

**Voicing Parts:
Contexts, Relationships, and Approaches
in Experimental Feminist Poetics**

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Declaration of Authorship

I, Nisha Ramayya, hereby declare that this thesis and the work presented in it is entirely my own. Where I have consulted the work of others, this is always clearly stated.

Signed:

Date:

Abstract

This project is an investigation of relationships between women, language, and experimental practice. The critical component focusses on examples of women writers and experimental feminist poetics; the creative component is more abstract, experimenting with ideas about women and language in mythical and imaginary contexts. I present a Tantric poetics: the critical component identifies aspects of Tantric poetics in relation to the selected writers and their works; the creative component explicates and demonstrates these aspects in relation to my own practice.

Critical Component

Contexts, Relationships, and Approaches in Experimental Feminist Poetics

The critical component presents an overview of a range of works by diverse women writers, considering these works in terms of experimental feminist poetics. This study serves to contextualise my practice and to theorise my poetics. The discussion is organised into three sections: critical and creative contexts for women's experimentations with language; different types of subjectivities and relationships between women writers; poetic and political perspectives and approaches shared by women writers. Writers are read in relation to each other in order to identify and investigate points of convergence and divergence. Due to the cultural and creative diversity of the many women and works included in this thesis, formal rather than historical perspectives are prioritised, although both are considered. This is an anti-canonical and anti-hierarchical survey, which is to say that works are not privileged according to date of publication or number of citations but are arranged horizontally according to instances of dialogue, commonality, and interchange. The writing seeks to examine as well as to enact key critical aspects of experimental feminist poetics, including dynamic exchanges between individual subjectivities, cultivation of difference, establishment of community, and proliferation of multiplicity.

Creative Component

Voicing Parts: As Of The Stones Used For Pressing

The creative component explores ideas surrounding relationships between women and language. Issues of gender and identity, and their construction and representation by means of language and literature, are investigated through experimental translations of the Sanskrit language and Hindu and Tantric mythology and ritual practice. This is a multidisciplinary and cross-genre project that works with history, religion, culture, and biography through formal experimentations with text, image, sound, and video.

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Introduction

The critical component of this research brings together multiple women writers in order to make connections between diverse women and their works, with the aim of developing a theory and a practice of Tantric poetics as a mode of experimental feminist poetics. Focussing on common features and points of comparison, I construct a community of writers that is structured around experimental feminist poetics rather than historical, geographical, or cultural fields of research. The mixture is important. I do not wish to circumvent individuality, difference, and personal circumstance in order to proclaim a homogenising notion of community and commonality in relation to women's lives or women's writing. Rather, I am interested in what happens when diverse women writers are brought into a critical study where they are received and interpreted in relation to one another. Choosing who to include, and consequently, who to exclude, is an uneasy process. Although I am not making any claims for a definitive list or canon, I acknowledge that every writer I elect becomes a representative of this account of experimental feminist poetics.

The critical component is a compilation of writers, works, theories, and practices relating to experimental feminist poetics. It is divided into five chapters, including the introduction and conclusion, which are divided into smaller sections. The creative component is similarly a compilation, but the focus is on mythological and historical figures, philosophies and beliefs relating to Tantric Hinduism, and ritual practices. It is divided into four cycles, which are divided into ten sections. In both components, I present a Tantric poetics. In the critical component, I identify and contextualise various aspects of Tantric poetics in relation to the selected women writers and their works; in the creative component, I experiment with and demonstrate these aspects. The two components work in conjunction, suggesting different ways of reading, writing, and thinking about poetry according to a Tantric poetics.

The Literary Canon and the History of Poetry: Susan Howe and Rachel Blau DuPlessis

In compiling an overview of experimental feminist poetics, it is important to think about canon formation and the gestures towards inclusion and exclusion that this suggests. In the essay 'Incloser', Susan Howe addresses the problem of choosing in relation to her work with seventeenth- and nineteenth-century North American history and literature:

The selection of particular examples from a large group is always a social act. By choosing to install certain narratives somewhere between history, mystic speech, and poetry, I have enclosed them in an organization, although I know there are places no classificatory procedure can reach, where connections between words and things we thought existed break off. For me, paradoxes and ironies of fragmentation are particularly compelling.

Every statement is a product of collective desires and divisibilities. Knowledge, no matter how I get it, involves exclusion and repression. Natural histories hold ruptures and hierarchies. (1993: 45)

As Howe notes, the act of choosing individuals has social and political implications as it involves the deliberate exclusion and repression of others. Even if one determines to provide an alternative to hierarchy, it is impossible to include and enable everything, and in deciding what to keep and what to cut we find ourselves trapped within the structures we had hoped to dismantle. Furthermore, assembling a group suggests there is a certain logic in place, identifying types and arranging matches side by side. Howe suggests that if we cannot avoid the perils of classification, exclusion, and hierarchy, we might find possibility in the ‘paradoxes and ironies of fragmentation’ that arise when different materials are placed together. The medley is a productive space.

Howe continues: ‘When we move through the positivism of literary canons and master narratives, we consign ourselves to the legitimation of power, chains of inertia, an apparatus of capture’ (1993: 46). The term ‘literary canon’ is defined as: ‘A body of literary works traditionally regarded as the most important, significant, and worthy of study; those works of especially Western literature considered to be established as being of the highest quality and most enduring value’ (*OED*). The canon is of particular interest to feminist writers because of the disparity between the men and women writers included.¹ Howe thinks through the dominance of male-authored texts in relation to her study of seventeenth-century narratives of conversion and captivity. In these narratives, women recount their experiences to a superior male figure (such as a minister) who transcribes, edits, and ‘authorizes’ their stories (1993: 50). This historical example illustrates the legitimation of male power by literary means. In the following paragraph, Howe emphasises the point with a quotation from Gertrude Stein’s poem ‘Patriarchal

¹ In *A Room of One’s Own* (first published 1928), Virginia Woolf conceptualises the lack of women in the literary canon as ‘empty shelves’ or ‘blank spaces on the shelves’ (2000: 53; 54).

Poetry’: ‘They said they said. / They said they said when they said men. / Men many men many how many many many many men men men said many here’ (Stein 1980: 132; cited in Howe 1993: 46).

An early version of ‘Incloser’ appears in the critical anthology *The Politics of Poetic Form: Poetry and its Public Policy*, edited by Charles Bernstein (first published 1990). (This essay is titled ‘Encloser’ and does not include lexicographer Noah Webster and his definition of ‘inclosure’, which Howe investigates in the later essay; see chapters two and three [72-81; 100-103].) The essay is followed by a discussion between author, editor, and contributors, in which Howe makes her critique explicit:

I am a poet. I work in the tradition of other poets who have inspired me; poets in the 20th century most of whom are men. Why are there so few women (until just recently) in this tradition? This tradition that I hope I am a part of has involved a breaking of boundaries of all sorts. [...] A recognition that there is an other voice, an attempt to hear and speak it. [...] This voice keeps on speaking *against* the grain. Yet even here when the history of this sub sub group gets written even *here* women get shut up or out. (2008: 192-193)

In the ongoing history of experimental poetics – a tradition that Howe considers herself part of, and which she believes to be committed to the rejection of former inequalities – women continue to be written out. The literary canon and the history of poetry share uncomfortable similarities.

In the essay ‘Otherhow’, Rachel Blau DuPlessis discusses literary history in terms of gender relations, noting the difficulty that women writers experience when confronting their position within the Western lyric tradition. She writes:

For ‘woman’ has always been a central site and icon for that tradition as a specially stressed sign, rather more rich than a sheep or a daffodil. ‘Woman’ has been constructed by that tradition as the permanent object of scrutiny, rather than as the speaking subject, even when, as we all know, there have always been a few women poets. A Corinna. A Praxilla.

[...] the very idea of a history of poetry is a fictional sequence formed by choices, exclusions, interests, silences, – a whole and contingent politics of discourse. We are schooled to see the history of poetry as a museum of discrete,

highlighted intact sequential objects; we may as well see them as an imperially assembled and classified but random set of fragments. Surrounded by the unwritten. And the destroyed. (2006b: 149-150)

As DuPlessis observes, the history of poetry is ‘a fictional sequence’ written by those in power, a ‘random set of fragments’ whose missing and broken pieces point towards the many ‘unwritten’ and ‘destroyed’ texts of the marginalised (which recalls the ‘exclusion and repression’ noted by Howe). In response to this discrimination, DuPlessis and Howe assume certain responsibilities:

[I] construct counter poems – counterfactual poems – postulating that there are many women poets throughout history (some real, some imagined) who have written poems uncannily positioned as having views aslant of dominant views of themselves in whatever era is being reentered. (DuPlessis 2006b: 149)

I can’t pretend that I don’t think there is a sort of pantheon of poets. Poets that have been great influences on me, whose poems I love. I am interested in getting women in that pantheon and keeping them there. (Howe 2008: 193)

Both writers wish to redress the balance, to restore women writers to the literary canon or the history of poetry by whatever means necessary – poetry, invention, criticism. However, we might also think of DuPlessis and Howe as constructing and working within a more inclusive, equal space. A space that provides a position from which to critique the dominant order; a space that enables an open network within which to create and facilitate relationships and exchanges. I understand this as a space of experimental feminist poetics.

Some Alternative Structures: Anne Waldman, Alicia Ostriker, and Juliana Spahr

In making a claim for a space of experimental feminist poetics, I am aware of the dangers of presenting a new canon or a restructuring of the history of poetry. Although I have included many women writers, there are many more that have been left out. If the literary canon is guilty of excluding, repressing, ignoring, or forgetting writers (particularly those who position themselves and their work as having ‘views aslant of dominant views’ [DuPlessis 2006b: 149]), I am wary of committing a similar crime. Therefore, instead of the canon with its implicit hierarchical structures, I propose a community of practitioners. For the purposes of this thesis the community includes Sara

Ahmed, Theresa Hak Kyung Cha, Hélène Cixous, Catherine Clément, Mary Daly, Tina Darragh, Mary K. DeShazer, Emily Dickinson, H.D., Rachel Blau DuPlessis, Lyn Hejinian, Susan Howe, Erica Hunt, Luce Irigaray, Bhanu Kapil, Audre Lorde, Harryette Mullen, Alicia Ostriker, Joan Retallack, Sappho, Juliana Spahr, Gertrude Stein, Cecilia Vicuña, and Anne Waldman. There are also those referenced in quotations, footnotes, and the bibliography whose names are too numerous to list. To better understand the implications of community as a concept through which to critique canon formation and to configure a different space, I will consider three alternatives to the canon: Anne Waldman's poetic genealogy, Alicia Ostriker's women's poetry movement, Juliana Spahr's collective and connective model.

In a series of lectures given at the Jack Kerouac School of Disembodied Poetics at Naropa Institute (now University), Anne Waldman discusses a range of writers, including Helen Adam, Jane Austen, Simone De Beauvoir, Diane Di Prima, Emily Dickinson, H.D., Sappho, Gertrude Stein, Monique Wittig, and Virginia Woolf. Waldman states that she has been immersing herself in reading works by women, and advises that such a systematic reading approach may be beneficial to all writers:

[This] is for people who just need fires lit under them to get busy reading and thinking more, reading more. I've been personally inspired by many of the texts that we are going to try to cover in this short period [...] I limited it by just including women writers. (18th July 1977) (my own transcription)

As teacher and poet Waldman shares recommendations and personal influences, encouraging students to experience texts through reading privately and listening to her readings in the lecture theatre. Each lecture opens with an invocation: a 'Southwest-Desert Indian' puberty rite, a hymn to the Mayan moon goddess, Waldman's poem 'My Lady', and invocations written by her female students. Thereafter, the lectures primarily consist of Waldman's readings of the selected texts, with very little commentary. Lectures conclude with discussions, question-and-answer sessions, and student presentations and poetry readings. The course is not organised chronologically, although some biographical and historical information is provided in the lectures, and Waldman states early on that there is no set syllabus; the course is open and flexible and student input is welcomed. (Waldman considers what she terms 'the muse problem' to be a common theme in the selected writers' works; see chapter two [53-92].)

Waldman outlines clear objectives: to encourage students to read as part of a writing practice; to familiarise students with a wide range of work, including canonical and little known texts; to demonstrate 'poetic lineage'. Waldman explains:

I wanted to just say a few words about poetic lineage, because that's kind of what we're going to be doing. I mean, I really want to be able to just jump around freely. So I'd like to do a little more Sappho [...] and then we'll move to, jump to H.D. because H.D. feels some strong affinity with Sappho and her work, at least in terms of her themes and so on. Then I wanted to read a Diane Di Prima poem which was written for H.D., so there are going to be those kinds of connections all the way through this class. (20th July 1977) (my own transcription)

Multiple writers are included in each lecture. Waldman traverses historical periods and geographical regions, reading poems and long passages of fiction from beginning to end, one after the other. She moves quickly between works, not demarcating each selection with context or overloading it with analysis. Reading aloud in her distinctive style, she creates space around each work. The juxtapositions are interesting in themselves. Waldman does not always explain the connections as she does in the above quotation; students must do the work. For example, later in the same lecture Waldman leaps from Sei Shōnagon to Emily Dickinson, which is harder to make sense of. Perhaps this is the impact of Waldman's lectures: saying very little about what she is doing and why, Waldman informally deconstructs the literary canon. Placing herself alongside Jane Austen, her students alongside Sappho, and goddess-worshipping Native American tribes alongside Gertrude Stein, Waldman's lectures enact an all-embracing community of writers, readers, and performers that exists beyond conventional critical stipulations of order and reasoning. Waldman describes her approach as a 'poetic lineage', but I would argue that she demonstrates a poetic genealogy. Lineage suggests history, hierarchy, linearity and product; whereas genealogy suggests creation, nonlinear networks, investigation and process. Waldman evades historical and literary boundaries, presenting the making of abstract and unpredictable connections as a critical practice.

I would now like to consider a contrasting approach: a history of women's writing that centres on a specific time period. A decade after Waldman's lecture series, Alicia Ostriker considers the relationship between second-wave feminism and women's writing after the 1960s. *The Routledge Critical Dictionary of Feminism and*

Postfeminism defines second-wave feminism as the North American and European political movement which strove ‘to extend the range of social opportunities open to women, but also, through intervention within the spheres of reproduction, sexuality and cultural representation, to change their domestic and private lives’ from the late sixties onwards (Gamble 2001: 310). In *Stealing the Language: The Emergence of Women’s Poetry in America*, Alicia Ostriker expands on this understanding of the movement, identifying 1960 as a ‘point of departure’ for women’s writing. She describes the emergence of a literary movement in which women writers put themselves, their bodies, and their lives into writing, developing poetic forms and genres to express their new experiences of subjectivity (1986: 7). Focussing her discussions on North American women writers working from 1960-1986, Ostriker presents her thesis:

Books have been written on many of the poets I include in this study, but few critics have attempted to understand the powerful collective voice in which they participate. My intention is to gain perspective on an emerging image, to describe a woman’s equivalent of what Whitman meant when he said he heard America singing in varied voices mysteriously united. The question I have asked myself is this: what happens when ‘we who are writing women and strange monsters,’ in May Sarton’s phrase, begin to write with a freedom and boldness that no generation of women in literary history has ever known? (8)

Ostriker suggests that the individual voices of certain North American women writers come together in conjunction with second-wave feminism to create a ‘powerful collective voice’ that sings for and with contemporaneous women. This voice signals women’s liberation and strength in solidarity. Ostriker discusses a long list of modern writers including Hélène Cixous, Mary Daly, Rachel Blau DuPlessis, Luce Irigaray, Audre Lorde, Adrienne Rich, and Anne Waldman. Concentrating on ‘the terrain these writers explore in common rather than on the real and sometimes bitter divisions between them’ (14), Ostriker orchestrates ‘varied voices mysteriously united’.

Chapter titles reveal the various concerns, attitudes, and practices common to writers in this study: ‘Divided Selves: The Quest for Identity’, ‘Body Language: The Release of Anatomy’, ‘Herr God, Herr Lucifer: Anger, Violence and Polarization’, ‘The Imperative of Intimacy: Female Erotics, Female Poetics’, ‘Thieves of Language: Woman Poets and Revisionist Mythology’. These subjects are discussed in relation to contemporaneous social and political issues, many of which were critical to second-

wave feminism: domesticity, femininity, and female identity; changing attitudes towards gender and sexuality; women's rights to contraception and abortion; gender-based violence; expanding studies of psychology and mental health; racial identity, racism, and the civil rights movement; international conflicts and the anti-war movement. Linking historical context with literary criticism, Ostriker claims that running parallel to the women's movement was a 'women's poetry movement':

It is clear that a women's movement exists in poetry as in society at large, antedating and to some extent inspiring contemporary feminism in its more political branches, while in turn being fueled by feminist thought and action and its creation of more conscious and courageous readers. (1986: 8)

Some characteristics of this movement are: work that is 'explicitly female in the sense that the writers have chosen to explore experiences central to their sex and to find forms and styles appropriate to their exploration' (7), 'encouragement of diversity' (13), 'a sense of poetic community' (13), and 'the quest for autonomous self-definition' (59). Ostriker selects numerous poets and poems that cohere with these objectives, although she states that she is led by the works themselves rather than her own arguments. She describes this method as 'inductive': 'I attempt to read by the light that poems themselves emit, rather than by the fixed beam of one or another theory which might shine where a poem is not and leave in darkness the place where it is' (13). However, there are slight contradictions between mission, method, and outcome. In assuming shared characteristics and aligning writers with poetics and politics to which they may not necessarily subscribe, Ostriker risks overwhelming individual poems with the glare of her personal enterprise.

