorily or may writing remain a confined space, a soothing retreat?

Specifically, Woolf’s writing may be considered as self-reflexive. In her work, she always puts up with her own writing self, and more than once, she underlines that the act of creation was indispensable and aching at the same time. Being some kind of private affair, Woolf’s writing reaches its essential dimension as it mirrors her whole self, the broken and the unified, the “monolithic.”² And the motion of thoughts (the image of the waves encapsulates this constant movement), her voice and those of her fictional semblances. While coherence is conjured up despite breaches, perhaps thanks to them, the being is naked. Woolf tried so hard to recollect her being into one that *The Waves* in which six facets of the same personality are staged (even seven with Percival) sounds like a novel handling the intricacies of multiple identities: “a six-sided flower; made of six lives.”³

Virginia Woolf continually revolves around the question of identity; it may be marked by gender or by structural failings. She needed a space to clarify her relation to herself and to the world. According to Caramagno, writing was clearly a tutor. Gendering identity is of particular importance as in *Between the Acts* when women imagine lily pools while men are “separatists,”⁴ which promotes a dual conception of gender. This perception



is softened by the presence of androgyny in *Orlando* or in *The Waves* for instance.

Another central theme related to identity is Woolf's disease. Some of her characters like Jinny in *The Waves* are allegories of body communication and of a sensual approach to sexuality whereas the psychotic Rhoda (in *The Waves* too) sees the other's body as an intrusion. Psychosis consists in the shattering of the identical structure. Pierre Férida, quoting Karl Jaspers substantially, states that "les psychoses sont des 'processus' qui rompent le cours de la personnalité" (what I may translate as "Psychoses are 'processes'" which heavily hinder the development of one's personality."⁵ The idea of the association between gender and disability emerges.

Thus, the Woolfian space seems to be filled in not only with the emergency to create, the intense need to make her identity clear and sustainable but also with the question of the reception of Woolf's bold experimental choices. Indeed, the participation of a reader induces the possible adherence of someone else to Woolf's world, which is uneasy, in danger and which tries and evokes the gendering space, the question of otherness, that of war. The presence of a reader serves to legitimate Woolf's voice as a female author. About this relation, Woolf says: "Any method is right, every method is right, that expresses what we wish to express, if we are writers, that brings us closer to the novelist's intention, if we are readers."⁶ In this quotation, she mingles the role of the writer and that of the reader as parts of a totality. Woolf is therefore far from being remote from external speculations.

Writing *The Common Reader* and declaring in her diaries that she dedicated one part of her day to reading, Woolf is concerned with the binary movement made of gift and reception. The act of writing is for Woolf a manner to communicate with the other and with herself, sometimes painfully. This essay examines the path taken by a woman who was diseased and overwhelmed with the injustices of a formatted patriarchal system through her link to writing as a possible space of salvation.

My argument will consist in observing Woolf's relation to her art, to her space and to her possible ways out. Writing, as a gesture towards otherness, even though it might be intrusive and writing, as a sphere of inward tension, even though it might be sheltering, echo each other fundamentally. Grasping a "room" to gain a place as a woman, as a renowned author may have been an incentive.

These considerations filter through Woolf's work and life, coherently and



the complexity of her connection with creation is compounding. Writing was not only, as I said, a space of freedom implying liberating expression but also as a medium for Woolf to render her breaches in her own, personal, innovative way. She could choose the formal tools she wanted and invoke the themes dear to her like the exploration of the "unconscious soul."⁷ In the meantime, I shall endeavor to look into the moment when the artistic tension, which was so important all along her existence, broke into pieces as in *Between the Acts*, her ultimate novel, in which a disruptive instant occurs and which eventually foregrounds her fall, her suicide. Hence, to what extent was Woolf's involvement into writing a means to vanquish the dark side of her tormented life?

