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"She believes she is herself, which isn't complete madness:" Becoming the Female Subject through Womanhood as Relation

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“She believes she is herself, which isn’t complete madness:” Becoming the Female Subject through
Womanhood as Relation

Senior Project Submitted to
The Division of Languages and Literature

by
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Annandale-on-Hudson, New York
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Table of Contents

Impasse Inhabitation.....	1
Incidental Poetics.....	10
Incidental Poem One: Excerpts from <i>A Palace of Pearls</i> by Jane Miller.....	13
Incidental Poem Two: Excerpt from <i>To Be in a Time of War</i> by Etel Adnan.....	18
Incidental Poem Three: “Chinese Space” by Mei-Mei Berssenbrugge.....	20
Incidental Poem Four: “What We Mean” by Rae Armantrout.....	25
Incidental Poem Five: Excerpts from <i>Don’t Let Me Be Lonely</i> by Claudia Rankine.....	30
Synthetic.....	37
Works Cited.....	45

“DUALISM: Pythagoras said that all things were divisible into two genera, good and evil; in the genus of good things he classified all perfect things such as light, males, repose, and so forth, whereas in the genus of evil he classified darkness, females, and so forth’

(Thomas Aquinas, ‘On the Power of Good,’ p.84)

Promethean aspiration: To be a woman and a Pythagorean. What *is* the communal vision of poetry if you are curved, odd, indefinite, irregular, feminine. ... First I find myself a Slave, next I understand my slavery, finally I re-discover myself at liberty inside the confines of known necessity. Gun goes on thinking of the violence done to meaning. Gun watches herself watching.”

- from *My Emily Dickinson* by Susan Howe

“She knew well enough the vast cold apparatus of civilization, and what contact with it meant; and how difficult it was to evade.”

- from “Sun” by D.H. Lawrence

“I am an instrument in the shape / of a woman trying to translate pulsations / into images for the relief of the body / and the reconstruction of the mind.”

- from “Planetarium” by Adrienne Rich

Impasse Inhabitation

In 1949 Simone de Beauvoir asked the woman question. The answer she came to—the question, of course: what on earth is a woman?—was that the category of woman denoted a permanent cultural Other, always constituted in reference to the permanent cultural Absolute, man. The Garden of Eden need not be re-spun into a feminist vindication of the snake because it already tells a cultural truth: an all powerful masculine force makes man in its image, gives him an integrated, unique self-hood, and then draws Eve out of a piece of him. As if Adam had the complexity to imply Eve.

Unfortunately, that all powerful masculine force, commonly known as patriarchy, convinced Eve, herself, otherwise. Why, Beauvoir asks, does woman, whose subjective experience is, of course, her own, and who possesses an Absolute self-hood, exist as Other not only in the external political and social realms but, too, in her own head? Why does the female subject conceive, experience, even posture itself as object? She writes,

The man who sets the woman up as an *Other* will thus find her in a deep complicity. Hence woman makes no claim for herself as subject because she lacks the concrete means, because she senses the necessary link connecting her to man without positing its reciprocity, and because she often derives satisfaction from her role as *Other* (Beauvoir, 30).

Acceding to womanhood (the conceiving, experiencing, and posturing of self as Other) confers access to feminist anthropologist Gayle Rubin's concept of the symbolic phallus. Reading back into Freud in "The Traffic in Women," Rubin reframes the embattled Oedipal crisis as a phenomenon of cultural conditioning working within a societal kinship system in which the symbol of the phallus entails the dominance of men over women. Possessing the phallus is how one holds power in this system; if they wish to be part of society, women, unable to possess the phallus, must access it through a male intermediary. Women become complicit in cultivating and maintaining Beauvoir's "necessary link" with men when "[they] accede to the place of a woman in a phallic exchange network. She can 'get' the phallus—in intercourse, or as a [male] child—but only as a gift

from a man” (Rubin, 195). Beauvoir frames the same concept—woman’s establishment in the “phallic exchange network,” or, society, through men—as a claiming of “the advantages an alliance with the superior caste confers on them” (30). In each construction, woman is complicit in her Otherness at the behest of the carrot and stick (or, perhaps, the positive and negative phallus): through the threat of exclusion from or demotion in society and through the possibility of ascension in it.

The stakes, then, of Othering oneself—that is, participating in womanhood, or not—are quite high. Thus—not wanting to die—I put on a dress. Contemporary feminism loves to proclaim that women practice femininity for themselves and not for men. In the sense that practicing it provides a foothold in phallic culture, I suppose I wear the dress for myself, for my survival both material and psychic. But it would be self-deception to say I don’t do it for men, that the choice to wear clothes I can’t run and dance in is natural, authentic, untouched by patriarchal intervention. The self that I am was hijacked a long time ago and even though she’s smart and she knows that someone messed with the code, the algorithm is the algorithm. I put on a dress. I like to put on a dress. I look pretty. I survive.



Beauvoir elaborates on woman’s Othered status, “[Woman] is defined and differentiated with reference to man not he with reference to her; she is the incidental, the inessential as opposed to the essential. He is the Subject, he is the Absolute—she is the Other” (16). To be a woman, then, is to exist in a state of permanent alterity. Man is able to live his subjectivity as its subject and takes woman as object, while woman is conditioned in such a way that she loses claim to the subject role of her own subjectivity and objectifies herself. The figure of the prostituted woman, who is doubly Othered, can act as a paradigm for understanding the production of female alterity generally. Langston Hughes’ treatment of the prostituted woman in his poem, “To a Little Lover-Lass, Dead,”

from his 1926 collection *The Weary Blues* enacts the inevitability of woman's alterity given culturally conditioned male and female subjectivities.

"To a Little Lover-Lass, Dead," describes a prostitute who has died and who, even in death, cannot escape the condition of female alterity. Hughes consistently constructs her in relation to men and culturally defined forms of womanhood, thus limiting either the possibility of, or the reader's access to, her authentic subjectivity. The line break after the first word of the poem, "She," neatly establishes womanhood as intrinsically Othered, at a remove, for the word itself becomes a thought; "She," that is, a woman not here, symbolized by proxy. The sentence continues, "She / Who searched for lovers / In the night" (Hughes, 13, 1-3) as the speaker once again constructs her relationally, this time explicitly in relation to men. (This is the same experience of the title where our very first reference to her is as a "Lover-Lass." The hyphenation makes the bond between the "Lover" and "Lass" intractable, as well as essential to her condition, though not to his. It is the "Lover" that comes first and acts upon the "Lass.") The speaker describes her passing into death and follows up with a description of her new condition: "Now like a little lonely waif / She walks" (Hughes, 13, 8-9). Once again she is described relationally, though here she is positioned against a form of womanhood, rather than against a lover, manhood. The effect remains consistent with Beauvoir's construction, for the woman is still deprived of a subjectivity of her own. The speaker maps this prefab womanhood—the delicate, unattached waif—onto her, not even giving her full purchase on it; she is not "a little lonely waif," but only like one.¹ With three lines left in the

¹ French feminist philosopher Luce Irigaray accounts for this comparative structure in her writing on women as commodities: "In order to have a *relative value*, a commodity has to be confronted with another commodity that serves as its equivalent. Its value is never found to lie within itself. . . . Its value is *transcendent* to itself. . . . The likeness here is only a measure expressing the *fabricated* character of the commodity, its transformation by man's (social, symbolic) 'labor'" (Irigaray, 176-7). In this case, the "little lonely waif" is the strain of female "fabricated character" that constitutes the woman in the poem's value, or objectified selfhood, or commodity status. Additionally, the three kinds of social commodity status' that Irigaray lays out for women are the virgin, mother, and, relevantly, the prostitute. Each of these roles represents a certain quality of relation among men; in the case of the prostitute, she is "*usage* [or use value] *that is exchanged*" among men (Irigaray, 186). Where the virgin is pure exchange value and the mother is pure use value, the prostitute occupies both of these roles, hence her doubly Othered status.

poem, she is still an empty space defined by adjacency and proxy and lacking affirmed internal qualities.

The final lines of the poem, which entail the final act of othering, ask both the lover-lass' and speaker's role in her lack of subjectivity, as well as calling attention to the speaker's relationship to her. Hughes writes, "She walks / An endless street / And gives her kiss to nothingness. / Would God his lips were sweet!" (13, 9-12). The giving of the kiss is the most active verb associated with her in the poem ("She / who searches," "She / ... has gone," "She walks"), yet even in her strongest moment of subjecthood, right at the border between life and death where one might imagine the possibility for disruption of her previous state, she fulfills a classic act of prescribed womanhood: to give, and, in particular, to give sexually. As a prostitute this was her public mode of engagement; even in the privacy of death she still only moves in the public mode she did in life. If the poem ended at "nothingness" this moment might allow the possibility of a reclamation of the self, one forced by the disjunction between her public mode and the intrinsic privacy of death: "[she] gives her kiss to nothingness," or, "she does not give her kiss." The choice of "nothingness" over "nothing" is the first interruption to this possibility, for the former is more material, a quality, while the latter is conceptual. The materiality of "nothingness" primes it to become the deathly absolute she is Other to and the speaker crystallizes this by gendering (male) and anthropomorphizing nothingness. Why does he do this?

To answer this we turn to the relationship between the speaker and lover-lass and note a certain tenderness in his treatment of her. The descriptor "little" and the euphemizing of her death as "[going] the quiet way" (Hughes, 13, 4) impart this sense. The center of this effect, however, seems to be the first word of the title—"To"—which, while easy to overlook is, in fact, the premise of the poem: it's directed toward the woman. This bolsters a sense of intimacy between her and the speaker in its evocation of letter writing or, specifically, love letters, and we see this subtle intimacy again in the last line as the speaker centers on a very nuanced element of the woman's subjective

experience, the taste of another's lips, suggesting that attempting to discern her side of a sexual experience may be a mode of thought he has engaged in previously. In this way the possibility that he was her lover emerges.