DuPlessis critiques Ostriker's version of history in the essay 'Blue Studio: Gender Arcades':

In the pedagogy of contemporary poetry, people may use movements or connections in poetics, groupings, manifestoes through which to read texts. [...] Of course, organizing reception by relation to some grouping is quite hard on outrider poets. What then to do with women poets when only some of the poets of this era found a home in 'the women's poetry movement.' [...] Should 'feminist poet' be limited to people explicit about their connection with the women's movement? And what is the possible content of a category like 'feminist poet' (some thematic or formal positions? some ideology?) or 'woman

poet' (physical gender?))? What does one do with the modern and contemporary burst of formally innovative women writers? (2006a: 61)

Ostriker's 'women's poetry movement' does not include all women writers of the time, and the absence of certain experimental poets is notable. Furthermore, some of the poets Ostriker does include might object, as DuPlessis stresses: '[there are] people who might well accede to feminism as a political and social demand for gender justice but who might *not* particularly engage with the "women's poetry movement"' (61). DuPlessis is mentioned several times in *Stealing the Language*, and her critique signals discomfort with the inclusion. DuPlessis's comment about outrider poets invokes Waldman. In 'The Outrider Legacy', an interview conducted by Mark DuCharme in 1992, Waldman describes the outrider tradition as a combination of various literary scenes: 'Beat, Black Mountain, New York School, San Francisco Renaissance [and the Poetry Project at St. Mark's Church and Naropa] – [...] outside the academic mainstream – more experimental, risky, oppositional. The Pound / Williams / Stein lineage' (2001: 166). Although Waldman understands her work as arising from various poetic communities and lineages, apparently she does not align herself to any groups based on gender or feminist politics. Ostriker's overview of women's writing during second-wave feminism is ambitious both in terms of its thesis and in the sheer number of texts and genres it includes. However, Ostriker understands the significance of the 'collective voice' in terms of harmony – 'varied voices mysteriously united' – and excludes writers who do not agree aesthetically, socially, or politically. The nature of inclusivity of Ostriker's women's poetry movement is problematic with regards to which writers are chosen and why, and whether or not these writers accept the circumscribed conditions of the grouping.

Juliana Spahr's *Everybody's Autonomy: Connective Reading and Collective Identity* is not a study of women writers, although, with the exception of a section on Bruce Andrews, each chapter focusses on a woman writer: Theresa Hak Kyung Cha, Lyn Hejinian, Harryette Mullen, and Gertrude Stein. Spahr is interested in reading as a collaborative practice that creates community. She writes:

I argue here that when we tackle literary criticism's central question of what sort of selves literary works create, we should value works that encourage connection. By 'connection' here I mean works that present and engage with large, public worlds that are in turn shared with readers. I mean forms of writing that well represent and expand changing notions of the public, of everybody.

And I mean forms of writing that take advantage of reading's dynamic and reciprocal nature. (2001: 4-5)

Spahr makes clear that hers is a formal rather than a historical or sociological approach, noting that 'many of the works I examine here have been critiqued as apolitical formalism and for not adequately taking up representational concerns' (5). Investigating notions of identification and non-identification between readers and works, Spahr considers works that are open and expansive, and able to adapt to and invigorate discussions about identity according to the context in which they are read. Furthermore, in choosing texts that use 'nonstandard English, multilingualism, puns, disconnected syntaxes, and repetition' and that address issues surrounding 'gender, ethnicity, and race' (6), Spahr demonstrates an awareness of multiple contexts and discussions. Indeed, thinking about literatures of minority, immigrant, exile, and postcolonial experience, she states that 'one other goal of this book is to place what are often considered marginal forms of American literature in a larger, cross-cultural context' (7).

Spahr discusses reading in terms of pedagogy: learning to read as a communal and socialising process, the nature of poetry courses in higher education, the challenges of teaching experimental poetics, the relationship between reading and literary criticism in contemporary theory, Spahr's personal memories of discovering Stein in school when 'everything that I thought I knew about reading changed' (2001: 15). It might be worth comparing Spahr's pedagogical approach with Waldman's. First, a note on their respective institutional experiences. In 1974, Tibetan Buddhist teacher Chögyam Trungpa Rinpoche founded Naropa Institute in Boulder, Colorado. Waldman describes it as 'the first Buddhist-inspired, contemplative college in the West' (2001: 85). Methods of teaching poetry were consciously unconventional:

We dubbed our particular poetry-teaching lineage 'outriders,' in that we were not interested in being 'academic' poets – vying for tenure – but wanted to 'honor poetry itself' by having it taught by practicing writers whose primary preoccupation was poeticizing rather than official teaching. (86)

In contrast, although Spahr is also a practising poet and is engaged with 'various grassroots, non-university-affiliated poetry scenes' (Spahr 2001: 8), she is also what Waldman terms an academic poet. She has taught at Bard College, Siena College, State University of New York at Buffalo, and currently works at University of Hawaii at

Manoa. However, despite the institutional differences between the teachers, both are concerned with students' reading habits: what, how, and how much they read. Both affirm the practice of communal reading, of reading and listening together in class. Spahr describes an exercise to teach poems that might be 'disconcerting' to readers unfamiliar with experimental texts:

I begin by having members of the class read the poem aloud a few times in different ways and then briefly discuss what might be disconcerting about this poem. Each of us then picks a phrase that struck us in some way and write out of, in response to, or in dialogue with that phrase (using the chosen phrase as the opening words of our own piece) for about ten minutes. When ten minutes are up, someone reads the original poem aloud. Each person interrupts this reading by reading their new piece when the reader reaches 'their' first line. What is created is a vocal hypertext [that] dramatically demonstrates the richness of these works when approached with collective reading methods and which gives students a sense of the vast possibilities of the collective reading experience.
(63)

Waldman's lectures and Spahr's exercise are both examples of active and collective critical practices: reading, listening to, and making connections between multiple works; reading, writing through, and collaborating on interpretations of a single poem. Waldman and Spahr demonstrate critical practices that consider diverse writers and works, investigating conjunctions without assuming or assigning common purposes. As Spahr writes: 'to see anything clearly [we] need to see its points of contact with other things' (71).

In different ways and for different reasons, several of the writers mentioned thus far investigate the interplay between singularity and multiplicity, between individual and community:

I think of a poet as being a receptor of many voices. A mixture of cultures and voices. But each poet is one voice – a singularity. (Howe 2008: 193)

In the particular we discover the universal. [...] Where [women's poetry] speaks in its own array of voices, it enlarges literature. [...] Without a sense of the multiple and complex patterns of thought, feeling, verbal resonance, and even

collective, and I do not argue that membership in one group or another is a necessity.² What I do suggest is that close attention to relationships – some obvious, some obscure – between diverse writers and works might reveal interesting and informative patterns. By recognising these patterns, we might find new and productive perspectives from which to approach writers and works and the world in which they exist.

Critical Methodology and Overview of the Thesis

My critical methodology involves making connections and finding significance in those connections. More specifically, I trace patterns in women's writing, finding evidence for these patterns in source materials and references (allusions, quotations, endnotes, bibliographies), methodologies (critical and creative writings that reflect on process), and biographical information (interviews, letters, historical accounts). Working from these patterns, I imagine and construct a community of women writers, understanding community as a group of individual women whose works contain enough commonalities that a collective interpretation may be productive. I do not argue in favour of a universal women's style, an essentialist set of characteristics that might be used to define and prescribe writing by women. Rather, I am curious about whether women writing in different contexts have anything in common, and, if they do, why that might be. I discuss women writers who explore issues surrounding gender, sexuality, race, class, and other aspects of identity and experience in their work, and who self-consciously investigate the constructed identities of woman writer and experimental feminist practitioner. Avoiding malpractice as far as possible (such as forcing connections to insert writers with certain identities for the sake of checking boxes), I bring together a varied and vibrant group of writers whose works enable the collective interpretation.

I am also interested in how different critical terms, metaphors, and source materials for my practice reveal different aspects of what I am doing.³

² In the essay 'Writing Poetry/Writing About Poetry: Some Problems of Affiliation', Marjorie Perloff describes some of the challenges of belonging to a community: 'Affiliation [...] is a two-edged sword. [...] Without affiliation, it seems, it is impossible in a mass society to function at all, but affiliation, whether academic or literary, whether based on gender or race, ethnicity or class, Ivy League or large state university, can easily become a straightjacket' (2004: 267).

³ My thinking is informed by George Lakoff and Mark Johnson's *Metaphors We Live By*, which explains the cognitive linguistic theory that 'our ordinary conceptual system, in terms of which we both think and act, is fundamentally metaphorical in nature' (2003: 3).

- I do community work. The word community signifies a group of people who are equally ranked within their group but who are distinct from the larger society in which they live; they share interests and ideologies separate from the dominant cultural order. Therefore, community implies equality, ‘social cohesion; mutual support and affinity’ as well as inequality, exclusion, and proscription (*OED*). Perhaps these tensions between minorities and the majority might be correlated with tensions between women writers and patriarchal tradition, or between experimental feminist poetics and conventional literary history. I would like to build a community of feminist practitioners founded on affirmation and mutual exchange: a community open to the contemporary writer and whichever position she may choose to assume.⁴ Community is also rich etymologically, sharing roots with common, commonality, commonplace, commune, communication, and communion.
- I assume a subtle difference between community and the collective. Like community, the collective is a group of people with shared interests and ideologies. However, while community suggests communication, relationship, and exchange, the collective implies agreement, solidarity, and outcome (the original senses of ‘collect’ and ‘collection’ relate to money and taxes). A communal approach signifies an open-ended approach shared by multiple people, whereas a collective approach signifies an approach shared by multiple people towards a mutual goal. I focus on the former.
- I map, chart points, ‘establish the relative positions, or the spatial relations or distribution’ (*OED*). My map of experimental feminist poetics begins with six points: Theresa Hak Kyung Cha, Hélène Cixous, Rachel Blau DuPlessis, Lyn Hejinian, Luce Irigaray, and Virginia Woolf. I was exposed to ideas about gender, writing, and experimentation through reading these writers, and they continue to affect my critical and creative practices. Reading closely, I am transported (or inducted, to use Ostriker’s term): Cha leads me to the muse; Cixous and Irigaray lead me to embodied writing and questions about subjectivity; DuPlessis leads me to H.D. who leads me to ancient wisdom and to Sappho; DuPlessis leads me in another direction, to Anne Waldman who leads

⁴ This community is not necessarily a woman-only space, although that environment may offer women writers certain cultural and creative freedoms.

me to disembodied poetics, to Naropa, to Bhanu Kapil; Hejinian leads me to Gertrude Stein, who leads me to Juliana Spahr, who leads me to Harryette Mullen and to Cecilia Vicuña; Woolf leads me to our mothers and unknown sisters, and to the common voice. The map expands, filling with points, lines, circles, brackets. This writer references that one, these writers all discuss the same subject, those writers are discussed by the same critic, these writers send letters to each other, those ones ardently disagree. My argument is structured around such intertextual and poetic relationships, coincidences, and overlaps.

- I trace: track and tread footprints, make and cross lines. This is related to lineage and genealogy. The latter is defined by Ann Vickery in *Leaving Lines of Gender: A Feminist Genealogy of Language Writing*:

It would emphasize the problems of negotiating both the imaginary and the social by focusing on particulars rather than the absolute. A genealogy interrogates the cultural space of poetry by approaching it horizontally in time (poetry as practice) rather than vertically (poetry as canonical tradition). This involves reframing many aspects of the poetic practice in order to link text with context. (2000: 15)

My rejection of the canonical structure follows Vickery's argument. I would describe my approach as horizontal, focussing on poetic practice as opposed to chronology and literary tradition. I am interested in nonlinear and non-hierarchical genealogies.

- I weave, form, fabricate, interlace, and spin, 'working into an elaborate and connected whole' (*OED*). Related to this, I make networks: 'any netlike or complex system or collection of interrelated things (*OED*). Weaving suggests artistic process and the possibility of product; making networks suggests social construction and the possibility of community. They are metaphors for each other. I imagine the lines as distinct histories, geographies, and cultures; the intersections as points of commonality (convergence and divergence); the interstices as the spaces beyond similarity and difference in which creative possibilities multiply.

- I read weaving as women's work, a cultural association explored by many writers.⁵ In Mary Daly's *Websters' First New Intergalactic Wickedary of the English Language*, 'The Network' is defined as 'the Gyn/Ecological context: tapestry of connections woven and re-woven by Spinsters and Websters; the Net which breaks the fall of Journeyers experiencing the Earthquake Phenomenon and springing us into New Space' (the New Space is 'Space on the Boundary of patriarchal institutions; Space created by women which provides real alternatives to the archetypal roles of fatherland; Space in which women Realize Power of Presence') (1988: 149; 84). According to Daly's vision, the network is woven by independent working women who form and fabricate a context for women's knowledge and women's power.
- I rely heavily on the dictionary, on etymology, on the multiplicity of the definition. In *The Network*, Jena Osman (who is led by Cecilia Vicuña) enters words in order to see. She writes:

CONNECT. CONNECTION, CONNEXION

See nexus

Nectare or nex was to bind which led to nexus, which is knot

[...]

to be confused with. utter. one direction always shadowed by another.

(2011: 9)

The dictionary reveals connections: which words are bound to which meanings, the options that exist. The dictionary also reminds us that decisions have been made about the order of significance in each entry, that the lexicographical authority arranges words and meanings according to the social and cultural conditions of the time. I try to remember this and to choose words responsibly.

Almost all of the writers I discuss are associated with literary movements, cultural scenes, anthologies and journals, although they are not defined by those groups. For example: Language writing (Hejinian, Howe, Darragh, Retallack), *I'll Drown My Book: Conceptual Writing by Women* (Cha, Howe, Kapil, Mullen, Retallack, Spahr),

⁵ Sigmund Freud considered weaving to be women's only contribution to civilization, as Luce Irigaray scrutinises in *Speculum of the Other Woman*: 'Whence the importance she vests in fabrics and cloth to cover herself with. [...] Which is, however, more or less, an "imitation" of the "model" Nature gives in the pubic hair. Woman can, it seems, (only) imitate nature' (1985: 115).

Chain journal (Osman, Spahr, Vicuña). Some of the women I discuss are aware of each other, have influenced each other, have collaborated and disputed. Others have never heard of each other: they live in different centuries, countries, or cultural spheres. Rather than provide detailed information about each writer's biography and literary background, I have chosen to focus on a few contexts to provide an overview of experimental feminist poetics. In the first chapter, I consider the terms 'experimental' and 'feminist' in relation to critical and creative concepts: Medusa's laugh, the open text, unintelligibility, and re-making. In the second chapter, I consider some of the different relationships that exist between women writers, focussing on women who acknowledge the influence of others on their work and of their own influence on others. The relationships are arranged into three categories: memory and muse, mother and daughter, reaction and revision. In the third chapter, I provide examples of shared approaches: dictionary, mythology, and ritual. The critical component is not intended to be a definitive list of contexts, relationships, and approaches, but is a demonstration of how aspects of experimental feminist poetics might be identified, analysed, and connected.

Emphasising the practice of poetics requires acknowledging one's environment and assuming a position; being aware of oneself and others, and making connections; devising and applying methods, and moving towards oneself and others. In the critical component, each section considers a particular aspect of poetics. When viewed as an interwoven argument, these aspects become parts of a whole: a Tantric poetics. Tantra (from the Sanskrit verb 'to spread or weave') emphasises pattern and practice, and comprises multiple sources and processes that work together to produce a particular arrangement or effect. I italicise and indent discussions of Tantric poetics and references to the creative component to mark instances of interrelationship and exchange between my critical and creative research and practice. In the creative component, my concerns with women, language, and community extend to mythical, historical, and biographical scopes. The women are allegories,⁶ goddesses, writers, and family members; the languages are conceptual, cultural, and manifold; the communities imaginary, esoteric, generalised, and intimate. Comprising text, image, sound, and video, the creative

⁶ My understanding of allegory is informed by Marina Warner's *Monuments and Maidens: The Allegory of the Female Form*: 'A symbolized female presence both gives and takes value and meaning in relation to actual women, and contains the potential for affirmation not only of women themselves but of the general good they might represent and in which as half of humanity they are deeply implicated' (1996: xx).

component thinks through experimental feminist poetics and Tantra, presenting multiple possibilities for reading and writing practices. My objective is to demonstrate that my contextualisation of experimental feminist poetics informs my theorisation of a Tantric poetics that is developed in my creative practice.