On a general scale, the link between the necessity to write and the fact of experiencing grueling events is often suggested in literature. Jorge Semprun wrote *L'écriture ou la vie*, for example, in which he mentions the impending need to express his experience in Buchenwald, in the camps. When Woolf requires "A Room of (her) own," a blistering pamphlet as it were, she lays emphasis on the urgency of holding a space to tell, to express her vindications and to postulate her right to have "a view of her own," to be an author.⁸

At this point, the cleavage between the "space out" and the "space within" (what Henry Michaux calls in French "l'espace du dedans") is to be examined. It echoes the phrase "being in the world," pronounced by Heidegger, which calls forth the equilibrium between the integration of the immediate world and the preservation of the private realm of the self. I wonder how far the influence of the world intrudes on the writer's space, above all when the writer is a woman, caught up in a patriarchal system.

Escaping confinement, Woolf herself mentions the interactions between her environment and her psyche. If "each sight or incident scores upon consciousness" as she declares, then there is no rupture between the being and the real, between the artist and the world. Therefore, the psychic space is not locked up, circumscribed, but all open.⁹ Woolf's writing becomes a genuine aperture overlooking the world around and it provides the example of a lettered lady embracing her liberty and destabilizing previous patterns. She redefined the classical narrative rules in order to deal with the fiction of the consciousness. The notion of aperture recalls the incipit of *Mrs. Dalloway* when the window opens *in medias res* upon a new day. Woolf took part in the life happening around; she was on the side of life. Her fragile mental health was not paramount to autism but rather to composing with the profound contradictions that her high consciousness gave her to



consider. She “[struggled] to develop an adult identity.”¹⁰

The gap between the self and the world may remind one of Michaux, a famous French poet who said to be interested but in the life-taking place in the mind. Contrary to him, Woolf displayed her interest in the external sphere from which she drew a part of her inspiration. The depiction of urban life is to be found in *Mrs. Dalloway*; war is at the core of *Between the Acts*, of *Jacob's Room* for instance; Woolf's *The Common Reader* comments on works by previous authors, like Jane Austen, another feminist artist. Still, a flurry of impediments fragments Woolf's way towards unification as a writer and as a woman. Being both internally and externally threatened, a frail thread underlies Virginia's life and work. The equilibrium is in abeyance, often on the brink to break, often dolesome.

If I refer to John Vernon's analysis of schizophrenia (I mention schizophrenia in the general acceptance of “psychosis”), the type of society in which the diseased being evolves may be more or less alienating. Western society, as it organizes time strictly, as it imposes objective gridlines and arbitrary divisions of space, tends to amplify symptoms by making identical landmarks stifling. The rigidity of the structure, which Vernon assimilates to a map, dangerously frames up the mind of the psychotic who is more sensitive to a world of fantasy, what Vernon names “the garden”. The space, which is over structured and overdetermined, prevents the schizophrenic from expressing its “subjectivities” and impacts on its “small area of property.”¹¹ A gagging effect comes out.

Woolf was born in a space of violence – characterized by war and patriarchy and by the numerous deaths which happened around her - and strong injustice. Being sexually abused by her half-brothers, being condemned to stay at home while Thoby, her dearest brother, was allowed to go and study in Cambridge, attending her mother's exhaustion and her too early death, Woolf was confronted with an intricate web of interactions between her environment and her being-to-be. Her spirits were ragged. She had split moods and her scattered mind underwent disruption as when she heard voices, thus multiplying the information sources and giving the illusion that several heads hosted in her psyche. Her ambivalence and duplicity gave the sentiment that she was multifaceted, intensely plural, standing at the crossroads of every ambiguity. Alexandra Lemasson, in *Virginia Woolf*, stresses Woolf's deep dichotomies that might account for the impossible redemption, for the lack of significant oneness to which Woolf was looking forward nonetheless. She loved parties; yet she aimed at being alone. She loved the town; still she could only feel well in the countryside. She was fond



of writing; however, she was devastated by anguish and depression when she had to conclude a project. Her psyche was essentially disjunctive. Her diseased space encountered her feminist space.

According to Elizabeth Abel, the private sphere of the female mind may be associated with a womb, what she calls a *mind-as-womb*¹². If the “society is “a father,”¹³ “the site of textual production is figuratively the womb.”¹⁴ Woolf, in the womb of writing and creation, may have experienced the protection of a cocoon which nourished “her islands of security.”¹⁵ Writing, from this point of view, is clearly a way to survive chaos.