A number of implications follow from this. For one, we see the speaker opening space for consideration of her experience, or the possibility of her subjectivity, both implicitly and explicitly. The premise of address entails this in that the poem is directed toward her which allows her a level of personhood she doesn't have otherwise: to write something to someone presumes they have a subjectivity with which to apprehend it. The concern with her side of a sexual experience in one respect does the same, but the coincidence of that moment with the gendering and anthropomorphizing of death, or the establishment of her new male absolute, complicates things. The exclamative nature of that line as compared to the descriptive nature of the rest of the poem seems to, in fact, center the speaker's subjectivity in the way that exclamation serves an impulsive need to externalize one's internal state. Even in wishing her well, the speaker cannot escape the pull of his (male) subjectivity and ends up perpetrating it on her, dooming her to an eternity of alterity. As the last line of the poem it centers maleness both in the exclamative property and the content of the line. The speaker's particular maleness also comes into question; we can read him as her lover and perceive a certain tenderness in his treatment of her but, given the circumstances of her life, reading him as one of those lovers *in the night* is perhaps more correct. This seems increasingly possible in consideration of the remove at which he describes her, as well as the particulars of the information he has about her. All we know, and so all we know he knows, is that she was a prostitute and that she has died, knowledge a previous sexual solicitor would jump to more characteristically than that which a lover would.

The particular character of the speaker's maleness is not, however, what is ultimately at stake, but instead the relation between a paradigmatic womanhood and manhood.² The juxtaposition of

² Whatever variety of expressions womanhood and manhood take on they are still a center and a periphery.

the premise of address against the relentlessly othering poem entails a recognition of the alterity of womanhood, and in particular, prostituted womanhood. Whether this awareness resides in active, if flawed, intervention and consideration on the part of a lover, or blind enactment on the part of a solicitor, both the male and female subjectivities (or lack thereof) propel the woman further into alterity by nature of their construction.

The absolute evacuation of the prostitute's subjectivity of course functions on a symbolic level just as her double alterity acts as the symbol for a general female alterity. It is not that women do not have a subjectivity—each individual woman is literally the subject of her own life and experiences it from the subject position—but that that subjectivity conceptualizes itself as object. Beauvoir writes that “Women’s drama” is in the conflict between these two psychic phenomena; that is, between “the fundamental claim of every subject, which always posits itself as essential, and the demands of a situation that constitutes her as inessential” (37) to herself and to others. “To a Little Lover-Lass Dead” enacts and dramatizes those demands and their consequences.



Beauvoir’s foundational analysis would plant many of the seeds for the the second wave of feminism, or the Women’s Liberation Movement, which was at its height during the 1960s and 70s and which launched a thousand radical feminist theorists. Women met in consciousness raising groups to discuss the sufferings of their lives and soon found that the personal was political, that all their many embarrassments and pains and failures and wounds did not belong to them but to a malicious, predatory patriarchal system stretching back to the beginning of human history. The discipline of Women’s Studies was born and women turned patriarchy’s analytic, probing, invasive lens against itself, undertaking for the first time a systemic, collective account of the burdens women had shouldered individually for centuries.

My feminist consciousness was raised slowly and then all at once when I was a junior in high school. I’d always called myself a feminist but it wasn’t until a friend introduced me to radical

feminist theory—the product of that same 70s tide—that I learned what that meant, or what it could mean. I knew I was hitting on something large when I came across a Margaret Atwood quote that made the stakes that I'd only been able to conceptualize abstractly at that point feel quite immediate. Atwood writes,

Male fantasies, male fantasies, is everything run by male fantasies? Up on a pedestal or down on your knees, it's all a male fantasy: that you're strong enough to take what they dish out, or else too weak to do anything about it. Even pretending you aren't catering to male fantasies is a male fantasy: pretending you're unseen, pretending you have a life of your own, that you can wash your feet and comb your hair unconscious of the ever-present watcher peering through the keyhole, peering through the keyhole in your own head, if nowhere else. You are a woman with a man inside watching a woman. You are your own voyeur (433-4)

In my experience disseminating this quote to any woman who will listen, it resonates painfully and immediately simply because of how correct it is. The feminist implications are secondary to the way you feel like Atwood has just done anthropology inside your particular head. When I moved past that initial shock and began to try to draw a feminist program out of it, I read it through the filter of the culturally popular liberal feminism I was mostly aware of at the time and that has been displacing radical feminism nearly since its genesis. This is the feminism that would argue my choice to wear a dress is feminist simply because I chose it. “You can't win!” this feminism would use this quote to argue; “it's all a male fantasy,” so just do what makes you happy. As Beauvoir's and Rubin's analyses evidence, however, and Hughes' poem renders, the patriarchal trappings of that choice are the reasons it makes me happy and they are so deeply engrained in my selfhood as to constitute it. What makes me happy is to a certain extent (and a deeper one than many women are willing to admit to themselves) what makes the patriarchy happy. I am an agent of my own oppression—I am my “own voyeur”—and of other women's, even if only by example: womanhood is a social disease. As a feminist, I'm not content to let agents of women's oppression roam free, so I'd like to kill the man inside. Or, more accurately, I'd like to kill my own womanhood, which is only constituted by or does not exist except in the capacity of reaction to the man inside. In my feminist vision, women drag the entrails of womanhood (and concomitantly, manhood) through the streets.

“Feminism is a suicide pact”
 “explain”
 “We kill Woman”
 - Text messages exchanged June 2018



My consciousness is raised more every day as I catch echoes of the patriarchy and of patriarchal conditioning in all the marrow of the world—my own, obviously, included. At the same time, I cannot abdicate from this infected world. The radicalized woman’s experience is fundamentally one of dissonance. She exists simultaneously along two metrics of truth: a righteous, feminist metric that exposes violent patriarchal power dynamics in the material and conceptual functionings of society; and the status-conferring, phallic culture’s metric which has immediate material and psychic implications for her life. The radicalized woman is suspended between these two metrics, unable to deny the purchase either of them has on her and all of our realities.

In this state of suspension, paralysis, I take ten selfies. The best one—the prettiest and most simultaneously alluring and withholding—I post and caption “All men are pigs.” I check my notifications obsessively until the tall, arrogant boy likes it. I revel in feminism—its art and language and academia and culture—in the same breath that I imagine myself through the eyes of men, reveling. I revel, paralyzed. I revel in place. I climb the lifeguard tower, transcending culture, “up on a pedestal” (Atwood). “Women / should be / pedestals / moving / pedestals / moving / to the / motions / of men” (Swenson, “Women”). I jump off the tower but I don’t fall and I don’t fly. It’s golden hour and it feels like the sun will always be in my eyes.

Whether this is true, whether I will always be caught between my feminist perceptions and patriarchal realities, to concede it, to acquiesce to the stringencies of the phallic culture metric even as my understanding of its inner workings grows, would be to abandon myself and so to abandon

feminism.³ The problem I now face is that, like Hughes' lover-lass, my authentic subjectivity, meaning who I would've been if not for patriarchy, doesn't exist. I don't know how to *not* acquiesce. Audre Lorde writes, "the master's tools will never dismantle the master's house" ("Master's Tools," 2) and I, unfortunately, am both his tool and house. Attempts to think myself out of patriarchy through the problem-solving patterns and codes I have learned in my life will be insufficient because they themselves are built out of patriarchy. The master's house is kingdom come. If these prescriptive thought patterns are, on an internal level, what keep me in womanhood and what channel my attempts to subvert it back upon themselves, perhaps learning to engage around or within or in spite of prescription is one method of liberation. If I actively override the elements of female social conditioning that will respond to brute force—teach myself how to stop performing feminine aesthetics, refuse to do emotional labor for men, etc.—and cultivate a certain free-flowing, anti-prescriptive practice that seeks to move a little more adeptly, and a little more accurately, than patriarchal thought patterns can, maybe I can concurrently account for and dismantle the more insidious, invisible elements of conditioned womanhood, too. Who I, and all women, would've been if not for patriarchy doesn't exist and never will, but who we could be in spite of it—perhaps—has a fighting chance.



³ I feel a responsibility to the women around me to make it easier for them to disobey patriarchy by disobeying it myself. Every time I'm a bitch or I don't shave or I prioritize women over men I make it easier for them to do those things too. As womanhood is a social disease, liberation is a social medicine.

Incidental Poetics

Poetics is the native world of anti-prescriptive thinking. It can be made to respond to or act through prescriptive models in both its writing and analysis: you can write in meter and use unique and evocative but accessible metaphors and someone else can read your poem through theory and metrical analysis and lyrical analysis and investigate etymology and take it literally—or not, as it demands—and read it well. And then I can take your poem and I can truly fuck it up. I can make it resonant with the way I brushed my teeth this morning. I can ignore every other word. I won't do those things without cause—some might, but I pledge that I won't—but I'll do them *for* cause more precise and enlightening and adept than any prescribed model can offer.

I struggled for much of the course of this project to allow myself to read in the anti-prescriptive attitude that poetry asks of its reader and that I'm capable of. Feminist theory overdetermined my readings of poems that I could've read for their play with language, or their resonance with how I brushed my teeth (my reading of Hughes is an example of prescriptively reading a poem through feminism, but the anti-prescriptive mode means knowing when to use determination, too). The way that womanhood and patriarchy are totalizing systems, similarly my knowledge of feminist theory became totalizing; thus, breaking totalizing thought patterns became both the theoretical and functional stakes of the project. In trying to find a way out of both of these systems I thought: what about a randomized poetics? An incidental poetics? Can I use an anti-prescriptive premise of poetics to, in one motion, write a liberated project and work toward a liberated womanhood?



On Sunday I cut open a pomegranate and spent 45 minutes mining it. I was wearing my new silk dress (danger and energy in every red pearl) and I felt antiquitous and special and primal and juice staining my hands which symbolically became blood. I'd say I felt like a regular Dionysian:

pomegranate drunkenness, murdering men with impunity. My peers could not touch me from the outpost of modernity they'd been exiled to.