Tantric poetics positions itself in the margins in order to observe, critique, and subvert; Tantric poetics urges non-hierarchical structures of community. Tantric poetics emphasises various aspects of weaving: the frame, the threads, the methods and movements, the patterns as they come into being. (Tantra is a verb and a noun, a dialogue and a doctrine, a religious tradition and a series of metaphors; see 'Notes on Tantra' [199-209].) The practitioner works with multiple source materials, forms, and processes. She is interested in dissonance; she orchestrates instances of aesthetic, social, and political disagreement and clash. Harmonies emerge and are submerged in the discord. (See 'Notes on Voicing Parts' for an arrangement [278-290].)

Contexts

Introduction: *We Who Love to Be Astonished* and Erica Hunt

I am interested in a community of experimental feminist poetics that recognises, encounters, and includes multiple contexts. The critical anthology *We Who Love to Be Astonished: Experimental Women's Writing and Performance Poetics* compiles a community of diverse writers. Editors Laura Hinton and Cynthia Hogue bring together women from different racial, social, and disciplinary backgrounds, writers whose varying politics and poetics often prevent them from being discussed in the same conversation. They state: 'While the essays published here examine writings by experimental women who innovate through cultural hybridization, the volume itself also innovates through a similar crossing of borders, by a contiguous mapping of critical paths' (2002: 4). The term 'contiguity' is borrowed from Erica Hunt, whose essay 'Notes for an Oppositional Poetics' (published in *The Politics of Poetic Form* in 1990) informs Hinton and Hogue's objectives. Hunt writes that oppositional cultures signify those that assume 'a critically active stance against forms of domination', including 'dissident cultures as well as "marginalized" cultures, cutting across class, race and gender' (2008: 198). She notes that many oppositional writers have been influenced by social and political movements, suggesting a way of thinking about opposition that preserves difference while recognising common cause. Hunt states:

Contiguity, as a textual and social practice, provides the occasion to look beyond the customary categories of domestic and international, politics, history, aesthetics, philosophy, psychology, sociology and so on. As a social practice it acknowledges that the relationships among groups who share an interest in changing the antidemocratic character of the social order is not as oblique as their individual rhetoric would represent. As a reading and writing practice, it suggests new synthesis that move out of the sphere of a monoculture of denial; syntheses that would begin to consider the variance between clusters of oppositional writing strategies with respect for what has been achieved by each and a sense of the ground that holds it in place. (205)

A contiguous poetics encourages oppositional texts to be read in relation to one another, to move between literary, cultural, and feminist influences and practices. By means of this approach, Hinton and Hogue hope to 'reconfigure the patterns by which we will receive experimental poetry and fiction to come' (2002: 12). Hinton and Hogue describe

mapping and crossing borders, Hunt writes of holding ground; perhaps their respective practices might be understood as marking and moving between critical and creative contexts and positions.

‘Context’ is defined as: ‘The whole structure of a connected passage regarded in its bearing upon any of the parts which constitute it; the parts which immediately precede or follow any particular passage or “text” and determine its meaning’ (an obsolete sense of the word is ‘the weaving together of words and sentences’) (*OED*). The contexts in this chapter provide a critical framework for the thesis, suggesting relationships between poetics and politics, women writers and feminist practitioners. They constitute strands of discussion that influence my argument: Medusa’s laugh, the open text, unintelligibility, and re-making. These contexts are themselves contextualised with reference to *écriture féminine* and Language writing, and are arranged in chronological order to suggest a trajectory of experimental feminist poetics. However, as the contexts present contrasting and overlapping positions, I consider this to be a contiguous rather than a historical practice. The selected writers hold various beliefs with regards to gender and feminist theory, but they share what Hinton and Hogue term a ‘feminist proclivity’: ‘to astonish by presenting what previously remained not only unseen but *unlooked for* in mainstream culture’ (2002: 5).⁷ In their concern with what writing might mean for women, they demonstrate Hunt’s oppositional poetics in terms of women’s relationships with work and world: the conviction that writing ‘enhances our capacity to strategically read our condition more critically and creatively in order to interrupt and to join’ (2008: 212).

Medusa’s Laugh: Hélène Cixous

French feminism is a theoretical term covering ‘a variety of feminist writing produced in France from the student revolt of May 1968 onwards’, but typically referring to works by Hélène Cixous, Luce Irigaray, and Julia Kristeva (Gamble 2001: 234-235). These women did not consider themselves to be part of a group, and despite certain commonalities – for example, the influence of Simone De Beauvoir; concern with sexual politics, equality, and difference; engagement with psychoanalysis; experimentation with critical and creative writing – intellectual disagreements

⁷ Hinton and Hogue trace their interest in astonishment to a phrase in Lyn Hejinian’s *My Life*: ‘We who “love to be astonished”’. They interpret Hejinian’s work as conveying a female subject who astonishes new subjects: ‘a new language and vision about her gendered body and voice; and the making and unmaking of signs that represent her’ (2002: 5). The afterword to *We Who Love to Be Astonished*, Rachel Blau DuPlessis’s ‘Draft 48: Being Astonished’, also engages with Hejinian’s work.

overwhelmed any possibilities there may have been for community and mutual support (Burke 1978: 843-855; Jones 1981: 247-263). A key area of interest and dispute amongst these feminist writers is the subject of *écriture féminine*:

What unites this form of feminist criticism is the belief that there is an area of textual production that can be called 'feminine', that it exists beneath the surface of masculine discourse, and only occasionally comes to the fore in the form of disruptions of 'masculine' language. A further assumption is that woman is given a specific identity within the masculine structures of language and power, and that she must strive to challenge it.⁸ (Gamble 2001: 222)

Language is crucial to understanding how women are perceived in society and how women perceive themselves. In order for equality to become a social reality, women's status within 'the masculine structures of language and power' must be addressed. Thus, Cixous opens her essay 'The Laugh of the Medusa' (first published in French in 1975) with a mission statement:

I shall speak about women's writing: about what it will do. Woman must write her self: must write about women and bring women to writing, from which they have been driven away as violently as from their bodies – for the same reasons, by the same law, with the same fatal goal. Woman must put herself into the text – as into the world and into history – by her own movement. (1976: 875)

Cixous declares that there is such a thing as 'women's writing' and that it is an active force. She refers to a 'universal woman subject', whom she defines according to 'her inevitable struggle against conventional man' (875). This 'woman subject' has been violently driven away from her self, from her body, from history and the world. Now she must write and restore herself through writing; she must return to her body and to the text, and in doing so revise her place in history and world. For Cixous, *écriture féminine* is a way out of the struggle of sexual inequality, a liberation for the universal woman subject.

⁸ Lynn A. Higgins discusses the difficulty of translating French feminist theory, particularly the term *écriture féminine*. She explains: 'the adjective *féminine* does not automatically denote femininity in either the American sense of ladylike decorum or in the Freudian sense of female destiny. It is simply the adjectival form of "female" or "woman"' (1985: 14). Keith and Paula Cohen's translation of 'The Laugh of the Medusa' translates *écriture féminine* as 'women's writing', which I maintain when quoting the essay. Otherwise, I use the French.

Cixous acknowledges that there is 'no general woman, no one typical woman' but that she is interested in the historical significance of woman as a category (1976: 876). Cixous argues that we live in a patriarchal and phallogocentric society in which 'masculine' values are privileged and 'feminine' values are diminished or ignored. Masculine values include 'opposition, hierarchizing exchange, the struggle for mastery which can end only in at least one death' (893), all of which support and strengthen the status quo. Cixous spends little time discussing masculine values, choosing instead to describe feminine values such as multiplicity, equality, creativity, compassion, experience, and transformation. Although these notions of masculinity and femininity are historical and cultural, and not necessarily representative of individual men and women, Cixous presents this opposition as a necessary structure for thinking about and working towards equality. Ultimately, the separation and conflict entailed by opposition are antithetical to Cixous's aims of love, generosity, and creativity without limits: she strives for 'the ensemble of one and the other, not fixed in sequences of struggle and expulsion or some other form of death but infinitely dynamized by an incessant process of exchange from one subject to another' (883). Relationship is essential, regardless of gender. However, this mutual exchange can be achieved only when women are equal to men and feminine values equivalent to masculine values; thus, women must redress the balance by realising, articulating, and appreciating themselves and feminine values.

The necessary change in perspective is signalled by the title of the essay. Cixous listens to and celebrates a female figure who has been reviled and silenced since her mythic origins: 'You only have to look at the Medusa straight on to see her. And she's not deadly. She's beautiful and she's laughing' (1976: 885). In the Classical Greek myth, Medusa was decapitated by a male hero, which the psychoanalyst Sigmund Freud (whom Cixous mentions throughout the essay) interprets as an analogy for castration (Freud 1963: 212-213). According to Freud, the terror that Medusa elicits in her enemies is the fear of castration. Women do not experience this fear, which Cixous reads as a particular strength:

Unlike man, who holds so dearly to his title and his titles, his pouches of value, his cap, crown, and everything connected with his head, woman couldn't care less about the fear of decapitation (or castration), adventuring, without the masculine temerity, into anonymity, which she can merge with without annihilating herself. (1976: 888)

In contrast to the male body, the female body is not conceived as a whole that will lose all meaning upon losing a single part; woman can lose parts of herself and give parts away because ‘secretly, silently, deep down inside, she grows and multiplies’ (888). Cixous presents the female body as the exemplar of feminine values:

If she is a whole, it’s a whole composed of parts that are wholes, not simple partial objects but a moving, limitlessly changing ensemble, a cosmos tirelessly traversed by Eros, an immense astral space not organized around any one sun that’s any more of a star than the others. (889)

The workings of the female body, its capabilities, its drives and pleasures are not arranged in hierarchical structures; the female body demonstrates the feminine values of fluidity, multiplicity, and indefinability. Therefore, in order to communicate feminine values, women must write their bodies:

Write your self. Your body must be heard. Only then will the immense resources of the unconscious spring forth. Our naphtha will spread, throughout the world, without dollars – black or gold – nonassessed values that will change the rules of the old game. To write. An act which will not only ‘realize’ the decensored relation of woman to her sexuality, to her womanly being, giving her access to her native strength; it will give her back her goods, her pleasures, her organs, her immense bodily territories which have been kept under seal. (880)

Woman must write because her body must be heard; if only men write the female body, women’s ‘immense resources’ will never be known. Non-assessed feminine values cannot be conveyed by masculine methods and meanings; they operate according to their own rules (which are not regulations in the sense of the ‘old game’) (880). Woman must write her self in order to hear and experience her self, to realise and reveal her long-concealed powers. The concept of writing the body presents structural and semantic possibilities for representing self and world. Cixous emphasises pleasure in nonlinearity and multiplicity, encouraging the woman writer to perceive and enact interconnections between her subjectivity and her work.

The declaration that woman must write is based on two premises: woman must write because history lacks women writers – ‘the number of women writers (while having increased very slightly from the nineteenth century on) has always been ridiculously small’ (1976: 878); woman must write because it is her nature to write, her body was made for writing – ‘Write! Writing is for you, you are for you; your body is

yours, take it' (876). The former view is shared by many feminist critics (see the introduction [5-8]); the latter is problematic and more difficult to understand. Cixous argues that according to patriarchal structures, man has been 'coaxed toward social success, toward sublimation' whereas woman has been identified according to her embodiment: 'it has been in body that women have responded to persecution, to the familial-conjugal enterprise of domestication, to the repeated attempts at castrating them' (886). Patriarchy has reduced woman to her biological functions and the services she can provide in terms of sexual pleasure and procreation. In order for woman to reclaim her body, and to refigure her experiences of pleasure and procreation, she must write. Cixous is careful not to come to any conclusions about how woman should experience desire – 'Each body distributes in its own special way, without model or norm, the nonfinite and changing totality of its desires' (891); or about whether or not woman should become a mother 'Either you want a kid or you don't – *that's your business*' (890). Nonetheless, she identifies common aspects of female embodiment:

Almost everything is yet to be written by women about femininity: about their sexuality, that is, its infinite and mobile complexity, about their eroticization, sudden turn-ons of a certain miniscule-immense area of their bodies; not about destiny, but about the adventure of such and such a drive, about trips, crossings, trudges, abrupt and gradual awakenings, discoveries of a zone at one time timorous and soon to be forthright. A woman's body, with its thousand and one thresholds of ardour – once, by smashing yokes and censors, she lets it articulate the profusion of meanings that run through it in every direction – will make the old single-grooved mother tongue reverberate with more than one language.
(885)

Cixous maps the female body as a complex site of desire, passion, enthusiasm. These drives and sparks have lain dormant, repressed by patriarchy or concealed in fear of retribution. Woman must refuse further subordination and silence, her body must speak and be heard. Her meanings exceed any single language (or any single usage of language); thus, in writing her body she will give both body and language new life.

The female body has not been expressed because the traditional (phallogocentric) forms of language that have been used to write her have not been adequate; syntactically, the linear movements and straightforward significations of phallogocentric writing do not have the capacity to represent the female body in all its excess. Woman must write with a new language and in doing so destroy the traditional forms:

It is volcanic; as it is written it brings about an upheaval of the old property crust, carrier of masculine investments; there's no other way. There's no room for her if she's not a he. If she's a her-she, it's in order to smash everything, to shatter the framework of institutions, to blow up the law, to break up the 'truth' with laughter. (1976: 888)

Language is conceived as institution, law, and 'truth' – all are masculine investments, and all must be smashed. Cixous employs explosive terms; the subversion she calls for takes the form of a violent rebellion. However, the weapon Cixous urges is laughter – the laugh of the Medusa. Cixous transforms the female monster into a beautiful laughing woman; the monster who petrified onlookers and was decapitated (or disempowered) by man is reimagined as a woman who destroys patriarchy in order to empower women. This transformation requires a 'volcanic' upheaval, during which cultural symbols will be refigured and codes rewritten. *Écriture féminine* is the new language that will 'blow up the law', giving woman the creative freedom she needs to write.

Cixous believes that 'writing is precisely the very possibility of change, the space that can serve as a springboard for subversive thought, the precursory movement of a transformation of social and cultural structures' (1976: 879). Change may be enacted once it has been imagined in language. *Écriture féminine* is critical to the liberation of women because once feminine values are demonstrated in writing, it follows that they may become realised in other ways. However, Cixous cannot offer specific instructions:

It is impossible to define a feminine practice of writing, and this is an impossibility that will remain, for this practice can never be theorized, enclosed, coded – which doesn't mean that it doesn't exist. But it will always surpass the discourse that regulates the phallogocentric system; it does and will take place in areas other than those subordinated to philosophico-theoretical domination. It will be conceived of only by subjects who are breakers of automatisms, by peripheral figures that no authority can ever subjugate. (883)

As a context of experimental feminist poetics, the significance of *écriture féminine* lies in its difference from traditional phallogocentric writing: it rejoices in unknowability and the lack of definitions and regulations to prescribe it. The practice can be revealed only by its practitioners – those who challenge hierarchies and institutions, who exist outside

the patriarchal system, who are ignored or ridiculed even as they dismantle the structures. Cixous herself is such a practitioner – her writing is abstract, textured, fast-paced, moving in many directions simultaneously. ‘The Laugh of the Medusa’ presents itself as a manifesto, with its rousing assertions, its call to arms (or writing implements), the multiplying lists of objectives and demands. And yet it offers no clear guidance; readers must work through the dense imagery to glean practical information, reading closely to collect clues on how to write. This obscurity coheres with Cixous’s message – each woman must write her own self and her own body. It is the collective force of individual practices that will bring about transformation.

Tantric poetics encourages pleurably subversive practices. The practitioner experiments with the possibilities of writing self and body in order to reimagine and re-identify with herself and others. (See ‘A Story of Tārā’ and ‘Tārāpīṭha’ for representations of subjectivity and structure, body and form, by means of the other [269-274; 275].) The undertaking may be serious, but laughter – a term that encompasses mental and physical experiences of joy, pleasure, amusement, lightness, and ridicule – is considered to be a powerful strategy. (See ‘Cows’, ‘A Story of Kamalā’, ‘Sanskrit Breakdown’, and ‘A Story of Mātangi’ for laughter in various contexts [176; 184-187; 260; 264-268].)

The Open Text: Lyn Hejinian

Lyn Hejinian is associated with Language writing. This term refers to the work of a number of poets and critics involved with *L=A=N=G=U=A=G=E* magazine and the subsequent anthology, both of which were edited by Charles Bernstein and Bruce Andrews from 1978-1984.⁹ In the introduction to *The L=A=N=G=U=A=G=E Book*, Bernstein and Andrews acknowledge the difficulty of defining the diverse work included in the anthology. However, two shared characteristics might be: a commitment to ‘exploring the numerous ways that meanings and values can be (& are) realized – revealed – produced in writing’, including paying close attention to vocabulary, grammar, subject matter, perspective, and other aspects of writing and language; the related belief in the social and political agency of poetry (1984: ix-xi). They explain:

⁹ *L=A=N=G=U=A=G=E* is the best-known of a number of journals and presses associated with Language writing, including: *A Hundred Posters*, edited by Alan Davies; *HOW(ever)*, edited by Kathleen Fraser, Beverly Dahlen, Rachel Blau DuPlessis, and others; *Poetics Journal*, edited by Lyn Hejinian and Barrett Watten; *Qu*, edited by Carla Harryman; *Roof*, edited by James Sherry; *This*, edited by Robert Grenier and Barrett Watten; and *Tottel’s*, edited by Ron Silliman.