This leads me to mention another private space with which Woolf had to put up genuinely. Julia, her beloved mother, was domestically perfect. Yet, Leslie, her husband, was so demanding that “the angel in the house,” Julia, got totally exhausted and parched up. Being at grips with the injustice that doomed her mother to death, Woolf required another sort of private space, a space that would allow her to become an author. She could not repeat her mother’s story. She was not imitating; she was searching. In this way, Woolf acquitted the right to escape the shackles of the household duty to embrace a world of freedom and she was in quest of a significant place. She wanted to transform her intimate territory into a status, a social place in which she could reach fulfillment and acknowledgment. Through details, metonymies, violent hesitations, schizophrenic style, and deconstruction in syntax, Woolf communicated her world through “rhythm in prose.”¹⁶ With the proper link between “intellectual” and “intimate,”¹⁷ between vision and emotion, between dream and fact, between disruption and creation, she found a voice.

The question of possession is now aroused. In *To the Lighthouse*, mostly autobiographical, Mrs. Ramsay, Julia’s fictional twin, is described as a domestic angel sacrificing herself. Woolf’s will to possess a “room” to write may be seen as the replacement of her mother’s enslaved space by her space of authorship and personal development.

Woolf’s acquisition of a “room” recalls her profound desire to possess a means to edit her own works and, more globally, those which she found interesting. With the Hogarth Press, her dream came true; she was at last utterly free to select and publish every piece of work she esteemed. Becoming an editor, a prolific author capable of tackling a multiplicity of genres, ranging from essays, novels, diaries to letters, Woolf got a space of her own, but she also conquered a place of her own.

Still, all these achievements—these brilliantly filled-in spaces—could not



lead Woolf to an epiphany. Crises often took place. Her inward “voyage” and her personal adventure were so sore that she ended in relinquishing her voice and the acquisition of her aura as a writer by drowning herself. She premeditated her suicide, leaving a well-thought farewell letter to her husband, gratifying his help and his care.

The question of preserving the private realm of the psyche by fleeing the ominous world is complex and rather puzzling.

On the one hand, if the mind retreats from the world, thus working out on its own, obsessions and hallucinations are enclosed in a prison-like space, a space which cannot import alleviating solutions from the outside. The individual consciousness is therefore utterly isolated as in autism. An example of this is conferred by Baudelaire’s short story “La Monomanie de Mademoiselle Bistouri,” in which a woman lives in a made-up sphere which she fills in with doctors; hence her fantasies permeate her mental process and any link with the outside is prohibited. If the outward world may be seen as hostile, it remains an aperture, a window, a well of alternatives.

On the other hand, the mental space is the propriety of the self, is its own “room” to exist, to think, and to shelter. May the psyche “re-create (...)”¹⁸ its space of freedom and imagination if it remains locked up? Although Virginia Woolf was subject to doubts and seesaw movements affecting her personality, to vacillations and collapses sometimes, she connected her interiority with exteriority, boldly. In *Mrs. Dalloway*, she stages Clarissa whose daydreams are intertwined with Septimus's trauma about war. In any case, the stream-of-consciousness genre allows different layers to cohabit. The narrative is enriched with the perpetual shift of thoughts and impressions and with the emergence of jolts and breakages. Bridges are sketched. “The fragment before us”¹⁹ is integrated into a fictional space which is grounded on well-established, though innovatory, codes and which is maintained by a coherent, durable “thread.”²⁰ So, trespassing “experimentalism”²¹ by founding meaningful relations between internal feelings and global questions, Woolf is at the same time an explorer of the inside and an acute observer of the outside. Tending towards a complete vision, Woolf’s works are nurtured by miscellaneous perceptions and by the peculiar awareness she had of her illness; she tamed this invading disease, thus echoing Jean-Luc Nancy’s “L’Intrus,” in which the philosopher looks into managing with the intrusion of a heart graft. In parallel, Woolf had to face a myriad of parameters. In her life, she was overwhelmed with split interactions which she tried and transcribed into her fiction, both “solid” (“Solid Objects”) and intensely ethereal, vaporous.