Emerging from my hallowed, ancient, golden room and my silken, red reverie to discard the hollowed pomegranate skins, I was met with a brimming dorm trash can; at the very top, a dark red pomegranate skin. Because I can take criticism I laughed and felt I should write a poem.

In the case of having your individuality contested by old fruit, Emily Dickinson suggests: "Did you ever read one of her Poems backward, because the plunge from the front overturned you? I sometimes (often have, many times) have - A something overtakes the Mind" (Dickinson Electronic Archives). Having plunged, the trashed pomegranate overturned a pruned self-image.⁴ Reading that pruning backwards, rotting pomegranate-tinted glasses as my optic, not of choice, but of incident, indeed my Mind was overtaken. I giggled to myself and sent off a funny little tweet about the experience. I came away a better person.

I'd like to continue to come away a better person and I don't trust myself, as a worse person than I will be when I come away, to prescribe that path. *American Hybrid: A Norton Anthology of New Poetry* has on its cover a butterfly in lemon-lime, one wing rounded and yellow with brown dots along its edge, the other angular and green with a single red dot that reminds me of the Japanese flag. The lemonylimey insect brandishes an American flag. I have an affinity for poetry and butterflies so last year when I came upon this book on a library shelf I did not open it but I did bring it home.

There are, according to the blurb, more than seventy New American Poets represented in these pages, spanning an accumulated 508 pages of poetry and light biographical information. Like myself, *American Hybrid* seeks to undo or resist traditional ways of thinking poetry by taking account of a newly rhizomatic poetic culture in American literature where, as Cole Swensen writes in the book's introduction,

⁴ Poet Rae Armantrout writes, "There's no good segue back from Dickinson" (Electronic Poetry Center).

Some nodes may be extremely experimental, and some extremely conservative, but many of them are true intersections of these extremes, so that the previous adjectives—well-made, decorous, traditional, formal, and refined, as well as spontaneous, immediate, bardic, irrational, translogical, open-ended, and ambiguous—all still apply, but in new combinations (xxv).

American Hybrid is a Norton trying to un-Norton itself, or a canon trying to un-canon itself, just as I am a woman trying to un-woman herself. My un-program program, working within the pages of this un-Norton Norton, will be to generate approximately five random numbers between one and 508 and undertake an analysis of the five resulting poems. We will see who each of us is on the other side, in the future.



Rules of Incidental Poem Selection:

- i. I will use a random number generator ranging from 1-508.
- ii. I will select the first poem to begin on the corresponding page. If no poem begins on this page I will select the poem that appears on that page. If no poem appears on that page I will generate a new number.
- iii. If the number generated corresponds with a poem by a male poet I will generate again until it does not. This is my favorite rule.
- iv. I will generate as I go. This describes both a psychic state I am aiming for and a mechanical operation. I will not generate all of the page numbers in one sitting, but will go poem by poem.

Incidental Poem Number One: excerpt from *A Palace of Pearls* by Jane Miller

Generation Sequence:

page 274

page 275

I have already broken a rule, but I have broken it through perfect incident and I will not be rectifying the mistake. I almost feel like I haven't broken a rule and, instead, as if the universe has shifted by just a degree recently so as to syncopate my relationship with Jane Miller which up until this moment was nearly too correct. Yesterday I generated the number 274 and was greeted by Ms. Miller who fully endeared herself to me by line 13 of the Norton's first excerpt from *A Palace of Pearls*: "I can't remember enough I make shit up" (Miller, 275). Today I have opened the Norton to find that this text in fact begins on page 275 and page 274 is biography—I am directly in violation of Rule ii.

Here's the thing. I'm certain that yesterday this was not true. Little elves have changed things in the night but I don't answer to little elves. I can't remember enough I make shit up. Jane and I are already far too entangled to part ways now, not in the least because her poem makes mention of both Federico García Lorca and the pomegranate, two actors who have already played significant roles in the genesis of this project. Randomness itself can be prescriptive; trying to achieve a perfect arbitrariness would just be another form of algorithm. Incident clears space for the happenstance—a human randomness where my brain can alight before I do.

Miller is slightly manically watching and experimenting with where and how the brain alights too. An anxiety permeates the poem and takes the form of things continually undoing each other as the speaker searches for, not just stable ground, but the *correct* stable ground. The result, of course, is instability. Lacking the tools and anxious about lacking the tools, the speaker flits between different modes of truth access that complicate or undo each other. The sonic redundancy of the first words of the poem—"Lightning lights the moon's shroud" (Miller, 275, 1) signals the concern with truthful representation. Avoiding the possibility of misrepresenting through device, instead the

speaker chooses a verb already contained in its subject: the thing *does* as the thing *is*: in doing so she abdicates from the representational responsibility of the poet and allows language to determine itself.

It is the inconsistency of representational tacks that characterizes the poem, however, and the following lines immediately unsettle this approach. The result is a hesitance about any approach. Miller writes, “the surface of my body is excited / like sharp stabs of emotion in love” (275, 2-3). These lines are a simile comprised of two metaphors, the effect of which is to produce an immense distance between the representation and its object. Metaphor as a tool indeed distances from material reality but tends toward conveying an experiential reality that material description may not encompass. In this case the proliferation of metaphor works against itself to obscure whatever broader truth of experience the simile is trying to pay respect to. The feeling of “surface” is represented as the feeling of “sharp stabs,” an oxymoronic comparison that doesn’t justify itself past the fact of its occurrence. Simile doesn’t require obvious parity between its two objects but it can be defused by mutual exclusivity. What’s important is that it is not the experience itself that is oxymoronic but the particularities of the speaker’s choice of metaphors. The original representational object—the way her body feels—is inaccessible behind the many layers of representation that, accumulated, make nonsense of each other. The clumsiness of meaning this produces is nearly directly opposite to the clumsiness of the first line which loses itself in a lack of intervention as compared to these lines which lose themselves in over-intervention. Enacting how quickly attempts at representation can deteriorate, three lines into the poem and the dangers that attend the possibilities of language have already reared their heads. Implicitly, Miller shows her attunement to the fact that holding too tightly to any one possibility, any one tool, dulls its edge.

This dulling through overuse or extremity is connected to a suspicion about the efficacy of art. Miller writes, “the bond of physiognomy a child’s distant melodic greeting / by all accounts sketchy lest I make too much of them” (275, 16-17). These lines need some decoding. Miller pairs

the “bond of physiognomy,” that is, the logical link that says the external is representative of the internal, or that reads the external as a symbol of the internal, with “a child’s distant melodic greeting.” It’s intuitive to read these lines as figuring the bond in terms of the greeting but Miller has a habit of punctuation-less sentence or clause breaks in the middle of lines; given the plural “them” in the following line it seems likely these two entities are being listed rather than related (the list is a kind of relationship, too). The pretty oblique categorizing of the physiognomic bond with the child’s greeting is given justification through the self-admonition, “sketchy lest I make too much of them.” This encouragement to tread lightly tracks well with physiognomy which is a pseudoscience; the child’s greeting is slightly more oblique but constellating it with the inner/outer structure that is at play in these lines gives it some standing. Children are pretty undiscerning with their attention as they bump up against the world and learn it through feedback; a child’s greeting is likely less a reflection on the person being greeted than on the child’s experimentation with the world. The through line of this thought, then, is if these things are taken too seriously, held onto too tightly, they fall apart—that is, failure through extremity, dulling through overuse. This is helpful but we should take care to not forget that at stake here is not the quality of extremity but the status of art, or the speaker’s shifting understanding of the status of art; “sketchy,” the alternative to “making too much” provides our way in.

“Sketchy” is quite a multivalent word. It denotes the preliminary, the hesitant, the suspicious, and, of course, the literal artistic sketch. “Sketchy” seems to be the model the poem enacts; an art that is hesitant about its efficacy, suspicious of art itself, and so, having learned the lesson of extremity, ends up only committing halfway to its own project. Miller writes, “thinking is only ever provisional / this is what I think now that we are both alone” (275, 11-2). These lines form a paradox wherein the identification of “thinking is only ever provisional” as a thought calls into doubt its own sentiment—that thinking is provisional—but that doubt is founded on the sentiment that is now being called into doubt. These lines seem to be the *reductio ad absurdum* of a sketchy

model of poetry or art, where hesitance becomes so central it turns on itself—a hesitance about hesitance—and even any soft, preliminary, sketchy attempts at meaning, stemming from an anxiety about *getting it right*, lose themselves in the land of circularity.

Does the poem offer any resistance to this self-defeating sketchiness? Where much of the lyric is self-reflexive or explicitly meditating on art, almost all of the excerpts in the Norton end with a capitalized line that seems to be operating on a different, more mythic landscape (almost closer to a literalized Palace of Pearls) and with a distinct tone. These lines are as follows:

“A FOOT SOLDIER SEIZED IN SIGHT OF HIS OWN SQUADRON” (Miller, 275, 22)
 “PLEASE CALL FOR SEVERAL HUNDRED THOUSAND PHYSICIANS / QUICKLY” (Miller, 276, 9-10)

“CHERRIES BLUEBERRIES WHITE PEACHES AND LIMES” (Miller, 278, 51)

“BE CAREFUL OF MURDERERS IN A PALACE OF PEARLS” (Miller, 279, 34)

It’s tempting—or at least *I* am tempted—to read these lines as an easy alternate mode to the vacillating quality of the rest of the lyric. The conclusive take on this poem would be “The Immediacy of War and Fruit” where war and fruit are each directly confrontational experiences, unbound by representation, and so the idealized poem should operate by their logic. This synthesis falls apart upon inspection in about 14 directions, not the least of which being my absurdly representationally bound experience with the pomegranate, discussed earlier. Centrally, it falls apart within the logic of the poem, too, which plays elements of the uncommitting reflections against themselves in these capitalized lines. Miller writes in excerpt 22, “history is the last thing poems should tell / and stories next to last so poetry is all / a scent of berry like a splash of destiny / which hints at the best of life” (277, 38-40). This excerpt is, of course, the one that ends “CHERRIES BLUEBERRIES WHITE PEACHES AND LIMES”—a scent of berry, indeed. Rather than representing an alternative, in this case the capitalized line reads as perhaps a repressed reversal of the professed position of the poem (instructed, “scent of berry,” one’s mind eventually rebels in the opposite direction) or as a comment on the insufficiency of language which cannot, as loudly as it yells, conjure a scent of berry, anything real.