One major preoccupation of L=A=N=G=U=A=G=E has [been] to generate discussion on the relation of writing to politics, particularly to articulate some of the ways that writing can act to critique society. [...] This view of the role and historical functions of literature relates closely to our analysis of the capitalist social order as a whole and of the place that alternative forms of writing and reading might occupy in its transformation. It is our sense that the project of poetry does not involve turning language into a commodity for consumption; instead, it involves repossessing the sign through close attention to, and active participation in, its production. (x)

Bernstein and Andrews are interested in writings that analyse and critique capitalist society, and particularly in writings that demonstrate these critiques through linguistic and literary experimentation. When language is used and consumed as a commodity – when words are valued for their ‘properties as instrumentalities’ (x), for how they might serve writer and reader – language is made to comply with capitalist demands. However, as Bernstein and Andrews argue, when language is foregrounded and explored, when works offer new ways for writer and reader to interact with language, language presents radical possibilities for social and political transformation.

Relationships between writer, reader, and text are a key concern. In the essay ‘Text and Context’, Andrews proposes reading as a communal experience:

Language work resembles a creation of community and of a world-view by a once-divided-but-now-fused Reader and Writer.

[...]

Altering textual roles might bring us closer to altering the larger social roles of which textual roles are a feature. READING: not the glazed gaze of the consumer, but the careful attention of a producer, or co-producer. The transformer. [...] It’s not a product that is produce, but a *production*, an event, a praxis, a model for future practice. (1984: 35-36)

Experimental works pose a challenge to the reader, they may not be easy to understand, their meanings not immediately apparent. The reader must actively participate with the text and work hard to produce meaning: ‘Meaning is not produced *by* the sign, but by the contexts we bring to the potentials of language’ (33). Meaning does not exist in the words, on the page; the poem does not signify in isolation. Rather, the reader brings her

own contexts to the text – associations, references, histories, which activate the work in ways that exceed the writer’s agency. Therefore, the reader is a co-producer, collaborating with the writer in the production of the text. There is no hierarchy in place, no dominating subject. Writers and readers are imagined as equal members of a community based on exploration and exchange. Andrews suggests that this model of practice is a world view, signifying ‘a utopian force only begun to be revealed’ (36).

In *Leaving Lines of Gender: A Feminist Genealogy of Language Writing*, Ann Vickery considers several women associated with Language writing, including Tina Darragh, Lyn Hejinian, Susan Howe, Joan Retallack, and Hannah Weiner. She also mentions women on the periphery such as Harryette Mullen and Anne Waldman. Noting the historical overlaps between Language writing and second-wave feminism, Vickery discusses Language writing as ‘a mode of feminist exploration and critique’ that differs from much of the writing produced during the women’s movement (2000: 8). She argues that the latter writing privileges accessible language, the articulation and affirmation of female experiences, and content that encourages women to ‘feel confident enough to express their feelings of difference’ in order to ‘build a feeling of collective experience and empowerment’ (8). However, this writing does not scrutinise language, how language operates and how it is used to manifest and sustain the dominant cultural order (8). In contrast, Language writing entails intellectual engagements with language. It does not support the belief that ‘women’s lives could be described only through transparent and immediate forms of representation’ (38). Noting second-wave feminism’s ‘underlying assumption of consensus in sisterhood’ (9), Vickery observes that the notion of ‘a centralized or coherent narrative’ was felt to be problematic by some women writers (37). Vickery emphasises the importance of community to Language writers in terms of shared writing practices, urban scenes (especially in San Francisco’s Bay Area; Washington, D.C.; and New York City), journals and small-press publishing. However, community does not equate to consensus or ‘uniformity of political direction’. Accordingly, Vickery suggests we think of language writing as ‘a field of rich and diverse feminisms’ (50). This field coheres with my understanding of a space of experimental feminist poetics that enables difference, relationship, and exchange.

I am interested in the relationship between theory and practice in Hejinian’s work, and in her experiments with and explications of form and narrative. Hejinian

opens *The Language of Inquiry* with the recognition that this collection of essays will be read as poetics rather than poetry (2000: 1). The dictionary defines poetics as:

The aspect of literary criticism that deals with poetry; the branch of knowledge that deals with the techniques of poetry.

The creative principles informing any literary, social or cultural construction, or the theoretical study of these; a theory of form.

Poetic composition; the writing of poems. (*OED*)

Poetics encompasses varied processes of reading, writing, and theorising poetry, from specific literary features to the position of poetry within wider social and cultural contexts. Hejinian describes her perspective:

These essays assume poetry as the dynamic process through which poetics, itself a dynamic process, is carried out. The two practices are mutually constitutive and they are reciprocally transformative. It is at least in part for this reason that poetry has its capacity for poetics, for self-reflexivity, for speaking about itself; it is by virtue of this that poetry can turn language upon itself and thus exceed its own limits. (2000: 1)

There is a subtle shift between the dictionary definition and Hejinian's understanding of poetics. According to Hejinian, poetics is the process of reading, writing, and theorising poetry, and poetry is the process and medium of poetics. These are interdependent processes, working together to explore and expand understandings of language. Thus, Hejinian continues:

I realize that I have tended to cast *poetics* into the role of articulating how and why a poet works, elaborating her reasoning and reasons. *Poetics*, in this respect, seems as much a philosophical realm as a literary one. But it is a pragmatic realm, nonetheless; the reasons and reasoning that motivate poet (and poem) are embedded in the world and in the language with which we bring it into view. (2)

Poetics is concerned with the drives and intentions of writer and text, with the social and cultural structures that cause and constitute the work. At the end of the introduction, Hejinian affirms her position within a community:

These essays, then, are rooted in conversations with and writings by a number of friends, mostly poets and particularly those either closely or loosely associated with Language writing. For almost thirty years now, I have depended on the friendship and on the challenges they have offered. They have provided a context for my work; they have given it meaning and made the undertaking of it meaningful, at least to me. (4-5)

This recalls some of Andrews' ideas in 'Text and Context': meaning is produced partly through the contexts in which a work originates, circulates, and is eventually read and received. Poetics can thus be figured as a collaborative process.

Hejinian's essay 'The Rejection of Closure' (first published in the 'Woman & Language' issue of *Poetics Journal* in 1984) might be read as a manifesto for experimental poetics. In this essay, Hejinian calls for the rejection of the 'closed text', which is 'one in which all the elements of the work are directed toward a single reading of it' (2000: 42). This refers to texts that invite a single authoritative interpretation, conventional texts that convey unequivocal meanings as if they were transactions between writer and reader. Hejinian proposes an ideal alternative:

In the 'open text', meanwhile, all the elements of the work are maximally excited; here it is because ideas and things exceed (without deserting) argument that they have taken into the dimension of the work.

[...]

The 'open text', by definition, is open to the world and particularly to the reader. It invites participation, rejects the authority of the writer over the reader and thus, by analogy, the authority implicit in other (social, economic, cultural) hierarchies. (43)

In accordance with her aims for the open text, Hejinian does not name patriarchy or capitalism as the authority she wishes to reject. Instead, she turns away from 'the cultural tendencies that seek to identify and fix material' (43), thus undermining the conventions that create and sustain the authority in question.

Hejinian provides literary and theoretical contexts for her concept of the open text, and references Cixous, Irigaray, and *écriture féminine*. She quotes a passage from Cixous's essay 'Castration or Decapitation?' in which Cixous writes: 'A feminine textual body is recognised by the fact that it is always endless, without ending. There's

no closure, it doesn't stop' (Cixous 1981: 53; cited in Hejinian 2000: 55). Cixous's description of a textual body without closure sounds very much like Hejinian's open text, and by including this quotation Hejinian seems to invite the comparison. Vickery states that many Language writers, including Hejinian, Howe, and Retallack, were familiar with French feminism. They were interested in *écriture féminine* and what it seemed to offer in terms of 'exciting theoretical models that could challenge traditional poetic form' (Vickery 2000: 52). Indeed, Vickery suggests that 'The Rejection of Closure' might be read as an investigation of *écriture féminine*:

As her letters reveal, Hejinian, although certainly attracted to particular concepts such as the open text, had a relation to French feminism as ambivalent as it was enthusiastic. At one stage to be called 'Closure and Confusion,' this early title for Hejinian's essay is suggestive of her struggle to think through a productive relation between French feminism and poetic method. (54)

Hejinian was wary of what she perceived to be the essentialism in Cixous's and Irigaray's arguments (53). Hejinian agrees with Cixous with regards to a fundamental relationship between desire and writing, but she takes issue with the particular configuration the French feminists offer: 'The narrow definition of desire, the identification of desire solely with sexuality, and the literalness of the genital model for a woman's language that some of these writers insist on may be problematic' (Hejinian 2000: 55). Vickery argues that this is a misreading of Cixous and Irigaray, and that Hejinian reads their metaphors 'in their most literal sense, overlooking the deconstructive politics that also informs the writing' (Vickery 2000: 54). In contrast with her readings of Cixous and Irigaray, Hejinian proposes a desire that extends beyond embodiment and sexuality:

The desire that is stirred by language is located most interestingly within language itself – as a desire to say, a desire to create the subject by saying, and as a pervasive doubt very like jealousy that springs from the impossibility of satisfying these yearnings. (Hejinian 2000: 55)

This is an epistemological desire – exploratory, expressive, creative – and it both emerges from and is enacted by language. It is also a desire that knows it will never be satisfied, for everything cannot be known, everything cannot be said.¹⁰ However, these

¹⁰ As Hejinian expresses in *My Life*: 'As for we who "love to be astonished," each new bit of knowledge is merely indicative of a wider ignorance' (2002: 77-78).

impulses and tensions contribute to the ‘maximally excited’ elements of the open text. A maximally excited open text is one that exceeds itself, exceeds writer and reader, demonstrating a poetry that ‘can turn language upon itself and thus exceed its own limits’ (1). Hejinian suggests methods for writing one such text:

Whether the form is dictated by temporal constraints or by other exoskeletal formal elements – by a prior decision, for example, that the work will contain, say, x number of sentences, paragraphs, stanzas, stresses, or lines, etc. – the work gives the impression that it begins and ends arbitrarily and not because there is a necessary point of origin or terminus, a first or last moment. The implication (correct) is that the words and the ideas (thoughts, perceptions, etc. – the materials) continue beyond the work. (46-47)

Hejinian proposes a combination of formal constraint, which we might think of as closed, and material (ideas, words, and things), which we might think of as open. Here, form and material are not binary opposites, but two aspects of poetic practice that must be considered in relation to each other. Hejinian deliberates:

Can form make the primary chaos (the raw material, the unorganized impulse and information, the uncertainty, incompleteness, vastness) articulate without depriving it of its capacious vitality, its generative power? Can form go even further than that and actually generate that potency, opening uncertainty to curiosity, incompleteness to speculation, and turning vastness into plenitude? In my opinion, the answer is yes; that is, in fact, the function of art. Form is not a fixture but an activity. (47)

Hejinian describes ideas, words, and impulses as raw materials, which she equates to a primary chaos that may be generated and constructed by form. Formal concerns can produce and shape conceptual ambitions without imposing restrictions. Thus, form is not only structure and support, but a process driven by creative and epistemological desires.

Hejinian emphasises relationships between theory and practice. Her poetic autobiography *My Life* (first published in 1980) can be read in relation to ‘The Rejection of Closure’. Structured around a set of procedures – the number of lines per section and the number of sections in the work match Hejinian’s age at the time of

writing (forty-five years old¹¹); each section begins with a title phrase, which is repeated (sometimes in altered form) throughout the text – *My Life* is an investigation of voice, narrative, memory, and linguistic and literary convention. It is interesting to observe how Hejinian’s ideas about poetry and poetics as ‘mutually constitutive’ and ‘reciprocally transformative’ work in practice. *My Life* is not an autobiography in the sense of a linear first-person narrative from birth onwards. The sentences in each section are written from different perspectives; they include concrete and abstract observations, philosophical concepts, and memories and descriptions of life events. It is not always apparent how sentences and sections relate to each other, and Hejinian’s method of organising the work (apart from the procedures already mentioned) is unclear. There are many sentences in *My Life* that seem to reflect on the process of writing and concurrently provide the reader with hints on how to approach the work: ‘Only fragments are accurate. Break it up into single words, charge them to combination’ (2002: 75); ‘This autobiography of expansive sensations is divided horizontally’ (85); ‘To some extent each sentence has to be the whole story’ (93); ‘If one can’t see a connection one must assume a decision’ (131).¹² The reader is advised to approach the sentence as a narrative unit. Each sentence makes an equal contribution, and must be considered in relation to the entire work and not just the preceding and following sentences. The reader determines how much effort she is willing to make to find the connections claimed by the text.

If each sentence is the whole story, lines such as ‘I wouldn’t look up’ (2002: 44), ‘Shufflers scuff’ (66), and ‘The throat singing of the Eskimo in katajak, revolving’ (164) are equally significant, though they may be harder to grasp or place. The text invites readers to make their own responses and Hejinian rewards individual interpretations: ‘An extremely pleasant and often comic satisfaction comes from comprehension, the fit, say, of comprehension in a reader’s mind to content in a writer’s work’ (121). Of course, such a fit is momentary, the connection is easily lost. But the relationship between text and meaning is not paramount. As Hejinian remarks in ‘The

¹¹ The first edition of *My Life*, written when Hejinian was thirty-seven, is composed of thirty-seven sections of thirty-seven lines each.

¹² Juliana Spahr finds that some of Hejinian’s grammatical shifts do reveal narrative progress: ‘While this book begins with an investigation of what the “I” wants to be, at a certain point the declaration of “I wanted to be...” changes into “I am...” This change, if one was doing a straightforward developmental reading of the work (a possibility that is often overlooked by critics who celebrate *My Life*’s postmodern impulse), could be read as emblematic of the transition from childhood to adulthood’ (2001: 78-79). Spahr’s reading does not negate the instability and complexity of Hejinian’s representations of identity, but confirms the view – as asserted by the final quotation in the above sentence – that *My Life* is not randomly or arbitrarily put together.

Rejection of Closure’, there are inescapable gaps between what one wants to say and what one can say, between ourselves and things, between words and world (2000: 56). Despite our desire to close these gaps, the displacement is productive:

A central activity of poetic language is formal. In being formal, in making form distinct, it opens – makes variousness and multiplicity and possibility articulate and clear. While failing in the attempt to match the world, we discover structure, distinction, the integrity and separateness of things. (56)

The writer of the open text does not attempt to say everything that can be said, and the reader of the open text does not despair when comprehension eludes her. In the gaps between desire and failure, alternative models of poetry and knowledge await discovery. Hejinian’s concluding remarks emphasise the liberating potential of difference, which is also expressed in *My Life*: ‘If words matched their things we’d be imprisoned within walls of symmetry’ (2002: 98). The open text is a space in which form might be investigated, and difference demonstrated; as Hejinian writes: ‘Of course, this is a poem, that model of inquiry’ (149).

Tantric poetics investigates the capacities and constraints of form. Working in conjunction with form and material, the practitioner opens and closes structures, and constructs and deconstructs narratives. (See ‘A Story of the Mahāvidyās’ for reflections on structure and narrative [215-223].) Gaps are exaggerated and connections invented between subject and object, self and other, referent and non-referent; the practitioner makes space for the inquiry. (See ‘Notes on Sanskrit’ for examples of exaggeration and invention [161-164].)