The reality for a schizophrenic is binary: first, the European society, which is founded on rational rules and strict decorum, is susceptible to divide the self, its freedom and its integrity. Jung speaks of “dark penumbra” when he invokes the restriction of the world to the only objectivity of the real. Secondly, as in Woolf’s case, psychosis alters the psychic sphere by shaking the unity of the self. There are voids and gaps.

Being the first to publish Freud’s works, Woolf “gulped [them] up,” as recalled by the lecture on Virginia Woolf held by Stella Harrison. As a new device to express or to contain the delicate motion of thoughts, writing is possibly comparable to enunciating words, verbally. It takes on a psychoanalytical function, becoming a useful frame to make up for symptoms. As a tool of auto-analysis that symbolically compensates for the obstruction of identity or its deferral, what Derrida calls “differance,” writing is an optimistic option. The collective on Woolf emphasizes the refuge that writing represented for Woolf and the importance of words to jugulate erratic invasions, popping up memories, and unbearable anguish. Since storytelling turns out to be an act of circumscription—of identification—suffering is suddenly nameable. That is how, in *The Waves*, Bernard, the faithful storyteller, the inventor of threads, finds out a way to alleviate his mates’ interrogations. His words create salutary links and eventually, found a protected sphere all tinted with smoothed attention. There is a “ring,” a “globe.”²²

The writing realm is a solution, partly. Hinting at Hegel, this solution gives a place to “individuality” which he defines as one’s own world, a space for oneself, a living place. Benveniste’s phrase “subjectivity in language”²³ also implies the unveiling of the ego whose “subjective life”²⁴ trespasses the grinding objectivity of the world. Catching voices, catching silence, catching momentums, as if they were atoms in the Epicurean way, Woolf sought for the sincerest and uncompromising representation of life, neglecting prettiness and pre-established patterns; she wanted to be true. Her space is that of a private, genuine vision hued with femininity and sweet imagery as well as with violence. In Harrison’s lecture, the idea that it is exactly what fails, what skirts in *Between the Acts* is uttered. Being confronted with this new artistic attempt, Woolf, who was a creator of moments-of-being and of sequences, reached the end of her adventure with writing. It did not maintain herself whole anymore. Her writing vanished like Bernard’s, in *The Waves*, when his voice gets dissolved into water.

So what are the exact limits of the act of writing? Being whirled asunder,



Woolf's space was filled in with fissures. In *Between the Acts*, "scraps and fragments"²⁵ are a leitmotiv. In *The Waves*, Woolf's play poem, the "structure" is barely "visible."²⁶ The "territory of non-identity" is "sunless"²⁷ since "I am not one and simple, but complex and many."²⁸ The wholeness of the ego's sphere is crushed down by a "plethora of perceptions"²⁹ which makes problematic the sentiment of being one.

Since Lacan refers to "I" as "somebody else," Woolf does not only interrogate her voice but also voices. Fundamentally, she treats of deep suffering, of the intimate life inside the psyche, and of the impossibility to survive. Ambiguity shows through her work and the hermeneutics of her art cannot ignore the bipolar system into which she was involved: she was depressed or euphoric; she was greedy or anorexic; she was hilarious or downhearted.

Even if Rhoda, the schizophrenic from *The Waves*, experiences a wonderful moment when listening to music and if there is an achieved experience of vision, there is, in *Between the Acts*, as said above, an ineluctable rupture, a loss which encounters the limits of the use of words for Woolf (See Harrison). If the writing space is useful, then it is not sufficient to make up for Woolf's dolorous being.

have wished to enlighten the coexistence between the astonishing possibilities of freedom and of fulfilling experimentation that writing offers, therefore creating a relevant space for a reprieve, and the unfamiliar, acerbic space (the world and the self itself, the another "I") which shatters sometimes the positive outcome of writing. Tensions and oppositions, crucial negotiations, also nest in the gendering sphere, which causes feminist insights to emerge. Woolf seems to have replaced the narrowness of the domestic space which was lethal to her mother by the openness of her writing which allowed a space outside the household to exist.