In the final analysis, the tool that remains workable for Miller is not to sketch or to yell; she does both those things, and others, and they take each other and themselves apart. The central operation of the poem is, in fact, *to take apart* and the mode in which she does this is humor. “Do you know how long it has been since a moral choice presented itself / and the wrong choice was made / not two minutes” (Miller, 276, 1-3), excerpt 4 begins. Humor relies on the incongruent and contradictory for its edge. Language doesn’t allow for stable, congruent representation, the poem enacts, and humor drags a neon highlighter over the fact of the instability, unconcerned by object. In this sense it offers the most direct line of communication between speaker and audience, and offers salience in the failures and cracks.

Incidental Poem Number Two: excerpt from *To Be in a Time of War* by Etel Adnan
 Generation Sequence:
 page 7

Page 7. I raise my eyebrows. Then I psychically raise my eyebrows at my eyebrow raise; why am I expecting randomness to middle? Unless that *is* the case—the Bell Curve? There are more numbers in the middle than at either end. Yes, okay. I nod my head to my grandmother the electrical engineer. Lately I've been saying I come from scientists and feminists (I've even made a Spotify playlist by that title. My friend Sam says, "Playlists as autofiction"). Do my origins show? I'm writing a numerically generated project and my one intervention has been to nix the men. Maybe they show too much.

Page 7. Oh no. "Etel?" Etel could be a man. Let Etel be a man. Proof. Let Etel be a man. When Etel is a man, Isabel generates a new number, *n*. Let *n* be any poem other than this horrifying mass of text on page 7. I'm being dramatic. It's just...what am I to *do* with this??

This excerpt from *To Be in a Time of War* by Etel Adnan, woman, takes the role of the infinitive to its logical limit. Five unbroken paragraphs of text compose the poem. Each of these paragraphs is composed of a comma divided list of actions: "To look at the watch, the clock, the alarm clock, to listen to the ticking, to think about it to look again, to go to the tap, to open the refrigerator, to close it, to open the door, ..." (Adnan, 6, 9-11). Let Etel be a woman. Let her not waver from this litany once.

I've been analyzing my allergy to this poem and, predictably, it's coming from exactly the overdetermining tick that I'm trying to break. The way I instinctively see it there are two tacks: go hard for the intricacies of the poem, investigating the particularities of "to distinguish the roses from the hyacinths" (Adnan, 6, 34) and "to thank graciously" (Adnan, 7, 50) for whatever conceptual resonances I can unfurl; or go hard for the form, thinking about the innate character of the infinitive in its relation to war—how it does not specify time nor place nor actor; how it

dislocates as war does. Is there perhaps a middle path that neither homogenizes the poem as a reflection on a verb form nor asks too much of its granularity? No, really—I'm asking.

Adnan seems to be asking about the relationship between self and action. War alienates self from action, or sets new terms for the relationship between self and action: the soldier is celebrated for things he⁵ would normally be imprisoned for; “war effort” calls for all of society to involve, to act, but by function of that universality the action becomes tangential for most, either obliquely related to the war or executed somewhere geographically distant from the original actor. The program one undertakes, then, “To wake up, to stretch, to get out of bed, to dress, to stagger toward the window” (Adnan, 6, 31-2), indiscriminately loses its sense of native relationship to the actor who undertakes it. This seems to be the operating condition of wartime for Adnan, so that even when the program is painfully authentic and personal, “to be ecstatic about the garden’s beauty,” (Adnan, 6, 33), it is still a part of the war function.

To constellate war, self, and math (which is how we began this reflection).

Bernard Chazelle in his 2006 article, “Could Your iPod Be Holding the Greatest Mystery in Modern Science?” in the journal *Math Horizons* explains things in terms I can understand. He writes, “Separating *control* (the hardware) from *program* (the software) was the major insight of Alan Turing—well, besides this little codebreaking thing he did in Bletchley Park that helped win World War II. The separation was the key to universality” (14-15). In this sense, Adnan’s poem is a transcript of software, and a gesture toward a spectral hardware, a self, present in its absence. The universalizing quality of war, war effort, is a Turing-esque severing.⁶

⁵ I would typically default to the “she” pronoun but war is innate to socially constructed manhood. See chapter 2 of Maria Mies’ *Patriarchy and Accumulation on a World Scale*, “Social Origins of the Sexual Division of Labor.”

⁶ I’m not fully satisfied with my reading of this poem. Please see Bernadette Mayer’s poem, “Failures in Infinitives.”

Incidental Poem Number Three: “Chinese Space” by Mei-Mei Berssenbrugge
 Generation Sequence:
 page 58

The first thing you should know is that Mei-Mei Berssenbrugge’s poem “Chinese Space” is formatted horizontally across two vertical Norton pages. The clause broken by the page division “the way the far corner of the pond becomes a corner again as we approach [PAGE/BREAK] on the diagonal, which had been a vanishing point” (Berssenbrugge, 58-9, 19-20), makes good use of this. The spine of the book becomes part of the poem and we experience the diagonal approach, vanishing, and reappearance. Utility is not so much the realm Berssenbrugge is operating in, however; rather, a particular quality of experience is both the object and mode of the poem. This quality is the quality of Chinese Space (although, I think, a certain tongue-in-cheek-ness should not be lost in our reading of that phrase) and the horizontal orientation⁷ signals that, asking us to reconstitute our expectations of the space of a poem and bringing us to expectations of space more broadly.

The defining principles of the poem’s mode of space are partialness and relationality. The poem’s object, the house, is specifically described as “a house we could not wholly / retain in memory” (Berssenbrugge, 58, 12-3); the reader is guided through the physical, but conceptually loaded, space of the house through paratactic perspective shifts that are sometimes logically followable but often done through oblique conceptual adjacencies. The followable ones often figure one element of the house in terms of another one and then shift the object through paratactic additions from the first element to the once only relational second. Berssenbrugge writes,

The eye expecting to confront static space experiences a lavish range of optical events, such as crickets in Ming jars, their syncopation like the right, then left, then right progress into the house, an experience that cannot be sustained in consciousness, because your movement itself binds passing time, more than entering directs it. (58, 5-8)

⁷ It occurs to me that the word “orientation” has a particular relevance. The label of the “Orient” already conflates space and direction with designation (that is, “Chinese Space”). “Orient” means that Asia, at least in a Western cultural imagination, has a spaced quality, and space and direction have an Asian quality. What is the reason we don’t use “to occident?”

The eye is the subject (where the mode is the partial and relational, perspective is necessarily going to be central) and expecting to *confront space* instead *experiences events*. The first of these modes of seeing is absolute and in “confront” presumes a total distinction between subject and object (that is, between self or perspective, and space); the second is fluid and suggests a more dynamic relationship between subject and object. The pattern I described above of the physical and conceptual perspective shifts is evident in the next lines. The “crickets in Ming jars,” which are already a feature of the “optical events,” are momentarily the central object but are then figured in terms of entrance into the house which becomes the object the sentence closes with as the speaker elaborates, “an experience that cannot be sustained...” This shift occurs subtly, is almost difficult to follow, because you come across the next element, the entrance into the house, before you realize you have left the crickets, the previous one, behind. What could’ve been a serial, linear description of walking through and observing a house instead asserts a more complex, dynamic relationship between the self, space, and time that enacts the partiality and relationality of experiencing those things.

I’d also add—and I don’t want to simplistically map things onto each other, but I think this addition is justified—that the way this grammar works totally corresponds to the particular experience of walking through a Chinese zen garden (and I imagine the architectural principles of zen gardens have influence or correspondence throughout Chinese architecture). Different elements of the space come into focus as you progress through the garden, the design intentionally manufacturing moments of clarity and stillness (like the moment the reader can pause with the crickets) and then disrupting them as you keep moving. These disruptions, these new elements, like the introduction of the entrance into the house—“like the right, then left, then right”—take a moment to unfold and settle as you approach the intended perspective from which to view them, and then have their own moment of clarity and stillness (when we connect “the right, then left...”

to the concept of progressing into the house). This is the experience described in the quote I began this account with where approach transforms a vanishing point into a corner.

In the final stanza a different, western model of space begins to bump up against this partial, unfolding Chinese model:

After the house was electrically wired in the thirties, he installed a ticker-tape machine connected to the American stock exchange. Any existence occupies time, he would say in the Chinese version, reading stock quotations and meaning the simplicity of the courtyard into a lavish biosphere, elevating the fact of its placement to one of our occupation of it, including the macaw speaking Chinese, stones representing infinity in the garden. This is how the world appears when the person becomes sufficient (Berssenbrugge, 59, 27-32)

The wiring and stock machine act as an insinuation of a new system of space, time, and interestingly, value, into the established system of Chinese space. In this model, where the person is “sufficient,” they become the arbiter of meaning in the space. It is not “the fact of its placement” that means, but the human presence which perceives, imagines meaning onto, and materially impacts the space. The assertion that “Any existence occupies time” would seem to gel with the model of Chinese space where the self, space, and time are intimately constellated, but I think “occupy” is meant to take on a more total quality; not “to occupy” as in “to inhabit” but as in “to dominate.” The motion from “the fact of its placement to one of our occupation of it” then takes on a dictatorial tint.

The macaw speaking Chinese would seem to corroborate the human occupation of the space as total, representing not just an ability to materially influence material things but also an assertion of *symbolic* human existence—language—influencing the material conditions. In this case, the western model seems to win out, if only through force. This reading misses, however, that the macaw is not, in fact, speaking Chinese, but mimicking sounds that exist in its environment, just other elements of “the fact of its placement.” It is, instead, the human apprehension of that

mimicking that transforms it into language—and transformation through apprehension is exactly the Chinese space model. Occupation is, so, defused.