Unintelligibility: Joan Retallack

Joan Retallack presents her interpretations of the relationships between poetry, poetics, and world in *The Poethical Wager*. Poethics is Retallack’s attempt to theorise the relationship between *poesis* (‘creation, production, poetry, a poem; the process of making’ [OED]), *ethos* (‘the characteristic spirit of a people, community, culture, or era as manifested in its attitudes and aspirations; the prevailing character of an institution or system’ [OED]), and *ethics* (‘moral principles; personal or religious responsibilities; codes of conduct’ [OED]). Poethics is based on the recognition that aesthetic traditions and the experiences of daily life are profoundly connected: ‘Every poetics is a consequential form of life’ (2003: 11). Retallack explains:

The most pressing question for me is how art, particularly literature, helps form the direction and quality of attention, the intelligences, the senses we bring into contact with contemporary experience. A related question concerns the ways in which contemporary poetics invites us into an ethos of the collaborative making of meaning. ‘Making,’ poesis, is always key. This is an imaginative activity that materially affects the life one lives in language, the life of language at large, the world of which language is both made and inextricable part. Another way to ask the question of poethics is, How can writing and reading be integral to making sense and *newsense* (sometimes taken for *nonsense*) as we enact an on-going poetics of daily life? (12)

This could be read as an extension of Bernstein and Andrew’s argument in the introduction to *The L=A=N=G=U=A=G=E Book* (Retallack is associated with Language writing). Language must be understood in terms of its social and cultural impact; experimental poetics – the type that invites the reader to participate in the production of meaning – can provide opportunities for working through the relationship between language and world. This also recalls Hejinian’s discussions in ‘The Rejection of Closure’, although Retallack’s and Hejinian’s ideas about the gap between language and world are quite different. Whereas Hejinian discusses the gap as a rich site for epistemological exploration, Retallack focusses her attention on the necessity of engagement. Vickery summarises Retallack’s view: ‘the writer must gamble on the “very realistic, if improbable chance” that his or her contribution will have some sort of significant effect’ (2000: 168-169). Poethics emphasises the responsibility of the writer. The experimental work may obscure its ideas and ethics in its linguistic activity, but the writer is not unaccountable. No matter how difficult the work is, it is not detached from the world. Retallack argues that the writer must accept her responsibility to observe, to situate herself and her work in the world in which she lives, and to remember; she must ask: ‘How does one develop a contemporary aesthetic, a way of being an artist who connects with the unprecedented character of one’s times?’ (2003: 18).

Retallack presents her ideas about the social and political agency of experimental poetics in a series of essays about the experimental feminine. She references the cultural binary between masculine and feminine (not the biological continuum that exists between humans) to explain how this duality forms the basis of her argument:

Feminine dyslogic – the need to operate outside official logics – is essential because official logics exist to erase any need to operate outside official logics, that is, the feminine. If this seems circular it's because it is. The habitus tends to be self-reinforcing. What's unintelligible within the rules of intelligibility of an institution is either invisible or threatening. The masculine is most intelligible in its need to prove it isn't feminine – pliant, forgiving, polylogical. (2003: 92)

Retallack organises various binary opposites around the fundamental opposition of masculine and feminine: tradition and experiment, logic and dyslogic, intelligible and unintelligible. That which is masculine forms the dominant order and reinforces the status quo. Antithetical to authority, tradition, and homogeneity, the feminine is inherently experimental in its deviation. However, these binary opposites are not absolute, Retallack imagines them as part of a dynamic continuum: 'these terms (as terms) describe only the most easily identifiable limits at either end of a sinuous, moving range of nuanced possibilities' (99). They must be read according to their constantly shifting patterns and contexts, and any interpretations of them must be adapted accordingly. The binary is constructed, identified, and destabilised simultaneously and persistently. Considering the question 'Why do binaries keep returning even after they've been deconstructed?' Retallack responds:

They are in antagonistic definitional relation to one another. You can't have one without the other. You can't have either without both. Masculine-Feminine, Rational-Irrational...are terms that locate limiting conditions for a very complex range of mixes and possibilities that wiggle, slip, slide, elide, combine, recombine, morph, mongrelize. (99)

The binary is an acknowledgement of the many ways in which exchange may occur, involving division and inequality as well as interdependency and reciprocity between diverse elements.

Retallack differentiates her concept of the feminine from other theories. She characterises Cixous's and Irigaray's identification of the feminine as: 'open, diffuse, multiple, complex, decentered, filled with silence, fragmented, incorporating difference and the other' (2003: 135). In contrast, Retallack's own identification of the feminine, presented via her alias Genre Tallique, is 'marginal, metonymic, juxtapositional, destabilizing, heterogeneous, discontinuous...' (135). At first glance these lists of characteristics seem comparable, particularly in terms of openness and multiplicity, and

the challenges to hierarchical structures that these concepts imply. How might we understand the difference between ‘decentered’ and ‘marginal’ or ‘fragmented’ and ‘juxtapositional’? Being decentered suggests being displaced, whereas being marginal suggests claiming a position; being fragmented suggests destruction and isolation, whereas being juxtapositional suggests productive relation. Moreover, Retallack’s terms are active, assertive characteristics that identify the feminine as affirmation rather than negation. According to Retallack’s M-F binary, the masculine is constructed according to its need to prove what it is not – ‘pliant, forgiving, polylogical’ (92) – and the feminine is defined by what it is, how it behaves, and where it positions itself. Taking ‘The Laugh of the Medusa’ as a point of comparison, although Cixous focusses on female desire and creativity, she also emphasises how woman suffers under patriarchy: timid, repressed, subservient, her body ‘the ailing or dead figure’ (1976: 880). Additionally, Cixous tells us that one cannot talk about ‘a female sexuality, uniform, homogenous, classifiable into codes’ (876); feminine practice cannot be defined, cannot be ‘theorized, enclosed, coded’ (883); woman’s language ‘does not contain, it carries; it does not hold back, it makes possible’ (889). Retallack responds to these negative configurations of feminine fearfulness, oppression, and obscurity with her proposition of the experimental feminine as feminist practice.

Reflecting on the common imagery of women’s ‘docile bodies and silent minds’ in feminist writing, and of the theoretically constructed ‘historical endurance and power we call “women’s silence”’, Retallack provides an alternative argument (2003: 110). She refigures ‘women’s silence’ as a surprisingly full and forceful space:

Silence itself is nothing more or less than what lies outside the radius of interest and comprehension at any given time. We hear, that is, with culturally attuned ears. The angles of our geometries of attention are periodically adjusted, sometimes radically reoriented.

[...]

If silence was formerly what we weren’t ready to hear, silence is currently what is audible but unintelligible. The realm of the unintelligible is the permanent frontier – that which lies outside the scope of the culturally preconceived – just where we need to operate in our invention of new forms of life drawing on the power of the feminine. (111-112)

If silence is what has been deliberately ignored, or selectively unheard, the unintelligible offers a space to discover and test new and different approaches, logics, and values. The unintelligible is a feminist strategy because it operates outwith patriarchal culture, challenging the very existence of the boundary. Challenging boundaries is vital to the experimental feminine. Formally, in terms of literary genre and convention, and socially and politically, in terms of gender and status: 'To make real gender trouble is to make genre trouble. Not to parody, but to open up explorations into forms of *unintelligibility* (unintelligability?) as transgeneric feminine frontier' (112). Indicating the aptitude, activeness, and power of the unintelligible through word play, Retallack stresses the profound effects of a change in perspective from silence to the unintelligible.

The experimental feminine is not a practice reserved for women. In fact, Retallack finds more examples of the experimental feminine in works by men, although her discussions focus on women writers.¹³ This is partly because there is no direct correlation between men and women and their cultural domains. But it is also because until the latter half of the twentieth century, the circumstances of women's lives have not enabled their intellectual and creative experimentations:

The power of the feminine is simultaneously admired and despised. By definition it trespasses on forbidden or uncharted territory. Hence, it's been only those who have had, first, the social backing and, then, the poetical courage (or naïveté) to risk ostracism by the academy who have felt able to take on the challenge. [...] Until relatively recently women have not had the social (public) power and cultural standing to take such risks without almost certainly disappearing beyond emotional and socially constructed vanishing points.¹⁴
(2003: 136)

¹³ In *Revolution in Poetic Language*, Julia Kristeva presents her theory of the semiotic *chora*, a rhythm or play that constitutes the space before grammatical categorisation and linguistic articulation. The semiotic *chora* is formed by unconscious drives – Kristeva refers to Freud's theories of the anal, oral, and death drives – that 'connect and orient the body to the mother' (2002: 37). Indeed, the maternal body is 'the ordering principle' of the semiotic *chora* (37). However, as Retallack observes, Kristeva's examples of writers whose work suggests the semiotic *chora* are all men (Mallarmé, Bataille, Lautréamont, Joyce) (Retallack 2003: 140). Although there are suggestions of Retallack's unintelligible in Kristeva's descriptions of the semiotic *chora* – 'indifferent to language, enigmatic and feminine, this space underlying the written is rhythmic, unfettered, irreducible to its intelligible verbal translation' (Kristeva 2002: 38), Retallack takes issue with Kristeva's suggestion that the semiotic *chora* is 'logically and developmentally "previous" to language' (Retallack 2003: 140). In contrast, Retallack argues that 'the feminine is in language from the start' (140).

¹⁴ Retallack recalls Virginia Woolf's speculations about unknown women writers in *A Room of One's Own*, extending the thought experiment from Shakespeare's sister (the gifted woman whose creativity was stifled, eventually resulting in her suicide) to 'lost female literary revolutionaries' who experimented with language and were never heard from again (2003: 136).

As Retallack observes, with the exception of a few women writers, including H.D., Gertrude Stein, and Virginia Woolf, women are barely mentioned in discussions about innovative literature. However, a change is signalled with ‘the advent of “Language”-associated poetics in the 1970s’ (137). Here Retallack cites Vickery’s *Leaving Lines of Gender* as being ‘essential for understanding the feminine nature of this (almost entirely male impresarioed) entry into the American experimental tradition’ (137).

Although the experimental feminine is a conceptual and aesthetic choice that is available to both men and women, and although it has been predominantly chosen by men, Retallack suggests that it may have more profound consequences when enacted in work by women. In a quotation attributed to Genre Tallique, Retallack simultaneously makes and distances herself from a clear statement about feminist poetics: ‘Feminist writing occurs only when female writers use feminine forms...’ (2003: 127). Retallack explains her equivocal position: ‘It may indeed be that too much authority has vested the rhetorics of feminist theory. And with just that patriarchal charge we seek to escape’ (127). Without instructing women and feminists about how they should or should not write, and without assuming a position of authority, Retallack builds her argument. She suggests that the experimental feminine ‘[relates] more closely to the life experiences of women,’ perhaps as a result of women’s experiences as outside, other, oppositional (135). However, rather than make pronouncements, Retallack concludes her discussions of the experimental feminine with some examples of women’s writing; she quotes Theresa Hak Kung Cha, Tina Darragh, and Lyn Hejinian, among others. The significance of these works is not in their ‘expression of gender’ but in their ‘enactment of genre’:

Nothing can matter without words coming alive – spinning contextual, connective, associative webs that not only apprehend the multidimensional realities of what we care about but enable our variant-radiant intelligences to range toward transformations of the complexities of desire and cultural realization. (143)

Retallack argues that feminist poetics involves the articulation of silence through the conscious activation of the unintelligible, and the development of writing practices that demonstrate a sensitive and generous engagement with the world that surrounds us. In drawing readers’ attention to writers working with ‘other languages, other worlds’, Retallack invites us to listen to and enter into dialogue with unintelligible and marginalised women writers. Retallack suggests that explorations related to ‘complex

realism, reciprocal alterity, polyculturalism, polylingualism, contemporaneity' are crucial to the demands of our increasingly diverse social and cultural realities (13). The poetical response to this 'complex and perilous world' is 'a search for new and aesthetic models [that] is inevitably, haphazardly, contingently under way' (13).

Tantric poetics assumes intelligible and unintelligible forms, and speaks in intelligible and unintelligible voices. (The presiding deity of Tantric poetics is Vāc, the unintelligible goddess of voice, speech, language, and sound; see 'Where Speech Abideth', 'Book 8, Hymn 100, Rig Veda', and 'Her Voice as an Instrument of Thought' [154-155; 156-157; 212-214].) Tantric poetics is interested in spreading lines of communication across great distances (historical, geographical, cultural) to extend explorations of unintelligibility. The ethos and ethics of Tantric poetics are enthusiastically unfixed – Tantric poetics is committed to the inevitability, haphazardness, and contingency of the search.¹⁵

Re-Making: Rachel Blau DuPlessis

Rachel Blau DuPlessis explicates and demonstrates concepts of experimental feminist poetics in her critical and creative work. In *Blue Studios: Poetry and Its Cultural Work*, DuPlessis considers feminist directives of reading and interpretation: 'No more and no less than the re-seeing of every text, every author (male and female), every canonical work, everything written, every worldview, every discourse, every image, every structure from a gender perspective' (2006a: 23). As for what feminist poetics might mean for writing, DuPlessis expounds her arguments in *The Pink Guitar: Writing as Feminist Practice*. This collection of essays includes 'Family, Sexes, Psyche: An Essay on H.D. and the Muse of the Woman Writer', DuPlessis's creative investigation into the life and work of poet Hilda Doolittle. H.D. had social and literary relationships with a group of male poets, including Ezra Pound and D. H. Lawrence, who encouraged and critiqued her writing. However, their influence was overpowering, and eventually, as DuPlessis writes, H.D. 'had to reject these men, in order to survive' (2006b: 23).

¹⁵ In response to a panel discussion of diversity, feminism, and poetics hosted by DuPlessis (part of a conference on translation at Barnard College, 16th November 1996), Cecilia Vicuña anticipates eventual unintelligibility in the question: 'each one of our lines | is continuing | and completing the next | so when we're all read | way back | in the future | HOW are we going to sound | speaking | to each other | becoming | once more | voice' (2012: 141-142).

Through her discussions of H.D., DuPlessis constructs a general argument about the struggle of the woman writer. She states:

So while the sexual system works both ways, the cultural system works in one direction only. To write, the woman must struggle against the weight of systems, and the center of the struggle is her need to take control of her story. She must de-story the old story, lift the weight of the accustomed tale so she can tell her own. [...]

For every word, each cadence, each posture, the tone, the range of voices, the nature of plot, the rhythm of structures, the things that happen, events excluded, the reasons for writing, the ways she's impeded, the noises around her, vocabularies of feeling, scripts of behaviour, choices of wisdom, voices inside her, body divided, image of wonder.

All must be re-made. (24-25)

Historically, cultural systems have been dominated by men, and literary conventions have been constructed and maintained by men. Women have found themselves to be unequal participants in these cultural and literary systems, and as a result have been unable to 'take control' of their stories and to express their experiences with the available – manmade – tools such as voice, plot, rhythm, vocabulary. The woman writer struggles against the inequality she faces within patriarchal society; she struggles against the canons and conventions of a male-authored literary history; she struggles to find words, forms, and styles to express her experiences of herself and of the world around her. Thus, she must develop her own methods in order to survive. DuPlessis understands the survival of the woman writer as the decision to keep writing in the face of inequality and suppression: 'the career of the woman poet is the career of that struggle' (29). In H.D.'s absolute terms, survival is writing itself: 'write, write or die' (1972: 7). Feminist writing practices involve practical and symbolic re-makings of language as part of a greater effort towards gender equality.

Wells (first published 1980) contains several examples of DuPlessis's early attempts at re-making. Two poems in particular – 'Medusa' and 'Eurydice' (written 1973-1978) – typify her feminist strategy of the time. In the former, DuPlessis takes the culturally familiar figure of Medusa and reimagines her, recalling Cixous's approach. DuPlessis's Medusa does not laugh, but she thinks, feels, and experiences pain; she is

written with a subjectivity that conventional mythic representations do not allow her.¹⁶ Looking back on her career, DuPlessis describes this approach as ‘a redirection of mythopoesis: telling the “other side” of the [story]’ (2006a: 224). She writes:

That gender binarism was an important invention of the time, for it allowed us to bring women as a socially formed entity up to concerted scrutiny. My sense of the potential of feminist critique was imagining the whole world differently. [...] This was my attempt to turn away from culture as it had structured the female figure in the lyric. (224)

Feminist practice involved close examinations of cultural images of women, the consideration of how women were represented and how that related to women’s positions in society. DuPlessis recounts the notion shared by some women writers that by transforming cultural representations social change would follow. Focussing their attentions on ever-present, ever-silent female figures, they found the ‘hoarse whispering silence [especially] hard to bear and especially generative’ (2006b: 146). This recalls Retallack’s discussions of silence and the writers that seek to represent its unintelligibility. However, as Retallack contends in a critique of the feminist strategy described by DuPlessis, and which is directed at Alicia Ostriker: ‘Transforming a life is not the same as redecorating a poem or house with stolen or even legitimately acquired accessories. [...] What is most useful to us now – images of the female or enactments of the feminine?’ (2003: 122). Simply presenting new images of women is ineffective, the methods of representation must be transformed in order to effect change. Retallack marks a distinction between an ‘interpretation of a fossil signified’, which is a new definition of a familiar figure, and a ‘collaborative engagement with interdynamically developing forms’, a new approach to language, poetic form, and critical and creative process (122).

In the essay ‘Otherhow’ (written 1985-1989), DuPlessis traces the progression of her feminist practice from creating a new perspective in the story, as in ‘Medusa’ and ‘Eurydice’, to re-making its form. She describes a poetics of rupture:

¹⁶ As Alicia Ostriker highlights in *Stealing the Language*, DuPlessis addresses the major event in Medusa’s life that often goes unmentioned: her rape by Poseidon, after which she was transformed into a monster (1986: 237). Cixous’s and DuPlessis’s versions of Medusa are examples of what Ostriker terms revisionist mythmaking: women writers’ investigations of embedded gendered images as ‘a means of redefining both woman and culture’ (211).

To refuse the question as asked. To break through the languages of both question and answer. To activate all the elements of normal telling beyond normal telling.

Write the unwritten, paint the undepicted?