Whereas Michaux is paradigmatic of the uncompromising gap between personal creation and the hostility of the world, in such a way as even the imaginary process is regarded as a source of anxiety, Woolf was well anchored in the life around her. Being a convinced feminist, being a pacifist, being an experimental searcher of new forms, she was far from being enclosed; in many ways, she was on the side of life, on the "territory" of unity, of vision and of sequences. She tried and reconciled contradictions through writing and she fought against her disease, being helped by Leonard who dedicated his whole life to healing her. The idea of a role reversal may flirt with irony. Leonard, as the representation of masculinity



obeys Woolf's needs and puts them forward. Woolf's illness was compensated for by this control over psychic fragmentation. As underlined by Caramagno, her works were resorted to in order to dramatize her fight.

Like Nash, the genial schizophrenic mathematician, Woolf strove to sort out her identical ill-being, as shown in *The Waves* which wavers from "suffer(ing)"³⁰ to "joy,"³¹ from "despair"³² to "love."³³ The language, in such a context, as a trace of Woolf's effort to make "the floating"³⁴ attached, may provide links between spaces. Woolf was herself in-between the acts. Whereas traditional novels are strictly structured, imposing a framed conception of writing, Woolf, rather uncomfortably, endangered herself by taking a deep plunge into telling the impossible, the unspeakable, the rough nature of a representation devoid of clear-cut bearings; preserving her space, her sincerity, her questionings, she was true to her creative self and to her feminist involvement. She was extravagant; etymologically she went beyond beaten tracks. At a time psychoanalysis was just born, she fathomed new spaces, thence "announc(ing) new beginnings"³⁵ and opening a new path in literary and cultural fields.

While, in Lacan's view, the real, the symbolic and the imagery, are all intertwined and united in a sane person, the conciliation between the three instances lacks in the psychotic. The latter's space is segmented, truncated and plagued with dislocation. Woolf needed schizophrenic devices to solve tensions and she needed tricks to maintain a cohering thread. In *The Waves*, for instance, the presence of the interludes reveals the containing frame which Woolf establishes to keep disruption under control. Yet, in Woolf's life, "symmetry" was turned "to nonsense."³⁶

No answer could apparently be found to the following fundamental questions: "But how describe the world seen without a self? (...) How describe or say anything in articulate words again?"³⁷

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- ¹ Zwerdling, *Virginia Woolf and the Real World*, 5.
² Woolf, *The Waves*, 61.
³ *Ibid.*, 175.
⁴ Woolf, *Between the Acts*, 72.
⁵ Férida, “Psychose,” 407.
⁶ Woolf, “Modern Fiction,” 152.
⁷ Little, *The Experimental Self*, 59.
⁸ Snaith, “Trespassing Boundaries,” 11.
⁹ Woolf, “Modern Fiction,” 150.
¹⁰ Raitt, “Finding a Voice,” 34.
¹¹ Vernon, *Garden and the Map*, 39.
¹² Abel, *Virginia Woolf and the Fictions of Psychoanalysis*, 87.
¹³ *Ibid.*, 108.
¹⁴ *Ibid.*, 87.
¹⁵ Woolf, *Between the Acts*, 121.
¹⁶ Whitworth, “Virginia Woolf and Modernism,” 148.
¹⁷ *Ibid.*, 148.
¹⁸ Woolf, *Between the Acts*, 92.
¹⁹ Woolf, “Modern Fiction,” 151.
²⁰ Woolf, *Between the Acts*, 115.
²¹ Reynier, “The Obstinate Resistance.”
²² Woolf, *The Waves*, 5.
²³ Benveniste (qtd. in Genette’s *Figures III*), 226.
²⁴ Oates-Smith, “Henry James and Virginia Woolf,” 119.
²⁵ Woolf, *Between the Acts*, 26.
²⁶ Woolf, *The Waves*, 123.
²⁷ *Ibid.*, 87.
²⁸ *Ibid.*, 56.
²⁹ Warner, *Virginia Woolf: The Waves*, 58.
³⁰ Woolf, *The Waves*, 186.
³¹ *Ibid.*, 60.
³² *Ibid.*, 69.
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³⁴ *Ibid.*, 57.
³⁵ Raitt, “Finding a Voice,” 29.
³⁶ Woolf, *The Waves*, 187.
³⁷ *Ibid.*, 221.