If the poem's western model of the self in space is about being "sufficient," perhaps the Chinese model holds the self in space as necessary, but not sufficient or determining. There's a freedom imparted by not needing to be sufficient, not needing to be the total matrix of meaning. The taking of pictures becomes a paradigm for this attitude. Berssenbrugge writes, "The grandmother poses beside rose bushes. / That is to say, a weary and perplexing quality of the rough wall behind her gives a power of tolerance / beyond the margins of the photograph" (59, 20-2). There's something reciprocal, or evenly distributed, in these lines that I think again comes from Berssenbrugge's interesting ordering choices. The present tense "poses" makes it ambiguous whether this is a description of a photograph being taken or of a photograph that already exists; because there hasn't yet been a mention of the photograph itself at that point in the line, the poem encourages one to read it in the lived present tense rather than the photographic present tense. The grandmother has meaning-making agency first in the posing; then the wall becomes the agent of meaning with the activity of "give". Interestingly, the description of how the wall "gives a power of tolerance / beyond the margins of the photograph" is the only signal that this photograph has already been taken. This fact, plus the context of the poem, the wandering through a house that seems to be in some way a part of the past, invites us only retroactively to think that the posing was actually in the photographic present tense. It would be easy to read the taking of pictures as aligned with the western model in a kind of assertion of the perspective and limits of a space; but since it is only in the description of the agency of the space that we loop back around and realize we're looking at a photograph, the poem's lyric seems to make the space contain the photograph more than the reverse. The photograph is, of course, a human axis of meaning but something about, perhaps, its specificity, how it can render a trait as particular and inhabited of a space as "a weary

and perplexing quality of the rough wall,” that then has influence outside the limits of the photograph, means it doesn’t abolish, and may even be subject to, the agency of the space.

The second instance of picture taking centers on human apprehension specifically, solidifying the poem’s understanding of its relationship to context (space, time, other people). Berssenbrugge writes, “The family poses in front of the hotel, both self-knowing and knowing others at the same time. / This is so, because human memory as a part of unfinished nature is provided / for the experience of your unfinished existence” (59, 35-7). In the first sentence posing is again related to a mutual relationship between the self and context. In the moment of pause and composition there’s an impulse present, in the case of both the grandmother and rose bush and wall, and the family, to also talk about the reciprocal motions of their existence; that is, the quality of the wall being the vehicle of the photograph, and the self-knowing and knowing. “This is so,” I think because the moment of composition, the photograph, is a moment of finishing, a moment of *finished existence*, but, as the speaker says, human memory is not. The photograph is nested in reciprocity between the self and existence because everything that surrounds it as a finished moment—the people posing, the person taking it, the person viewing it—are living in unfinished nature. To finish or to be absolute or to occupy would be a kind of death or “finished nature.” “Unfinished nature” makes me think of the macaw, who would start speaking Italian or Swahili if those sounds became a part of its environment. Humans in the same way are always unfolding, in Chinese space or elsewhere. To be alive, to be part of nature, is to be unfinished and shifting.

Incidental Poem Number Four: “What We Mean” by Rae Armantrout
 Generation Sequence:
 page 441, “First Draw the Sea” by Keith Waldrop, skipped under rule iii.
 page 19

I can't tell you how glad I am to leave Keith Waldrop's “First Draw the Sea” in the literary dust. I know the premise of this project would absolutely prime me to think this at the first male poet I come to but—genuinely—this poem is ACHINGLY masculine. I'm trading the rhetorical existential questions, Latin phrases, Christian imagery, and self-congratulating mention of Sappho for Rae Armantrout's self described “Cheshire poetics,” “poems that seemed as if they were either going to vanish or explode - ... extremes, in other words, radical poetics” (Armantrout, EPC) with pleasure.

Armantrout's statement of poetics has an affinity with some of the implicit premises and concerns of this project. Perhaps the reverse is more accurate, that this project has an affinity with Armantrout's statement—and not through accident but indeed through incident—as the poetic school she belongs to, the Language poets, have had their fair say in my poetic training. She writes that the “radical” in radical poetics might be measured “by how much is put at risk in the text, how far the arc of implication can reach and still seem apt” (Armantrout, EPC). The premise of this project—that breaking a poetic prescriptiveness through randomness and incident could have implications for political prescriptiveness—presupposes a far-reaching arc. “Political” isn't quite a sufficient descriptor, though. I'll let feminist Shulamith Firestone speak for me: that the scope of implication “cannot be easily fit into traditional categories of thought, e.g., ‘political,’ is not because these categories do not apply but because they are not big enough: radical feminism bursts through them. If there were another word more all-embracing than *revolution* we would use it” (1). Both the model of radical feminism that informs the criticality about patterned thinking in this project and Armantrout's radical Cheshire poetics seek to reconstitute things (or understandings of things)—ideas, language, culture, institutions—to a degree that exposes an extreme kind of truth. It loops

around, too, back from radical feminism to language and poetry, given assertions like Firestone's later one that the conceptual category of the Other—yes, Beauvoir's Other—(which forms the basis of fundamental units of language like “you,” “I,” etc.) is premised on the sex division (Firestone, 7). A Cheshire poetics doesn't presume congruency and finds conceptual pull in either its lack or its incidental occurrence. Similarly, radical feminism's “bursting” quality means one can find resonances in unpresumed places (incongruent places) and in the same way it can gain resonance from those places.

Armantrout's “What We Mean” is concerned with definition—of language, of states of being. She writes in her Cheshire poetics statement that “I think of my poetry as inherently political. (though it is not a poetry of opinion). In an optimistic mood, one might see the multiple, optional relations of [formally disjunctive] parts in such work as a kind of anarchic cooperation” (Armantrout, EPC). Indeed, the poem, split into three subsections, has about 15 disjunctive elements floating around. In this case, though, the form of “anarchic cooperation” described, the way disparate things might come together or diffuse even more, is part of the question of the poem. More precisely put, the way *context could settle those elements into meaning* is being investigated. The political arc of implication for the poem, if we're thinking Cheshire poetics, stakes language and context as determiners of reality; I use “stakes,” though, because of the poem's unsettledness—asserting these things would be a settling context and that's not this poem or Armantrout's mode. She writes that her poetry “points two ways then vanishes in the blur of what is seen and what is seeing” (EPC). I'm trying to render the blur.

About halfway through the poem the speaker says, “A peculiar / reluctance to ask / presented by whom / and in what space?” (Armantrout, *American Hybrid*, 19, 16-9). This moment is in some ways meant to prompt the reader to ask these questions of the poem itself given that the answers are conspicuously absent. “Presented by whom?” “We” is the narrating voice of the poem and is of totally ambiguous character. It could be a royal “we,” especially given the poem's opening

address, “Oh Princess,” (Armantrout, *AH*, 18, 1). It could also be a statement of a particular group, perhaps poets, or a sort of universalizing “we” of modern humanity which would implicate the reader into its ranks. It could also be a conspiratorial “we,” implicating just the reader in with the speaker. Of course, making a call about the correct character of the “we” would be impossible and unfounded; the relevant information is the effect it has on the experience of the poem, which is the effect of an authoritative and collectivizing voice claiming consensus among totally unknown agents. The assertions based on the consensus of this group can still be made, and they are—“By space we mean / the collapsible / whirligig / of attention” (Armantrout, *AH*, 19, 20-3)—but the context that is implicitly originating them and that should inform ambiguities in their stated positions is missing.

The second question, “presented ... in what space?” yields similar answers. The definition of “space” quoted above is preceded by this question and so the moment of reading it doesn’t yet entail that definition. If we allow it to be asking about physical space, the most physically grounded moment of the poem is its beginning, “Oh Princess, / you apple-core afloat / in coke / in a Styrofoam cup, / on an end-table, / you dust, glass, book, crock, thorn, moon. / Oh Beauty who fell asleep / on your birthday / we swipe at you” (Armantrout, *AH*, 18, 1-9). Despite this being the most material time in the poem it’s not material in any cohesive way; it’s not a scene or something to lend stability to the rest of the conceptual reflections of the poem. It’s dislocated just like the identity of the “we,” in both the lack of material context and the form; “Oh Princess,” who then becomes an apple core, also in a coke, is, too, in a cup, etc. We trip over each new addition for those first five lines because we keep expecting the characterization to end before it does, and then are propelled in frenzy through the further mutations, “dust, glass, book...” It’s totally unclear at this point if what’s being described is living or object, human or concept. What space are we in then? This immaterial material passage is immediately followed up by the question: “How are we defining ‘dream?’” (Armantrout, *AH*, 18, 10).

The question posed by the poem—“by whom and in what space?”—applied to the phrase “What We Mean” asks who and what determines the space of meaning. The space of meaning could be definition—“What We Mean” when we say “X”—but does that mean that things without definition, lacking determinable limits, like dreams (“How are we defining ‘dream?’”), sleep (“Oh Beauty who fell asleep”), death (“(obits)” (Armantrout, *AH*, 19, 28)), and space, as in outer, (“among orbits” (Armantrout, *AH*, 19, 27)), don’t have meaning? Definition happens in the present tense grammatically in the poem (“defining dream”) and conceptually. It’s a kind of consensus we can experience or invoke in the present as a stand-in for things that may not exist in the present. Dreams, death, and space are kinds of presents that don’t function on consensus because they’re vast enough and immersive enough to set their own terms. After asking about dream definition, Armantrout writes “An exaggerated sense / of the relevance / of these details, / of ‘facts’ / as presented?” (*AH*, 18, 11-5). Taken as answer to the question of dream definition (I don’t think it has to be—“the multiple, *optional* relations of [formally disjunctive] parts”), I think what’s being described is the raised stakes of dreams, the way our priorities in dreams hinge on things that upon reflection are total extremities in the sense of exaggerated relevance, as she puts it, or the reverse where unreasonable, scary, big things are just the “‘facts’ / as presented.” The “reluctance to ask / presented by whom / and in what space?” also describes the way we don’t question the altered reality when we’re in it; we show up in the middle of the action so things that seem disproportionate can just *be*, they don’t require a scaling narrative to bring them to that point. That is, they don’t need a context to settle them.