Must make a critical poetry, an analytic lyric, not a poetry that ‘decorates dominant culture’ (to cite Michael Palmer) but one which questions the discourses. This situation makes of representation a site of struggle. (2006b: 145)

DuPlessis refuses that which is linear and transparent in language; she rejects the presumptions of the binary. The story must be broken open, and each part activated (evoking Hejninian’s open text, in which ‘all the elements of the work are maximally excited’). This is not ‘giving voice to the voiceless’, which is what DuPlessis used to claim she was doing (144). This is investigating the notion of voice itself, challenging the linguistic and literary conventions that have determined representation for so long, acknowledging the gendered conditions and inequalities of language and literature and starting again from there. The struggle of the woman writer is ongoing, but it will not be overcome by adhering to the rules of the binary – for example, male/female, question/answer, written/unwritten, voiced/silent. DuPlessis’s aim is to disrupt the system. She provides a list of terms relating to rupture:

delegitimate

deconstruct

decenter

destroy

dismantle

destabilize

displace

deform

explode (145)

We might compile a set of literary terms to pair with these actions: tradition, representation, function and capability of poetry, narrative, poetic form. Expanding the exercise, social and cultural terms might be included: power, inequality, identity, homogeneity, order, meaning, truth. The essay concludes with a multiple choice

sentence illustrating the rupture of grammar, narrative linearity, and semantic authority (it also applies to Retallack's ideas about genre trouble):

I am a GEN { $\begin{matrix} \text{der} \\ \text{re} \end{matrix}$ made by the writing; I am a GEN { $\begin{matrix} \text{re} \\ \text{der} \end{matrix}$ read in the writing.¹⁷ (145)

From 1986-2013, DuPlessis worked on *Drafts*, six books containing 114-115 poems (the number is deliberately unspecific) and a series of visual collage poems. DuPlessis's original aim was to write an endless poem. In the preface to *Surge: Drafts 96-114*, she explains her formal approach:

[*Drafts*] attempts, structurally and in its poetics, to over-pass any number of opposites. This work is conceptual and expressive, odd and even, ending and not ending. This work comprises individual poems to be read separately and poems in a communal setting that, like any grouping, is both integrated and not-integrated, melding and jostling.

[...]

Drafts has made a structure where you cannot say which text has priority, that is, which text glosses and which text states, which is the original and which is the elaboration. I wanted the sections to be self-contained, each readable on its own, and readable in any order. [...] *Drafts* is a work that as a whole ruptures the binaries that might contain it. (2013: 1-2)

Suggestively, DuPlessis compares her collection of poems to a community. The individual elements of *Drafts* fit together and they do not; they exist in a self-contained system and they gesture outwards; they collide; they unite. The elements are not necessarily equal, neither are they hierarchical. They function in relation, affecting each other's interpretations depending on the pattern in which they are read. This structure represents DuPlessis's feminist and 'utopian' goal: 'to treat differences in a non-binarist manner' (9). By rupturing binaries and orchestrating complex relationships between

¹⁷ DuPlessis borrows her idea for this multiple choice sentence from Emily Dickinson: '[A way to rupture the poem], in an homage to Emily Dickinson, could draw upon her rhetorical strategy of indicating variants, to keep the poem open, perhaps; to indicate the enormous changes of meaning, even in a narrow compass, that could be achieved by a minute (in some cases) alteration of a word' (2006b: 148).

individual elements in a communal setting, DuPlessis's politics are demonstrated – not simply described – through form.¹⁸

In 'Draft 49: Turns & Turns, an Interpretation', DuPlessis reflects on her changing poetics. Remembering the early stages of her career, when "the woman's side," / the "other-side of everything" – / emerged with full force,' DuPlessis tries to explain her current position:

I can't pin down exactly what I want
except the form of conviction. So longing and lingering,
I slide away from lyric, away from myth, away from narrative
into the wilds of segmentivity,
trying for motion and telling, for engagement and toll
marked simultaneously. (2004: 122)

Here she moves away from her earlier practices, the myths and narratives telling 'the "other-side of everything"'. Using this quotation from H.D.'s poem 'The Moon in Your Hands', DuPlessis acknowledges the influence of her literary foremother and emphasises the need for revision. The 'wilds of segmentivity' is a curious phrase. Segment signifies part of a whole; not necessarily a broken part of something that has been destroyed, like a fragment, but a self-contained part that is whole in itself. In *Blue Studios*, DuPlessis explains: 'Segmentivity – the ability to articulate and make meaning by selecting, deploying, and combining segments – is the underlying characteristic of poetry as a genre. Narrativity and performativity summarize the particularities of fiction and drama, but segmentivity distinguishes poetry' (2006a: 199). She describes segmentivity in relation to sequence:

Poetry can then be defined as the kind of writing that is articulated in sequenced, gapped lines and whose meanings are created by occurring in bounded units, units operating in relation to chosen pause or silence. The line segment creates meanings. The acts of making lines and making their particular chains of

¹⁸ *Drafts* may be thought of as an example of Hejiniian's open text. 'Draft 48: Being Astonished' acknowledges Hejiniian's influence in its title, and also references Tina Darragh, Harryette Mullen, and Retallack. DuPlessis's poem is an investigation of feminist poetics and a celebration of women writers who work through the struggle: 'Women astonished, always, inside / writing: how their possibilities / get undercut at times; at times even denied. / Still those loud bright notes and scintillant / scryings, arise, are here, are now and newly mint!' (2004: 217).

rupture, seriality, and sequencing are fundamental to the nature of poetry as a genre. (199)

Although DuPlessis characterises units of poetry as lines, *Drafts* demonstrates an understanding of units as sentences, paragraphs, references, images, pages, sections, and individual ‘drafts’. Wilds are wastelands, unknown places in which one wanders, goes astray, gets lost, and makes unimaginable discoveries. The phrase suggests a complicated yet productive gathering of diverse elements, a combination of units that emphasises sequence and rupture simultaneously. Furthermore, the elements or units might refer to writers, works, and readers; source materials, contexts, and methods; and wider social and cultural issues – perhaps the ‘wilds of segmentivity’ is a community of experimental feminist poetics. The poem continues:

All this
from stubborn commitment.
An ethical vision amid compromise. The moment when you
say no, you will not,
the moment when you say yes, you will.
Choose and choose again. Uneven blasts blowing.
It is time, turning. In time is what I am writing.
In the midst of this site
to feel at once aroused, on fire and squelched. (124)

This evokes the interconnections between poetics, ethos, and ethics explicated by Retallack. DuPlessis expresses the difficulty and desperation of holding onto conviction, of choosing a conviction again and again, no matter the circumstances or the forces ‘blowing’ one off course. Reiterating Retallack’s call for writers to acknowledge the contemporary, DuPlessis writes through the turns of time. Politics and practice and their attendant risks will continue to change; the necessity of feminist poetics remains.

A significant change of approach in *Drafts* is that rather than ‘giving voice to the voiceless’, DuPlessis enters into dialogue with the women she references. ‘Draft 57: Workplace: Nekuia’ invokes numerous writers, female and male, living and dead (*nekuia* is a Greek term for the epic convention of the ‘journey underground’ [2004: 234]). DuPlessis brings together varied writers, themes, and literary traditions using a procedure in which she selects works containing the number nineteen. In ‘Draft,

unnumbered: Précis', DuPlessis revisits and summarises the ideas contained in Drafts 1-57; this is the entry for 'Draft 57':

Entering the space
we have heard about
but rarely known:
this underground.
Here one breathes in
an uncanny and unstable aura
of resistance, wary hope, and sadness.
One sometimes chooses this,
sometimes simply gets cast.
It seems to be our space and time.
We feel so numbered,
feel so numb. The web is dark.
We are roped to this dark, in which tides of voice rise,
swell, are noted, and break over us. (221)

It may be dark underground, but it is certainly not lonely. DuPlessis's Underworld is populated with writers, breathing, feeling, and communicating in the gloom. As in Homer's *Odyssey*, the inhabitants of the underworld speak over one another, becoming overwhelming, but always yielding, letting the next one in. There is a sense of solidarity – the situation may be bleak, but whether it was chosen or decided, they are underground together, 'roped to this dark'. DuPlessis does not speak through the characters she finds meaningful, she appears in the work alongside them. She opens up networks of inspiration and influence to make space for her peers alongside their predecessors. Notably, almost all of the writers discussed in this thesis are included amongst the many references in *Drafts*.

The Underworld is an ideal site for the open, equal community in which diverse writers, influences, and references may be imagined mingling together. As DuPlessis suggests in the essay 'Manifests', the journey underground might be understood as a poetic practice:

This is my claim to write 'otherhow' – 'Not "otherness" in a binary system, but "otherhow" as the multiple possibilities of a praxis' [2006b: 154]. This claim of 'otherhow' can also be imagined as a determined walk away from the

claustrophobia of some gender narratives, carrying talismans of these debates as urgent reminders but traveling, perhaps, into another space. (2006a: 95)

Perhaps DuPlessis's movement into 'the wilds of segmentivity' is a different configuration of the journey underground which is a different configuration of travelling 'into another space'. The emphasis is on methods of approach (sliding, journeying, travelling), relationships (between segments, between members of the underworld, between gender narratives), and contexts of transformation (from poetry to poetics, death to rebirth, binary to multiplicity).

Tantric poetics is informed by more contexts than it can reference or discuss or expand on. It cannot include everything but tries to create and engage with as large a community as possible, to realise and re-make past, present, and future relationships. (See 'A Story of Dhūmāvātī' for a journey underground, a communion, and a return [226-229].)

Relationships

Introduction: Mary K. DeShazer

Relationships are fundamental to my understanding of experimental feminist poetics: relationships between selves and worlds that inspire and enable the selected works, relationships that the works explore, relationships that are created by the works and that extend the works towards other selves and worlds. In *Inspiring Women: Reimagining the Muse*, Mary K. DeShazer analyses relationships between women writers, emphasising the ‘affirmation of influence’ that characterises their work (1986: 6). DeShazer is interested in the symbolism and function of the muse in literary history, and she provides a brief survey of male poets who engage with the muse, mentioning Hesiod, Ovid, William Shakespeare, John Milton, William Blake, Ezra Pound, and Allen Ginsberg (7-26). DeShazer understands the relationship between the conventional muse and male poet to be unequal as the male poet is typically ‘*dependent on or superior to*’ his muse (6). In contrast, she sees the relationship between reimagined muse and female poet as ‘*interdependent*’ (6). These reimagined muses are not Classical figures draped in white, blowing inspiration into the ears of male poets, but ‘powerful, active women through whom [modern women writers] find voice’ (ix). They may be spiritual and mythic figures, literary predecessors, the woman writer herself or women from her daily life. DeShazer references literary critic Harold Bloom’s theory of the ‘anxiety of influence’ to present her argument:

Bloom’s paradigm of an ‘anxiety of influence’ – the ‘strong’ male poet’s compulsion to undo, isolate, empty, even kill (all Bloomian verbs) his literary predecessors and control his whoring muse – manifests itself in the woman poet as an affirmation of influence. This affirming impulse leads her to construct, complete, confront the self through the power of a female poetic construct, a revised and revitalized muse. [...] the woman poet typically strives to establish continuity, to connect aesthetically with her foremothers, her contemporaries, her muses. (6)

Many women poets may not be interested in their literary foremothers, may not relate to their contemporaries, and may find the muse to be an irrelevant and even objectionable construction. However, extracting DeShazer’s argument, I would like to concentrate on her concept of the ‘affirming impulse’ through which women writers find connection and continuity. According to this concept, women are encouraged to contextualise and

conceptualise themselves and their work within communities of their own making. DeShazer reveals that relationships – whether mythic, historical, literary, social, personal, or imaginary – are necessary and rewarding conditions of writing.¹⁹

This chapter focusses on relationships in the work of the selected writers. These relationships may be between writers and literary predecessors, between writers and mythic, historical, and personal figures, and between writers and themselves. Through analysing different types of relationships, I try to understand different experiences of and attitudes towards subjectivity. I am interested in how writers demonstrate awareness of themselves and of others, how they position themselves in relation to others, and whether or not they try to make contact. The chapter is structured around three relationships: memory and muse, mother and daughter, and reaction and revision. These are overlapping concepts rather than fixed categorisations, and relate to each section, although they may not be discussed explicitly. For example, muse might refer to the Classical daughters of Zeus, the notion of poetic inspiration, an influential female figure, a silenced female figure, a writer's creative impulse. Discussions of a writer's relationships with these concepts lead to questions of subjectivity, ethics, history, and politics. Does she identify with the muse? Does she feel a sense of responsibility towards the muse? How does her engagement with the muse compare with her predecessors'? What are the implications of her reimagining of the muse? DeShazer focusses on individual writers' creative identities and metaphors of poetic inspiration, including H.D.'s goddess muse, Adrienne Rich's communal muse, and Audre Lorde's warrior muse. In contrast, I am interested in the different ways such identities and metaphors might be adopted and applied by multiple poets, and what that might reveal about how the community operates.

Memory and Muse: Rachel Blau DuPlessis, H.D., and Sappho

The oldest known female poet in the Western tradition, Sappho lived in the Greek island of Lesbos sometime between the seventh and sixth centuries B.C.E. Little is known about Sappho's life and work. Translator Diane J. Rayor writes that 'of the nine books of Sappho's poetry collected in Hellenistic times (some five hundred poems), only one

¹⁹ Joan Retallack declares her rejection of the 'authoritatively intelligible' forms of the conventional muse: 'I would rather conspire (active voice) than be inspired (passive voice)' (2003: 123-124). She refigures Bloom's 'anxiety of influence', suggesting an experimental feminine model for relationships between writers and works: 'It opens up a distinction between the need to imprint/impress one's mark (image) on the other and an invitation to the others' discourse as necessary to an always collaborative making of meaning' (125).

definitely complete poem remains' (1991: 2). The defining feature of Sappho's poetry may be its ultimate fragmentation; her work has been found in potsherds, scraps of papyrus, and shreds of material used to package mummies and coffins. The many gaps and breaks in Sappho's poetry have been interpreted differently by her translators. Poet and classicist Anne Carson describes her methodology for translating Sappho's fragments:

I have used a single square bracket to give an impression of missing matter, so that] or [indicates destroyed papyrus or the presence of letters not quite legible somewhere in the line. It is not the case that every gap or illegibility is specifically indicated: this would render the page a blizzard of marks and inhibit reading. Brackets are an aesthetic gesture toward the papyrological event rather than an accurate record of it. (2012: xi)

It is important that absences are documented rather than filled in, as past translations of women's poetry have, as Rayer claims, 'contributed to distorted or censored renderings' (1991: 18). Furthermore, certain translators have used their authority to subvert the original intentions of the poet: 'Obvious examples include translations that switch pronouns or even the subject from female to male' (18). Indeed, Sappho's relationships with women are particularly controversial.²⁰

Sappho writes about women, or, to women, in many of her poems. Sometimes she is affectionate: 'for my mother | in her youth it was a great | ornament if someone had hair | bound with purple – | a very great ornament indeed' (Carson 2012: 195). She is jealous: 'What country woman bewitches your mind... ' (Rayer 1991: 68). She is passionate: 'Pacing far away, she remembers | gentle Atthis with desire, | perhaps ... consumes her delicate soul' (61). Sappho had intimate friendships with women and she may have been motherly.²¹ Her fragments reveal sexual desire, romantic concerns, and

²⁰ Poet Caroline Bergvall describes Carson's translations of Sappho's fragments as a poetics for our time, 'a language of the erased, of the stranger, of the visual stutter and the hyphenated or elliptical being. Of the co-existence of written and erased. Of verbal and visual' (2011: 131). However, in Carson's refusal to get into the 'matter' of Sappho's sexuality, Bergvall suggests that the marked erasures extend beyond the gaps in material. In contrast, Bergvall calls for a representation of Sappho's poetry that leaves nothing out: 'Sappho is compost. Sappho-compost. Not-papyrus to papyrus, copyists to printed page, wet burial to bodies burning desire to song to musical instruments to language to fragment to perfumed clothes to poetic impositions to social silences to translation norms to literary formulae to erotic beauty to restorations to lovers to creations, part-noun, part-adjective, part-address, part-history, part-gossip, part-lyre, part-vegetable, part-sapphic. Precipitate' (131).

²¹ 'Ancient biographies attest that Sappho had a daughter named Kleis. She may well have, but we should admit that our evidence – "I have a daughter that reminds me of" – is not conclusive: *pais* (which I have translated as "daughter") can mean either "child" or "slave", and the speaker of the poem may not have been Sappho' (Poochigian 2009: 48).

heartbreak. Due to the predominance of the female pronoun in her work, her homosexuality is presumed.²² Rayor suggests that Sappho shared her work with small groups of female friends, so that she could ‘present erotic desire among women as a subject worthy of exploration in its own right’ (6). Translator Aaron Poochigian discusses scholarly debates over whether this group was a school, a group of symposium performers, a religious community, or a brothel. He concludes that Sappho was an aristocrat who held leadership over an exclusively female group:

[It] began after puberty and ended with social integration through marriage. Operating as a discrete social organism, the group had a strong sense of what sorts of taste and behaviour marked it as special. Furthermore, Sappho and a chorus of girls, on occasion, sang genuinely religious hymns and performed songs in public. (2009: xxvii)

Many of the women in Sappho’s poetry are Classical Greek figures, such as Aphrodite, Hera, the graces, and the muses. She frequently invokes the muses in her work: ‘here (once again) | Muses | leaving the gold’ (Carson 2012: 259); ‘here now | tender Graces | and Muses with beautiful hair’ (261); ‘for it is not right in a house of the Muses | that there be lament | this would not become us’ (303). Given Sappho’s historical context we may assume that she does so for both literary and religious reasons. Approximately one or two hundred years before Sappho, the Greek poet Hesiod introduces the muses in *Theogony*:

So spoke the fresh-voiced daughters of great Zeus
And plucked and gave a staff to me, a shoot
Of blooming laurel, wonderful to see,
And breathed a sacred voice into my mouth
With which to celebrate the things to come
And the things which were before. They ordered me
To sing the race of blessed ones who live
Forever, and to hymn the Muses first
And at the end. (Wender 1973: 24)

²² Attempts have been made to rewrite Sappho’s identity, as illustrated by Ovid’s narration of her tragic love for Phaon: ‘Atthis no longer brings joy to my eyes as | she once did. Nor do I find pleasure | in the hundred others I have loved in shame. | Yours is now the love these maids once had’ (Isbell 2004: 134).

The message is clear: poets who worship the daughters of Zeus will be blessed with inspiration and the gift of song. To secure these blessings, invocations of the muses must be recorded in poetry. Thus, Hesiod created a literary convention and poets have been articulating the muse (one or all of the sisters²³) ever since. It is easy to forget that the original significance of the muses was religious, and that there were cults of the muses in Pieria and Mount Helicon. Their religious significance waned as their literary resonance increased, and now invocations of the muses are more likely to recall Homer and Hesiod than the goddesses themselves. In *Theogony*, Hesiod charts the lineage of the gods and goddesses, stating that the mother of the muses is Mnemosyne, or Memory – allegorically speaking, memory is the mother of poetic inspiration. Hesiod’s muses do not simply provide inspiration and artistic skill to poets, they also have the power to enhance or erase a poet’s memory (24-26).

Sappho was aware of the muses’ significance. ‘Fragment 55’ may be read as a criticism of an unskilled or ungrateful poet:

Dead you will lie and never memory of you
will there be nor desire into the aftertime – for you do not
share in the roses
of Pieria, but invisible too in Hades’ house
you will go your way among dim shapes. Having been breathed out.
(Carson 2012: 115)

The person whom Sappho addresses does not ‘share in the roses of Pieria,’ which suggests that she has not been blessed by the muses, who were associated with Pieria. Whether this poet was ignorant of the muses’ power or she did not give thanks as she should, the punishment that Sappho decides for her is severe: she will be forgotten. Disappearing amongst ‘dim shapes’ in the Underworld, her poetry will not make her immortal. As Sappho is the only known female poet of her time, we may assume that the curse came to pass. Not only has Sappho been remembered after her death, she has been exalted. In the history of poetry, Sappho occupies two roles: she is female poet and

²³ In *The White Goddess: A Historical Grammar of Poetry and Myth*, Robert Graves argues that the muse is the goddess who resides at the intersection of poetry and myth. He rejects Hesiod’s account of the ‘bevy of nine little departmental goddesses of inspiration’ (1999: 384). Graves argues that although the muse’s powers have been diluted over time and appropriated by male gods, the nine daughters of Zeus were originally the singular mother goddess: ‘The Triple Muse, or the Three Muses, or the Ninefold Muse, or Cerridwen, or whatever else one may care to call her, is originally the Great Goddess in her poetic or incantatory character’ (383-384).

muse (Plato is said to have given her the epithet ‘the tenth Muse’ to mark her creative genius). Poochigian writes that ‘after her death she was associated, like the Muses, with the lyre, and subsequent art and literature frequently portray her as a Muse’ (2009: 16). Indeed, Sappho has inspired a great deal of poetry by men and women.²⁴

H.D. imagines Sappho as a knowing combination of poet and muse. Blending intimacy and veneration in the essay ‘The Wise Sappho’ (written 1919), H.D. writes:

The greatest of her own countrymen in the greatest period of that country’s glamour, [themselves] confessed her beyond their reach, beyond their song, not a woman, not a goddess even, but a song or the spirit of a song.

A song, a spirit, a white star that moves across the heaven to mark the end of a world epoch or to presage some coming glory.

Yet she is embodied – terribly a human being, a woman, a personality as the most impersonal become when they confront their fellow beings. (1982: 58-59)

Sappho is a manifold figure for H.D.: goddess, muse, woman, poetry itself. Sappho is the author of ‘magnetic, vibrant’ poems emitting a ‘white, inhuman element, containing fire and light and warmth’, her words ‘transcending colour yet containing (as great heat the compass of the spectrum) all colour’ (57-58). H.D. praises Sappho’s descriptions of flowers and beautiful girls, her emotional wisdom, and her less admirable characteristics: ‘Aristocratic – indifferent – full of caprice – full of imperfection – intolerant’ (59). H.D. acknowledges that ‘Sappho has become for us a name, an abstraction as well as a pseudonym for poignant human feeling’ (67), but her poetry reveals the extent of Sappho’s literary influence.

H.D.’s Fragment poems begin with one of Sappho’s fragments, and expand into longer poems that reflect on Sappho’s words and imagine the lost originals. Sappho provides both textual source and intellectual inspiration. H.D. enters into abstract dialogue with her muse, and the vast historical and cultural distances separating the two women seem to dissolve in the exchange. Consider ‘Fragment 113’ from *Hymen* (first published 1921):

²⁴ Poochigian refers to male poets who adopted or adapted the Sapphic form – including Catullus, Algernon Charles Swinburne, and Allen Ginsberg – and states: ‘The mainstream of Western poetry flows through Sappho and on down through the centuries. That she happens to be female, in this respect, is immaterial’ (2009: xxxix). In contrast, Susan Gubar discusses Sappho’s enduring influence upon women writers from seventeenth-century English poet Katherine Philips to contemporary poets and critics in the essay ‘Sapphistries’: ‘the person and poetics of Sappho have haunted the female imagination’ (1984: 44).

'Neither honey nor bee for me.' – Sappho.

Not honey,
not the plunder of the bee
from meadow or sand-flower
or mountain bush;
from winter-flower or shoot
born of the later heat:
not honey, not the sweet
stain on the lips and teeth:
not honey, not the deep
plunge of soft belly
and the clinging of the gold-edged
pollen-dusted feet;

[...]

not iris – old desire – old passion –
old forgetfulness – old pain –
not this, nor any flower,
but if you turn again,
seek strength of arm and throat,
touch as the god;
neglect the lyre-note;
knowing that you shall feel,
about the frame,
no trembling of the string
but heat, more passionate
of bone and the white shell
and fiery tempered steel. (1997a: 46-47)

H.D.'s vocabulary and imagery evoke Sappho's poetry. The strings of the lyre suggest the age in which Sappho lived; the white shell and mountain bush suggest her native isle. The capricious and indulgent yet mournful tone is an expansion of Sappho's tone, as hinted in fragments such as: 'for you beautiful ones my thought | is not changeable' (Carson 2012: 83); 'I used to weave crowns' (255); 'but me you have forgotten' (263). Rachel Blau DuPlessis's 'Pomegranate' from *Wells* quotes the same fragment:

Torn open –
that parchment
of negative spaces
'no honey
nor the bee'

empty globes
where seeds
fell
from

fragment upon fragment. ([1980]: 24)

This poem, written in remembrance of Sappho, revisits the Classical myth of Demeter and Persephone (also known as Kore). Persephone, Demeter's daughter, is abducted by Hades and trapped in the Underworld, and Demeter cannot rest until they are reunited. Demeter's quest is a partial success – mother and daughter are fated to an endless cycle of departures and returns.²⁵ In her investigation of the mother-daughter relationship, DuPlessis invokes Sappho and her fragments, the little poetic worlds from which seeds of inspiration fall. Comparing H.D.'s and DuPlessis's uses of Sappho's fragment, DuPlessis's poem imagines the consequences of Sappho's influence on women writers, whereas H.D.'s poem enacts a continuation of Sappho's work. DuPlessis applies a critical distance between herself and her literary predecessor, whereas H.D. identifies with Sappho and assumes her persona.

H.D.'s understanding of continuity is not only literary, it extends to her experience of memory. She was conscious of different dimensions of memory – memories belonging to daily life and personal history, and memories that recalled an ancient existence. Her fascination with ancient Greek, Egyptian, and Biblical culture and mythology provides an insight into her ideas about memory as mass psyche.

²⁵ Alicia Ostriker notes the significance of this myth to many women writers: 'The model among women writers, critics as well as poets, is Demeter and Kore: except that it is the daughter who descends to Hades, step by step, to retrieve and revive a mother who has been raped, or perhaps seduced, by a powerful male god. For as the mother returns to earth, the daughter expects to blossom' (1986: 16). In *Lesbian Peoples: Materials for a Dictionary*, Monique Wittig and Sande Zeig reimagine the dynamics of Demeter and Persephone's relationship as familial, romantic, and passionate: 'Famous ancient goddesses, companions and lovers from Pelasgia. One was born from the other. When Persephone had to part from her, Demeter would show her sorrow by destroying everything alive on the surface of the earth until Persephone returned' (1980: 42).

Sigmund Freud, who was H.D.'s psychoanalyst, teacher, and friend, explains the mass psyche as 'a continuity in the emotional life of mankind which allows us to disregard the interruptions of psychical acts caused by the passing of individuals' (2005: 155). He tells us that the skilful poet can tap into the mass psyche, bringing ancient rhythms and symbols to the surface, writing words that arouse 'the depths of mankind's eternal nature' (2008: 190).²⁶ Like Freud, using mythology as a key into the mass psyche, H.D. understood myths as poetic echoes of universal truths. For example, in *Tribute to Freud*, an autobiographical account of her relationship with the 'blameless physician', she moves from a personal memory of her brother to mythological siblings to cosmos:

They make a group, a constellation, they make a groove or a pattern into which or upon which other patterns fit, or are placed unfitted and are cut by circumstance to fit. In any case, it is a common or garden pattern though sometimes it finds its corresponding shape in heaven. (2006: 42)

Mythic symbols and patterns require deciphering and elucidation; as H.D. writes in the poem 'The Walls Do Not Fall', 'the rare intelligible thread | that binds all humanity | to ancient wisdom | to antiquity' must be traced (1997b: 24). H.D. believed that she had the mystical ability to perform these actions; furthermore, she associated these powers with her womanhood and with her writing.

H.D. believed that true poets possess visionary powers. In 'Notes on Thought and Vision' (written 1919), she terms the artistic, inspired, extrasensory mind the 'jellyfish consciousness', which can be located in the brain or the 'love-region':

There is, then, a set of super-feelings. These feelings extend out and about us; as the long floating tentacles of the jellyfish reach out and about him. [...] I first realised this state of consciousness in my head. I visualise it just as well, now, centered in the love-region of the body or placed like a foetus in the body. (1982: 19)

Musing on 'vision of the womb', she wonders if it is easier for women to achieve this state of consciousness than it is for men. Although she decides that men are as capable

²⁶ In *The Archetypes and the Collective Unconscious* (first published 1959), Carl Jung extends Freud's ideas with his concept of the collective unconscious: 'In addition to our immediate consciousness, which is of a thoroughly personal nature and which we believe to be the only empirical psyche [...], there exists a second psychic system of a collective, universal, and impersonal nature which is identical in all individuals. This collective unconscious does not develop individually but is inherited' (2011: 43). This collective unconscious consists of archetypes, or 'pre-existent forms', which Jung equates with mythological motifs.

of these visions as women (25), her later poetry suggests otherwise. *Trilogy* (first published 1944-1946) and *Hermetic Definition* (1972) are concerned with signs, secrets, and patterns; the keys to these codes are often contained within and revealed by female figures. For example, the Lady – the Mother, Mary, Holy Wisdom – in ‘Tribute to the Angels’, who appears carrying a book:

her book is our book; written
or unwritten, its pages will reveal
a tale of a Fisherman,
a tale of a jar or jars,
the same – different – the same attributes,
different yet the same as before. (1997b: 105)

The mention of a ‘tale of a jar’ foreshadows ‘The Flowering of the Rod’, and its depiction of Mary of Bethany. In this Biblical story, Mary anoints Jesus with an expensive perfume and wipes his feet with her hair. H.D. imagines a young man noticing Mary’s hair and catching the scent of her fragrance, in this moment he gains access to past and future worlds:

it translated itself
as it transmuted its message

through spiral upon spiral of the shell
of memory that yet connects us

with the drowned cities of pre-history;
Kaspar understood and his brain translated (156)

Time overlaps in this poem: Kaspar is one of the three magi, and Jesus has not been born; Mary is a composite of many different Marys (‘I am Mary – O, there are Marys a-plenty’ [135]); the tale of the jar spirals, repeats itself, and ends differently each time, ‘different yet the same as before’. In H.D.’s version of the story, a man receives a message from a female figure, and he must interpret her message (like the male poet who must interpret messages from his muse). But the message is one of female presence and female power: ‘I am Mary, she said, of Magdala, | I am Mary, a great tower; | through my will and power, | Mary shall be myrrh’ (135). The secret revealed in Mary’s hair and in her perfume is that Mary, Eve, Lilith, Venus, Isis, Demeter, and many other divine women pervade every moment in history, they are ‘unalterably part of the

picture' (146). The female figure reveals herself to a chosen man to grant him understanding, and it is the female poet – H.D. – who must interpret and distribute the message.²⁷

H.D. experienced visions and dreams, which she correlated with her beliefs about the mass psyche, circular temporality, and 'ancient wisdom' and memory. For example, when she was a teenager, H.D. had a vision of an unknown serpent-thistle symbol, which she discovered years later carved into a Greco-Roman or Hellenistic signet-ring in the Louvre. This experience was interpreted by Ezra Pound as 'a flash-back in time or a prevision of some future event' (Doolittle 2006: 97-99). H.D. was uncertain about whether these visions come from within or without; in *Tribute to Freud*, she refers to them interchangeably as psychological 'symptoms' (as per Freud's diagnosis), 'moods', and 'inspiration' (68-70). Sometimes she thinks of herself as a Classical priest or prophet, receiving 'warnings or messages from another world or another state of being. Delphi, specifically, was the shrine of the Prophet and Musician, the inspiration of artists' (75-76). Sometimes she is a poet communing with her muse, as in 'Hermetic Definition': 'She draws the veil aside, | unbinds my eyes, | commands, | write, write or die' (1972: 7). This muse is not simply a literary convention. Although H.D. identifies her with names borrowed from various mythological traditions, she is a muse of H.D.'s own imagining, the 'veiled Goddess' carrying a book (1997b: 102). This muse is an internal and external presence: she is projected from H.D.'s body, she walks towards her in dreams, she commands her to write, she is the mystery in her poetry. Indeed, H.D. constantly returns to the idea of creating and disclosing codes in her poetry, but she is the 'hermetic definition' embodied. Although she turned to men for help with her interpretations, she ultimately fulfilled the simultaneous roles of poet and muse, committed to the task of deciphering herself.²⁸

²⁷ In *The HD Book* (written 1959-1964), Robert Duncan interprets Mary's 'will and power' as 'the genius of the poem', which he relates to Jung's concept of the anima, a feminine archetype whose characteristics can be detected in Helen of Troy, Persephone, and Venus (all of whom appear in H.D.'s poetry). Duncan writes: 'It is not only Mary in the presence of the Wise Man [Kaspar], it is the poetic or daemonic creativity of the woman' (2012: 489). Duncan quotes Jung's description of the anima: 'Turned towards the world, the anima is fickle, capricious, moody, uncontrolled, and emotional, sometimes gifted with daemonic intuitions, ruthless, malicious, untruthful, bitchy, double-faced, and mystical' (Jung 2011: 124). Duncan does not necessarily impose Jung's characterisation of the anima on the female presence in H.D.'s poem. He suggests that H.D. hints towards an infinite, universal female agency comparable to an archetype in Jung's concept of the collective unconscious – perhaps H.D. identifies an archetype of the woman writer.

²⁸ Referring to H.D.'s *Helen in Egypt* (first published 1961), Alicia Ostriker suggests that H.D.'s paradigm of poetic language is summarised by Helen's discovery of an innate knowledge of Egyptian hieroglyphs, which 'can only be deciphered when she discovers that "she herself is the writing"' (Ostriker 1998: 32).