This state is different from the state of the unsettled poem where we ask “who constitutes we?” and what does that mean for what “we” profess to believe? The poem is finite and will be read in context;⁸ the reader can choose to accept the invitation of the unsettled poem to take the facts as

⁸ I, for example, am lying in bed. I just had an apple cider donut and some oat milk while reading an article in the Atlantic. Today I didn’t turn my phone on and I’ve been thinking about how nice today has been without it. Sometimes one can have too *much* context.

presented, but probably they won't. It is likely instead that they will undertake "the collapsible / whirligig / of attention, / the figuring and / reconfiguring / of charges / among orbits / ... that has taken forever" (Armantrout, *AH*, 19, 22-9). What we mean is premised on what we choose to attend to and how we arrange the things we do (presented by us!!! And in *this* space!!!). The clipped sentences of this particular Cheshire poem give the sense of words as moveable blocks or units subject to human selection. Context is a short-hand kind of settling and most of the time it does the job; I can tell you to hand me the pomegranate on the counter and a knife from the drawer and you will probably choose a serrated knife over a butter knife. But there would be meaning in taking a butter knife and stabbing it into a pomegranate and letting the juice fly and vanishing in the blur.

Incidental Poem Number Five: excerpt from *Don't Let Me Be Lonely* by Claudia Rankine

Generation Sequence:

page 338

Claudia Rankine, my love, thank you for meeting me here.⁹ I first read *Don't Let Me Be Lonely* (*DLMBL*) at the end of a very beloved poetry class. Winter became spring and we read O'Hara and Dickinson and Bashō and Lorca and then we read Rankine and we talked about her in an ugly room in a beautiful mansion on a hill. I didn't like her at first; prose poetry isn't my favorite and the poem made me sad at a time when I was sick of ugly (in the sense of hurtful) art.¹⁰ She's been sitting in me for a long time, though, and the earnest, ironic, vulnerable, broken mood of the poem has been acting within me like one of the dominating metaphors of the poem, the "giant liver, [that] receives everyone and everything" (Rankine, 341, 67) acts on its objects. It separates the gold out from the silt.

As I've been doing with excerpted or fragmented poems, I'll lightly be taking the Norton's sequencing as premise. It's worth noting, though, that unlike the Norton's formatting of *A Palace of Pearls* which signaled absence through numbering the excerpts (it went from 1 to 2 to 4 to 22) the Norton's formatting of *DLMBL* doesn't distinguish between page breaks (of which there are many in the original formatting) and absence. That is, the same little black square marks where there's a new page *and* where there's a new page having skipped several pages. This formatting choice also means that unlike in the original where most pages (and it's a notably tall book. Normal paperback width but extra long) only have truly a fraction of the page occupied by writing, the total length of each of the Norton pages is occupied. I'm sure it's a different poem for these reasons—the sense of

⁹ "Emily Dickinson, my love, / hope was never a thing with feathers" (Rankine, 340, 19-20).

¹⁰ I also read the whole thing straight through in one of the oddest sensory and psychic states I've experienced which was while temporarily working as a gallery monitor at the Hessel Museum of Art. My job was to stand in one room of the gallery for maybe four hours. The particular room I was assigned had a looping audio and video display (other connected and echoing rooms did, too) that I must have heard and watched 100 times. This made the stakes of the reading experience—the original book version of the poem features images of staticky TV screens—feel quite immediate.

void and emptiness the gaping white pages emit is definitely moderated—but that’s part of the experience of anthology, the concessions that attend being one of many.

The one and the many, the part and the whole, is a thematic concern of *DLMBL*¹¹ (and Rankine’s other work. See: *Citizen*). The Norton’s biography on her asserts that “she searches for both the root and the ramifications of social discord in the specific choices and responses of individual people” (*AH*, 337), an analysis that speaks to her complex handling of the part-whole relationship. Harmful cultural dynamics do not originate from individuals but they take residence in and gain strength from them; whether or not the whole is greater than the sum of its parts, the parts still matter to the character of the whole. This analysis of the role of the individual dominates *Citizen*, where interpersonal racial micro aggressions (and straight up aggressions) constitute the black speaker’s lived experience of racism. The inverse direction is true for Rankine, too—and *DLMBL* takes this element as its greater focus—where individual pain is not separable from collective pain. She writes, “I forget things too. It makes me sad. Or it makes the me the saddest. / ... the sadness lives in / the recognition that a life can not matter” (340, 14-5). This phrasing, “a life can not matter,” read grammatically suggests that mattering is the default but that that default can be interrupted: it’s *possible* for a life to not matter. It’s an intentionally awkward phrasing, though, and read aloud or phonetically one also hears “a life cannot matter.” This ambiguity (or doubleness—the two readings conflict) suggests that when a single life can be displaced from mattering, life categorically cannot matter. This effect is resonant with the Emma Lazarus quote, “Until we are all free, we are none of us free” (Jewish Women’s Archive) (also associated with Maya Angelou; also central to black feminism) and evokes for me the radical feminist anti-prostitution argument that when any women is a commodity, all are. In this model the suffering of the individual belonging to a

¹¹ Armantrout says the same thing of her poetry, writing that it speaks to questions like “Does the part represent the whole? Is metaphor fair to the matter it represents? Does representative democracy work?” (Armantrout, EPC). Rankine is certainly in a similar sphere, if at a different angle.

group is necessarily consequential to that group because it admits the potential suffering of the rest of the group.

I think this model of suffering scares people sometimes because it suggests a homogeneity to the conditions of a particular group, and perhaps accordingly an interchangeability among them, as if a general material analysis of the conditions of a particular class negates the personhood or identities of the people belonging to that class. The quote above, “It makes me sad. Or it makes me the saddest,” captures a similar arc of anxiety about relating one’s own position to the position of the group. The speaker loses a sense of the character of her own emotions because she seeks to calibrate them against an absolute scale. “Saddest” doesn’t necessarily read as “saddest of the group,” whatever that group may be—I actually think it’s meant to be an internal, personal scale—but it’s still symptomatic of a desire to measure pain in determinate, proportionate ways. The question of interchangeability I raised above is another facet of Rankine’s exploration concerning the standardized measuring of pain and of the self. The speaker says that when her father dies and she can’t attend the funeral she wants to send a replacement mourner. She conjures this “replacement mourner, a woman. She has lost her / mother years before and because she is already grieving she just continues / attending funerals for a price. Like a wet nurse, the prerequisite is a state of / ‘already grief’” (Rankine, 341, 50-3). There’s an absurdity to this premise, first produced by the idea that it is the speaker’s act of mourning, and not her particular person and *its* mourning that has value, and second, by the attempt toward authenticity implied by the requirement that the replacement mourner genuinely be grieving. It’s still a kind of authenticity but, again, it doesn’t value particularity; it seems to see pain as a collective, undiscerning resource that’s not performative and yet somehow doesn’t need sincere correspondence to its object (as performativity doesn’t). It’s an absurd concept, yes, but it’s also earnest, another way of trying to relate the suffering of one person to the suffering of others.

Trying to understand relational suffering was one of the concerns of this project in an earlier iteration; I was thinking a lot about how we should conceptualize different classes of violence (rape versus verbal sexual harassment, for example) and violence against victims of different societal and cultural status' (a working class woman who needs her job for survival coerced into sex with her boss versus a millionaire movie star who has resources and support in place coerced into sex with hers) in terms of each other. All rape is unacceptable and horrific and the pain it causes shouldn't be ranked but how then do we account for the disparity between the immediately consequential material implications involved in these two theoretical women's rapes? Similarly, how do we categorically condemn all invocations of misogyny (rape versus verbal harassment) while taking into account the varying degrees of suffering they cause?

Rankine implicitly is asking, and perhaps answering, these same questions in the integrating and repetitive way she weaves different elements, different instances of suffering, into her particular, polyphonic writing. The blending of voices and experiences of suffering separates it from strict residence in the individual and individual instance, or more specifically it figures specific and individual instances in terms of others. Rankine writes about Bush winning the presidency,¹² "the same Bush who can't remember if two or three people were convicted for dragging a black man to death in his home state of Texas. *You don't remember because you don't care.* Sometimes my mother's voice swells and fills my forehead" (338); this then moves into the line, "I forget things too. It makes me sad. Or it makes me the saddest" (340). This isn't the neatest example of this formal trait, but it expresses the slippery quality Rankine's portrayal of pain has, where one response or expression of it—the mother's admonition—can become an element of other pain, whether it's a different person's or different instance of. A particular cadence she often uses plays into the slippery quality, too: "The words remain an inscription on the surface of my loneliness. This loneliness stems from a

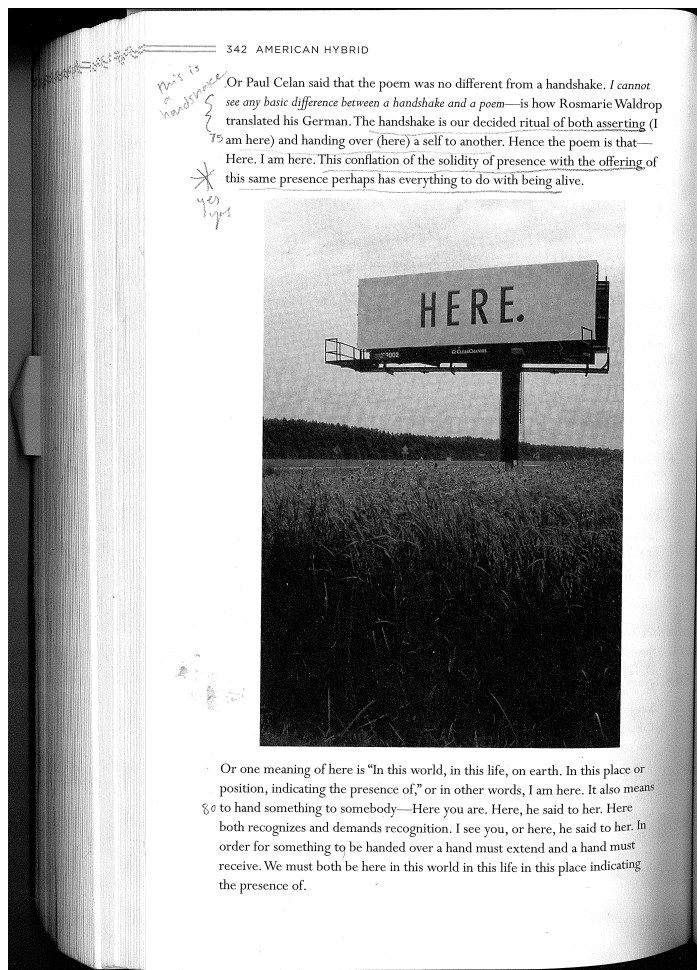
¹² She writes, "Cornel West makes the point that hope is different from American optimism. After the initial presidential election results come in, I stop watching the news" (338). When I first read this (I didn't know when it was published) I assumed this was the 2016 election—it is, I'd argue, which is another instance of reverberating sufferings.

feeling of uselessness” (Rankine, 341). Concepts blur into each other, or become features of each other. Experiences of suffering and their particular, located or expressed qualities for Rankine act as the language for other located experiences of suffering.¹³

All these attempts at understanding the modes of relation between the part and the whole as they relate to pain speak to the fundamental imperative of the book; that is, “don’t let me be lonely!”

What models of relation can mitigate others’ pain? is one of the implicit questions of the imperative. The poem and the Norton excerpts end with one answer, worth representing in full here.¹⁴

There’s something difficult to hook into about the final passage, a quality produced by its circularity. The repetition and the insistent presence of the “Here,” forces each line to be coextensive with the rest at the same time as Rankine complexly accounts for their coextensivity. “Here” takes on a polyvalent quality constituted by meanings that feel like they immediately



¹³ The language I came to for understanding violence of differing conditions was **scales of violence**, which I think captures the way different expressions of oppressive systems, racial micro aggressions versus racialized police brutality, for instance, or the theoretical instances of misogynistic violence described above, are just dilations of each other, the same substance in different concentrations. This *links* rather than *divides* the experiences of suffering that may take place in different degrees while also accounting for the consequences of that variation. This is essentially just an expression of the personal being political, where all individual experiences of classed pain are symptomatic of it, as well as the analysis of Rankine about roots and ramifications in individuals, but I think the conceptual apparatus of scaling is helpful.

¹⁴ Here.

converge the second you try to isolate them—is “being Here” really different from “Here you are?” “I am here. It also means to hand something to somebody—Here you are” (Rankine, 342); there’s a distinction being made with the “also” but the language itself does not corroborate that: “I am here” and “Here you are” feel like they signify the same thing. The status of Here becomes immediate and prelapsarian in the attempts at isolation that cannot help but give way to convergence.¹⁵ Each angle Here is approached from channels to the same point which is the word on the page, its meaning, your field of vision, the fact of the poem—which is a handshake which is its Hereness. Being Here is an assertion of solidity and a premise of solidarity: don’t let me be lonely.¹⁶

As immediate as presence is in these lines, it’s also paired with relinquishment, a kind of absence: “The handshake is our decided ritual of both asserting (I am here) and handing over (here) a self to another” (Rankine, 342). There’s a loss in this that needs accounting for. The mention of the translation of the Celan quote signals this sense of relinquishment; she writes, “Or Paul Celan said that the poem was no different from a handshake. *I cannot see a basic difference between a handshake and a poem*—is how Rosmarie Waldrop translated his German” (342). This first expression of the poem as handshake and Hereness also enacts its meaning in the way that translation is a kind of handshake: the assertion and handing over. The placement of the framing context—“is how Rosmarie...”—*after* the translation, which allows the original and translation to touch syntactically, curates this. This enactment is also a convergence of sign and signified; as the relinquishment entailed by the handshake is being described, the relinquishment inherent to translation is represented.

Translation is a relinquishment or loss through the sacrifice of precise, individual, authorial meaning in the name of dissemination, or in the name of being *one of many* (languages, peoples, etc.). The loss is, then, constructive in both the sense of reception and in the act of translation itself. The

¹⁵ And the image of the billboard becomes both a reclaimed and corrupted Garden.

¹⁶ This is resonant, perhaps, with the contemporary imperative in activism to “show up.”

translator may cut things or augment them to retain their meaning but through this process builds upon the original text. A good translator's constructiveness is in the interesting or evocative ways they *represent*, but a bad translator does constructive work too even if only in the meaning produced by its failures up against the original text. It's not a question of value but a question of being: a bad handshake is still a handshake, still has reverberations, is still Here. The loss in translation, handshake, poem, is an additive loss; even looking at the slight variation between Celan's phrasing, "the poem was no different from a handshake"¹⁷ and Waldrop's "I cannot see any basic difference between..." an interesting relationship is produced between binaries as designation (not different/different) and foundations or essentials as designation (no "basic difference"). This raises questions about whether we can still meaningfully classify groups that have variance; what the threshold of a classifying system becoming spectral (in the sense of a spectrum) is; what the relationship between cultural or linguistic shorthands and technical meaning is; etc. I digress, because this is not the point; or the point is the fact of my digression which would not exist if not for a minute variation in translation. A cloistering anti-translation, anti-handshake purity that fears loss through relinquishment ends up, in fact, having lost, being lesser, for the constructiveness it precludes.

So, perhaps being Here is about constructive loss, and perhaps constructive loss is the mood of those ambivalent final words, "presence of" (Rankine, 342). The hanging preposition gives way to an absence—the loss of an infinite number of words it could've been—but it's also a resistance to definition which is perhaps a kind of presence in the sense of an escape from ego. And, indeed, it is a presence—it's the ending of a handshake, a poem, and a return to an embodied experience of self. Not in the poem—the poem is over—but Here. Having just read a poem.

¹⁷ I realize this is Rankine's paraphrasing but the use of "no" is what will become salient shortly and that seems to be technically true to the original.

Synthetic

Here. Having just read a poem, or having just read five. When Langston Hughes wrote, “She / Who searched for lovers / In the night,” he conjured, as I wrote at the time of that poem, a woman *not Here*, symbolized by proxy. The woman not Here or the Othered woman is a negative presence, constituted only by her patriarchally-determined actions and status and by her objectification at the hands, or eyes and minds, of herself and of men. She *has* a subjectivity but Hughes’ rendering speaks to how a self-objectification forced by the social conditioning of womanhood turns her subjectivity into an empty space and displaces the location of her selfhood from her internal experiencing to her functional place in the world.¹⁸ As a radical feminist, I believe that women have responsibilities to themselves and to other woman to mechanically de-objectify themselves as much as they can; this is a moral imperative, I believe, for the elements of womanhood that respond to will. But these acts of de-objectification are not synonymous with the reinstating of a non-objectifying subjectivity because of the confounding effects of the insidious elements of womanhood this project met impasse within.

Looking back to Adnan’s poem helps us to think through the insufficiency of mechanical de-objectification for full reclamation of subjectivity. As woman’s self is cut off from her actions through the programmatic quality of patriarchy, we see the missing subject of the poem alienated from her actions through the programmatic quality of war. Feminist historian Maria Mies tells us that war is a masculine mode associated with, or having its roots in, the particular object relation to nature that men developed in early human history. While women could conceive of their total body as productive through childbirth and so saw production as an integrated mode of being, men had to

¹⁸ Radical feminist Ti-Grace Atkinson writes that understanding the patriarchal classing and thus objectifying (and thus self-objectifying) of women requires understanding that “‘political’ classes are artificial; they define persons with certain capacities by that capacity, changing the contingent to the necessary, thereby appropriating the capacity of an individual as a function of society” (*Radical Feminism*). This has a number of implications such as the abolition of gender which reifies the sex division; for our purposes, though it’s interesting framing the caste of womanhood as *function* up against selfhood as a kind of *capacity*. If we think of capacity in an allowing way, like the poetic capacity, perhaps we get somewhere...

act *on* nature to be productive and did so through the mediation of tools. This mode of acting on through tools paved the way for the development of weaponry and war; more importantly for trying to understand the insufficiency of de-objectification through will, it planted the conceptual seeds in the male psyche that would grow into interaction between subject and object figured as an oppositional and predatory relationship where subject acts upon object. This logic of the subject, where to be fully subject is to be constituted by one's actions upon an object, is hence a patriarchal and male model. In attempts to undo self-objectification, the premise that doing anti-patriarchal actions, or acting on the objectified subject in a feminist mode, is a way to build a comprehensive anti-patriarchal self, thus relies on a smuggled in patriarchal logic. The effect of this is a failure to account for the fact that these actions exist on the level of politics, and as Firestone tells us, radical feminism at its best has a bursting quality that is excessive of politics, that isn't bound by patriarchal categorizations of the elements of culture. Thus, to get outside the bounds of patriarchy, the process of subjectification must also have a bursting, excessive quality.¹⁹

This excessive self, constituted not solely by her actions, anti-feminist or anti-patriarchal, but by the fact of her whole, excessive subjectivity is, up against Hughes' woman not Here, the woman Here. This isn't actually a new insight within this project; we've known that a woman has total subjectivity even in her self-objectification by being aware and analytic about that self-objectification. The quality of the Hereness produced by that dynamic is exactly the suspension between feminism and patriarchy that became both the functional and conceptual stake of this project. But it was that impasse of suspension where I began to center methodology—turned to the mode of incidental poetics—and anti-prescriptively invited the five poets to join me Here. (“Claudia Rankine, and Jane and Mei-Mei and Etel and Rae, my loves, thank you for meeting me here”). And I invited them not

¹⁹ That being said, the political mode one lives in has an influence on one's subjectivity that isn't negligible. The excessive self absolutely responds to political action but just is not fully constituted by it. Additionally, as can't be said enough in the current feminist climate, the anti-patriarchal actions of individual women can have a positive rippling effect—especially when they occur on a large scale and thus become collective—which is why feminist culture needs to promote actively anti-patriarchal individual action and expression instead of homogenizing it all as male fantasies.

through any theoretical agenda that might attempt to conjure subjectivity—theirs, mine, paradigmatic woman’s—through a particular mode of feminist action or thought, thus invoking male predatory object relation, but instead they joined me through randomness and incident. This random selection was a practice of Hereness in that it involved relinquishing some of my agency (the agency to choose what I attend to) in exchange for the poets’ relinquishing of their poems to my criticism; that is, the random selection was a practice of constructive loss. In short, I have read poetry. Or, in short, we have shaken hands. This is a way of doing classed womanhood as a form of relationality which is an operation I will elaborate on. First I want to investigate the specific Hereness the six of us have produced, or what the fact of a collective specific Hereness means.

As the varying, complex, intricate, not intricate, writings of these five women evidence, they are quite literally possessive of subjectivities adept and agential. Beauvoir’s description of women’s drama indeed accounted for the truth of complex female subjectivity while also pointing to the self-objectifying impulse of that subjectivity; the self-objectifying impulse is a cultural reality we find still explicit and implicit in and among the expressive (and excessive) subjectivities of these poems. In DLMBL, Rankine writes, “Mahalia Jackson is a genius. Or Mahalia Jackson has genius. The man I am with is trying to make a distinction” (340). This moment renders both ex- and implicitly the impact of women’s Othering within the culture and within themselves. In the speaker’s male partner’s distinction between *being* and *having*, he conceptually denies the possibility of Jackson being any kind of holistic self, particularly a positively and male coded form of self (a genius). Instead, she is only allowed attributive genius the same way a pretty photograph might *have* a blue sky but *is* not one, does not get to claim the sky’s subject position. Similarly, shifting from being to having denies for Jackson the claim to the subject position of her own genius. This is misogyny proper (and racism and classism, as the speaker says in the next line) and it suggests internalized misogyny, or self-Othering in the way Rankine’s speaker is the voice of the distinction (not “The man I am with says Mahalia Jackson has genius,” but, “Mahalia Jackson has genius”). She asserts from her own subject

position and *then* clarifies that this distinction is not native to her but a translation of her partner's analysis. Also, she never reinserts him into the subject position of the assertion; he is only described as making the distinction. Although the follow-up critical reflections on the oppressive trappings of the distinction impart a certain exasperated and critical quality to the tone of the original statements, the overpowering and pervading nature of the male subject position is still rendered. This is not particularly something that needed proving, but here we affirm the presence of prescribed female subjectivity in these particular poets and poems.

When Beauvoir says, "along with the ethical urge of each individual to affirm his subjective existence, there is also the temptation to forgo liberty and become a thing"²⁰ (30) we know this to be true and see it in the Rankine above and everywhere we look, including inside ourselves. The woman as self-objectifying Other is a fantastic, synthetic, useful theoretical account for women seeking to understand patriarchy and themselves under patriarchy. It is an account concerned with apprehending and rendering the stringencies of phallic objectifying culture—but phallic objectifying culture is harmful precisely because it doesn't allow for the subjectivity of women. Thus, descriptive accounts of the culture don't particularly allow for women's subjectivity either in mechanical or representative ways, although they indicate the fact of it.²¹ Thus we see that a theoretical account of women's self-Othering is absolutely true, but it also replicates totalizing and prescriptive cultural patterns by way of being concerned with culture as such. Our representations of varying, complex, intricate, not intricate, female subjectivities in these five poems, then, although they are products of political and prescribed female subjectivity, are not sufficiently accounted for by the theory that surrounds and gives language to that cultural positioning. To allow them to be would be to concede a patriarchal victory.

²⁰ Read "*her* subjective existence;" Simone, darling, practice what you preach.

²¹ That is, women's subjectivity is a premise of feminist theory, not the content it centers.

Luce Irigaray describes the motion toward a similar kind of possible patriarchal victory and the flawed logic that makes it contestable. We can use this logic transferably:

Commodities among themselves are thus not equal, not alike, nor different. They only become so when they are compared by and for man. And *the prosopopoeia of the relation of commodities among themselves is a projection* through which producers-exchangers make them reenact before their eyes their operations of specula(riza)tion. Forgetting that in order to reflect (oneself), to speculate (oneself), it is necessary to be a 'subject,' and that matter can serve as a support for speculation but cannot itself speculate in any way" (Irigaray, 177).

In our case, we will take this "*prosopopoeia of commodities among themselves*" to extend to the way patriarchy ends up mechanically speaking through feminist theory and recreating the "operations of specula(riza)tion," or self-objectification. The logic flaw Irigaray points to in the second half, the "forgetting," highlights how both the culture and the woman who has been prescribed by the culture (and, for our purposes, the feminist theorist mapping the culture) do not account for the "self" part of "self-objectification." This self is materially as complex as any self who does not self-objectify because the sovereignty of self-objectification is not that vast—woman is not just the speculated "matter" she has been taught to make herself into. This lack, I want to say, is not a failure of feminist theory but a cruelty of patriarchy and evidence of its insidiousness. What is accounted for by "remembering" the speculating self is exactly the excessive model of the self I have already spoken about, where political prescription cannot, as hard as it may try, override the *fact* of female subjectivity.

What happens when we center the fact of female subjectivity and not its self-objectifying trait? Just as the social medicine of political action is a kind of leading by example, a pedagogic representation of the possibilities of action-based models of feminist womanhood, each of the poems I have written on is a pedagogic practice of female subjectivity (and my criticism aimed to be too). Take the case of the female body as *sexual* object specifically. The sexual Othering of women is a classic element of phallic culture that has a litany of implications for how women experience sex.

Straight male sexuality is the desiring of women, but straight female sexuality²² is the desiring of men *desiring them*. The desiring straight woman under patriarchy lusts not for the male body but for *her* desirable reflection in male eyes. This is symptomatic of the same sexual subjectification of man and objectification of woman that centers the male orgasm in straight sex—the male orgasm is a representation of male desire which is culturally the object of female desire and so becomes synonymous with sexual desire totally (hence, phallic culture). This is the symbolic dimension of straight sex under patriarchy and feminist theory, as I have just exercised, excellently accounts for it. But when Jane Miller provides her purposefully obscuring description of sex, “the surface of my body is excited / like sharp stabs of emotion in love,” she describes an embodied, complex—and through the excessive use of metaphor that I traced in my original reading of the poem—obfuscating, un-pinnable, and, thus, un-objectifiable experience of sex. That is, it is a representation of an *excessively subjective* experience. The excessive subjective experience does not categorically, nor in this particular case, deny the purchase of patriarchy; the phrasing of “sharp stabs” again speaks to the predatory, mediated male object relation that has found its way from the dawn of history through to contemporary sexual culture. The excessive subjective experience does, however, center the fact of female subjectivity, which is decidedly *subject* and decidedly nebulous around and about and among its prescribed codings.

This series of female poets representing their excessive subjectivities thus, on the one hand, provides a pedagogic model of possibility for conceptualizing female subjectivity in all its true, lush complexity, reactant to and never unaffected by its self-objectification, but not coextensive with it. The second function is the production, through my critical engagement with the poems, of one example, or a series of examples, of the possibility of constructing women as an anti-patriarchal class by doing womanhood as a form of relation. This is what I have described above as the

²² All women are touched by their cultural sexual Othering but it has differing effects along the axis of sexual orientation.

project's practice of Hereness. That is, we—Isabel, Jane, Etel, Mei-Mei, Rae, and Claudia (as well as Simone, Gayle, Luce, Shulamith, and the rest)—are all women Here. In the model of “Chinese Space” the self unfolds and shifts and has moments of stabilizing clarity and realization in proportion to the context it engages with. This is the latitude that is man's cultural birthright—to react proportionally and directly to context without needing to account for the self as context. But when the context we react to is other women experiencing their excessive selves—including their practices of culturally conditioned womanhood but not *reducible* to those practices—the subject woman (that is, the woman reacting to them—you, me, etc.) begins to rely or depend on or account for those other women as total subjects. This account itself is a challenge to self-objectification and the closest we have come to reclamation of subjectivity.

The female subject reacting to other female subjects' excessive subjectivities are the grounds of Hereness of this project, and constructive relinquishment is thus the mode. The poets relinquished their poems to my criticism; I relinquished my attention to their subjectivity. As over the last 40 pages they and you and I have all met Here, I have relinquished my criticism to you and I have implicitly asked you to relinquish your attention to me. This practice between women is a mode of classing—and you must class to understand and escape class—that provides an extra-political exit route from prescribed womanhood. Or, more constructively put, an access route to figuring out what it means to be the subject. Rankine writes that, “The conflation of the solidity of presence with the offering of this same presence perhaps has everything to do with being alive” (342) Irigaray writes “*So commodities speak. To be sure, mostly dialects and patois, languages hard for ‘subjects’ to understand.* The important thing is that they be preoccupied with their respective [exchange] values, that their remarks confirm the exchangers plans for them” (179). When women speak in these languages belonging to the self-objectifying subject (that is, woman, as opposed to Irigaray's quote “subject” subject, or man), but refuse to “be preoccupied with [and] confirm the exchangers plans for them” by virtue of their necessarily exceeding their exchange value (their prescribed

womanhood), they are offering their solidity and their subjectivity to other women, which has everything to do with being alive.



“The female’s individuality ... frightens and upsets [man] and fills him with envy. So he denies it in her ... and tries to convince himself and women (he’s succeeded best at convincing women) that the female function is ... such as to make her interchangeable with every other female. In actual fact, the female function is to relate, groove, love, and be herself, irreplaceable by anyone else; the male function is to produce sperm. We now have sperm banks.

In actual fact the female function is to explore, discover, invent, solve problems, crack jokes, make music—”

- from *SCUM Manifesto* by Valerie Solanas

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