After H.D.'s death, a number of women writers continued this task. Sixty years apart, Rachel Blau DuPlessis and H.D. both wrote poems about the Classical Greek figure Eurydice. Having been bitten by a deadly serpent, Eurydice entered the Underworld; her husband Orpheus, the mythic bard, attempted to rescue her and failed. DuPlessis discovered H.D.'s Eurydice poem some time after she had written her own; she describes her reaction as 'a talismanic, a talis-mantic, moment of connection between myself and H.D.' (2006a: 224). There are similarities between the poems. Compare the following lines of DuPlessis's (written 1973-1974):

He has entered the dark
behind me

He wants to bring me back to the light

He wants to retrace the steps of my journey.

No.

I am turning.

I am going deeper
into the living cave ([1980]: 51)

with these lines from H.D.'s (written 1914-1917):

Against the black
I have more fervour
than you in all the splendour of that place
against the blackness
and the stark grey
I have more light (1997a: 39).

It is striking that two poems written so many years apart resonate with the same defiance. Eurydice rejects her husband's bid to save her; she is not interested in returning to life with him, finding more possibilities for herself in the alternative realm. Light is significant; both Eurydices reject the green and yellow light of the Upperworld, instead choosing the darkness of the Underworld, in which they provide their own light. To compare the final verses, we have H.D.'s:

At least I have the flowers of myself,

and my thoughts, no god
can take that;
I have the fervour of myself for a presence
And my own spirit for light;

and my own spirit with its loss
knows this;
though small against the black,
small against the formless rocks,
hell must break before I am lost;

before I am lost,
hell must open like a red rose
for the dead to pass (1997a: 40)

and DuPlessis's:

She will take shape and sprout
a soft light far from the surface
pushing outward, of her own power
stalk, ladder of climbing cells
root, filling the corridors of rock
flower, breaking the earth, fragrant, opening
seeds of Eurydice ([1980]: 53)

In the Upperworld, Eurydice is muse and Orpheus is poet: the roles are distinct and only his words are heard. Underground, the shadows protect Eurydice from his gaze. DuPlessis and H.D. give voice to the traditionally silent, objectified female figure, transforming Eurydice from passive source of inspiration into active creator, nourished by 'her own power'. DuPlessis and H.D. both imagine Eurydice as seed-like and the Underworld as the environment needed for her to grow. Alone in the black cave, having chosen to be apart from her husband, Eurydice blooms. She can finally create, and her creation is feminine and powerful, threatening to break the holds of her earthy confinement if unleashed:

She will brood and be born
girl of her own mother

mother of the labyrinth
daughter
pushing the child herself outward
 great head, the cave large inside it
 great limbs of a giant woman
 great cunt, fragrant, opening

seeds of Eurydice (53)

Eurydice is seed, child, mother, and earth, existing in a reciprocal and generative relationship with herself.

DuPlessis suggests that contemporary women writers require literary foremothers; in a community of women writers, women may be imagined as mothers (in the sense that they create literary works, literary predecessors) and daughters (literary descendants).²⁹ For DuPlessis, this role is primarily fulfilled by H.D., although she hints that Sappho is the original source. Describing the thrill that she and other women writers experienced upon rediscovering H.D. in the 1980s, DuPlessis writes: ‘At every moment that the bucket went down into her vast and capacious oeuvre, it came up full, full, full’ (2006a: 226). She proceeds to analyse her own subtext: ‘That metaphor suggests that we still need the theoretical (that is ideological) capacity to understand the matter of Mater – the “matriarchal” figure standing at the wellsprings of cultural generation’ (226-227). It is important that a women writer has female predecessors in the literary canon, perhaps to signify that the female poet’s vocation is as legitimate as the male poet’s, perhaps as a reminder that although women have written less, women have always written. And the mother needs her daughter in return; this is a reciprocal relationship. In rediscovering H.D., women writers established her as foremother: ‘We were inventing an H.D. We influenced her work – how it was read, what parts of it were read, why it was interesting’ (226). In reading H.D., writing about her, and writing poetry after her, poets and critics brought her back to life: ‘And she was a haunting presence: we had conjured her; she had conjured us. *Dux femina facti*’ (226). The woman leads the work (*dux femina facti*) as a result of this interdependency.

²⁹ Or, in Virginia Woolf’s terms, originators and inheritors: ‘Moreover, if you consider any great figure of the past, like Sappho, like the Lady Murasaki, like Emily Brontë, you will find that she is an inheritor as well as an originator, and has come into existence because women have come to have the habit of writing naturally’ (2000: 107).

DuPlessis and her peers undertook a major task in the rediscovery of the forgotten poet. Certain aspects of the history of poetry were destabilised as a result of their critical work: 'The revision. The reassessment. The reconsideration' (2006a: 225). For DuPlessis, this work was deeply personal. Following the coincidence of the Eurydice poems, she continued to experience a certain connection with H.D. as 'a bond between this poetic mind and my own, a spiral of recognition' (225). The spiral suggests the reciprocity of the relationship, and also a certain temporal circularity connecting the older poet with the younger, which DuPlessis interprets as the 'still-recurrent cultural conditions' that result in women writers expressing similar concerns about gender and agency despite living decades apart (225). H.D.'s haunting presence is a reminder of how little has changed and how much has been forgotten. This is why women situated at the current point of the spiral must continue the work of their mothers: they must write to remember, to record and restore, and to enable the next cycle to bring change.

DuPlessis states: 'The problem of memory is the largest motivation for my poetry' (2006a: 210). Memory is an individual and a cultural accumulation for DuPlessis; a mixture of personal experiences (like forgotten memories contained in diaries, as documented in the poem 'Memory') and collective histories ('Begin with the Armenian genocide, begin with the Belgian depredation of the Congo, or begin with the Holocaust' [214]). She believes that poetry has a 'memorializing function', behind which lurks a ghost (210). Bearing sociocultural identifications and histories, the ghost haunts each word:

It seems as if poetry is the institution (the conduit, the mouth) through which this phantom can speak. Can make sounds. It can recognize, and it can grieve.

How? Because of the thick layering of implication that words in poetry generate, because feelings are trapped in the rich matting of language, and because poetry acknowledges silence. How? Because of words that recall words used before.

Words that contain the mysteries of the unspoken. (214)

Memory motivates and constitutes poetry because memory exists within, and cannot be separated from, language and literature. Memory speaks through poetry, and feels, and is silent, but the ghost is palpable. Memory is reliant on poetry yet is incredibly powerful in its ever-lurking presence. Rather than thinking of poetry as a voice that speaks for the voiceless (as discussed in chapter one [44-52]), DuPlessis creates forms

and structures that might represent memory: ‘in the poem I found I was building the space of memory or a replica of its processes’ (2006a: 213). She considers fragment:

I try to write so that if a single shard were rescued in the aftermath of some historical disaster, that one shard would be so touching and lucid as to give the future an idea of who we were. It is like our reading Sappho after her almost total erasure. This kind of thinking sets a standard for the work.

Poetry is a documentation of human existence and culture, not only in terms of narrative and sequence, but memory and rupture (Sappho’s poetry is the exemplar for these broken pieces that remember). It is DuPlessis’s task to acknowledge what has been left unwritten, to remember what has been destroyed. DuPlessis moves away from H.D. over their differing approaches to memory:

The generative principles of *Drafts* are repetition, recontextualization, reconsideration, returns that are not returns to the same. The ‘same/– different –’ negative dialectic of *Trilogy* places the emphasis at once on recurrence and universals but also on the particularities of their specific emergence [1997b: 105]. This creates a tension in my response to claim that things would recur by deeply structured patterns – to me that was mysticism, and I parted intellectual company with H.D. over the issue of ‘origins’ and recovery. (231-232)

In order to clarify the function of memory in DuPlessis’s work, I would like to consider two poems written at different stages of her career: ‘Memory’ (written 1976) and ‘Draft 26: M-m-ry’ (1995).

‘Memory’ begins with an excerpt of a letter in which the narrator describes finding old diaries recording emotions and events that she had forgotten. The failure of memory is a marked theme, with the line ‘It is mostly of things I have no recollection happening’ echoing throughout ([1980]: 14-15). The narrator seems upset by the contents of the diaries; for example, she tells us that she had regular conflicts with her mother, juxtaposing this detail with the apparent melancholy and regret expressed by her mother: ‘My mother stands on the lawn | saying “I have wasted my life” | but never saying that again’ (14). The diaries document a past life, but if memories make the person, the person who wrote the diaries no longer exists. The poem seems to exorcise this prior persona, working through forgotten images, opinions, and experiences in order to rewrite the ending:

In my bed I dream of the murderous mother.

In bed dead father dark as a puppet.

Under the scummy pool she holds her black-haired daughters.

Two precious pearls, these parents.

Who has love enough to meet them

At the ever-increasing crossroads? (15)

The mother who feels she has wasted her life by ‘choosing the choices | that were’ can only live another life, choose another choice, by murdering her daughters. Crossroads are a mythic motif: the place where past and present meet, a liminal world, haunted by deities and spirits. Mother and daughter meet at the intersection. The daughter reconstructs memories of her mother as the woman she was, and reimagines the mother as the woman she might have been.

In this poem memory is textual, contained and preserved by text, including the letter, the diaries, and the poem itself. ‘Draft 26: M-m-ry’ continues the work of the former poem, elaborating DuPlessis’s ideas about memory and self. The title is meaningful: the dashes represent absences in memory and the work of memory in bridging gaps and making connections across time and space. DuPlessis writes:

Lives/ in furrows/ unspellable mnemosyne misty over
the field (misspelled/ as filed), its empty/ dashes
declare a signing gap, singing/ gap of herself hello again
unpronounceable/ mnemosyne:
blinking out in extreme/ sadness, bartering/ liquidity
to hyphenate the cracks/ because
they mark/ a bridge to
particulars one wants ‘forever’ (2001: 167)

The crossing from ‘particulars’ to ‘forever’ hints towards a move from personal to ancient memory, as expressed in H.D.’s work. Furthermore, DuPlessis’s reference to Mnemosyne (Memory, mother of the muses) suggestively recalls the mythic mother. Although ‘forever’ is enclosed within quotation marks, implying it is a fanciful or a borrowed concept, there is also a conflicted sense of desire: ‘a struggle/ between voices that compete/ to / identify what I want’ (166). DuPlessis refers to a ‘mind collective’, but this is not H.D.’s mass psyche or universal memory – this is the work of poetry:

It's just time/ a soft unreadable light

sweet/ wax in wane./

Poetry the opposite:/ it's always given out/ the fact

that it remembers forever,/ good at deigning

memorial design:/ this pile-up of letters –

don't do me/ any favours,

since, as the site/ of detritus and forgetting,/

one could not want to see it bettered. (167)

Poetry is collective memory: history's discarded and forgotten voices that have been interpreted and articulated by poets. Poetry is not omniscient, it cannot remember 'forever', but, as 'the site of detritus and forgetting', whatever it does record is uniquely valuable. Dead and living are 'yoked together', calling to the poet who can 'barely decipher / the veering of half-spoken' but who turns to face them and listens nonetheless (168). In different ways and with different intentions, both H.D. and DuPlessis produce poetry that remembers, reimagines, and offers a return.

If H.D.'s understanding of the muse is poetic, personal, and mythic, DuPlessis's understanding is strictly literary. In the essay 'Manifests', DuPlessis reflects on the subjectivity of the muse: 'Where is the manifesto of the muse? What does a woman say as she becomes iconic, her presence invisible? Is there evidence from any particular historical woman who became muse-ified? Where are her outbursts and her desires?' (2006a: 77). Considering that the muse has traditionally been in the service of men, DuPlessis expresses anxiety about her relationship with women writers: 'Can she withhold her blessing? Is she ambivalent to the female seeker? Am I withholding my own blessing on myself, and how did that get engineered?' (74). DuPlessis looks to H.D. to understand the depths of this problem and the strategies this female poet developed in response:

She is given, by culture, no particular background for understanding what will bind her and how she can survive and transform this. [...] H.D. used her life and the active drama of her memories as the laboratory for the creation of ways to transform her contending muses into a structure.

For the woman writer, the family is the muse. If it turns nasty, and it can, it is the combined hydra-head of a monster/herself. For she needs not have come to

terms with the many heads inside her: sister, mother, father, baby, husband, lover, brother. They will teem inside her; team up inside her. (2006b: 37-38)

Memory is the space in which the woman writer locates her creativity. Memory is inside her, in terms of personal experiences, and outside her, in terms of collective history. The family is the muse, encouraging her vocation. The family is inside her, the many selves that exist within her ('they are flooding me, fighting over me' [38]), and outside her, the people in her life. Memory and muse are double: 'above, yet below', inside and outside (25). They depend on the woman writer to give them voice, as she depends on them to support her creativity and motivate her poetry. Remembering the Classical source text, this interdependency might be imagined as a mother-daughter relationship. Mnemosyne speaks through her daughters, Sappho remembers:

]
]you will remember
]for we in our youth
did these things
yes many and beautiful things
]
]
] (Carson 2012: 45)

The muse is the prevalent female presence in the history of poetry, and as such she demands attention. Women writers may not see the muse as a reflection of themselves and their contributions to literature; nevertheless, male-authored women or 'women' are important sites of enquiry for the female poet, who experiences literature from a double perspective: '[She] is presumably a speaking subject in her work while a cultural artifact or object in the thematic and critical traditions on which she, perforce, draws' (2006b: 149-150). The female poet experiences herself as subject and object, speaking through poetry and encountering a silent version of herself inside poetry. She is poet and muse, assuming active and passive roles, realising that these binary positions do not represent her experience. She is self and other, identifying and developing multiple diverse perspectives and relationships in her critical and creative practice.

The practitioner of Tantric poetics assumes personal, ritual, and transcendental subjectivities. She investigates patterns from multiple perspectives – of inspiration and remembering, intuition and analysis, return and rebirth –

measuring her responses to her findings. (See 'Once Very Familiar' and 'Her Voice as an Instrument of Thought' for reflections on memories and maps [165; 212-214].)

Mother and Daughter: Susan Howe and Emily Dickinson

If one were to name the space of Susan Howe's poetics, words such as 'margins', 'wilderness', and 'frontiers' might be used. Howe's writing frequently turns towards these spaces, invoking them as sites of freedom and creativity.³⁰ Howe is interested in men and women associated with North-East American literary and religious history, many of whom she perceives as venturing into unknown spaces, as her description of Emily Dickinson illustrates: 'Really alone at a real frontier, dwelling in Possibility was what she had brilliantly learned to do' (1985: 76). Howe constructs an opposition between figures like Dickinson, who enters the wilderness through her unconventional approach to language and cultural systems, and figures like lexicographer Noah Webster, who constructs and maintains these systems, operating within the boundaries. Howe argues that Dickinson's 'intentional misuse [of] Webster's original *American Dictionary of the English Language* (1828)' is what marks her writing as North American, antinomian, and free (1993: xi; 1-2). Researching the mid-seventeenth-century antinomian controversy in New England, Howe finds that the lawlessness of this Christian philosophy – in which a covenant of grace is considered superior to the moral law of works, and believers are rewarded in heaven for their faith rather than for their actions – is gendered feminine. Furthermore, Dickinson, although not directly involved (the controversy occurred 200 years before her birth) continues the feminised lawlessness of antinomianism in the apparent formlessness of her letters and poems, the highly individual grammar and punctuation of her manuscripts, and her persistent refusal to publish her work (1-4).

³⁰ I focus on the notion of freedom outside the bounds of social and cultural structures in Howe's work, although, as Will Montgomery argues in *The Poetry of Susan Howe*, Howe also finds great potential in structure, law, constraint: '[Howe negotiates] a structural analogy between antinomianism and radical poetics. In a remarkable – and questionable – feat of conflation, she sets up an opposition between grace, spiritual immediacy, poetic inspiration, and a "contemporary American practice" of writing, on the one hand, and an array of legislating religious, political, and literary forces on the other. Howe at some times [...] appears to valorise the asystemic; at others to strive for balance between law and grace (and their various analogues); and at still others to complicate this opposition with a third term, often gendered as feminine. Her use of dichotomies is itself rooted in the exigencies of place' (2010: 82-83). (Tensions between bounds and boundlessness in Howe's work are discussed in chapter three [100-103].)

Howe understands deviation from commonly accepted laws of literary expression as meaningful cultural work that critiques stifling and unjust social order while presenting the opportunity to imagine and create radical alternatives:

In childhood if we are lucky, Nature furls us in the confidence of her huge harmony. Assimilation into civilization's chronology, its grammatical and arithmetical scrutiny calls for correcting, suspecting, coveting, corrupting my soul into a devious definition of Duty. I must pursue and destroy what was most tender in my soul's first nature. A poem is an invocation, rebellious return to the blessedness of beginning again, wandering free in pure process of forgetting and finding. (1985: 98)

Civilization, grammar, and arithmetic represent the injurious duty of abiding by the rules of literary tradition. Howe argues that ignoring that duty and aligning oneself with nature – which is configured as rebellion, freedom, and maternal comfort – lead the way to pure creativity.³¹ The religious vocabulary cannot be ignored, and Howe's treatment of poetry often parallels religious inquiry. She realises this complex and ambiguous relationship in her analysis of Dickinson: 'Through a forest of mystic meaning, Religion hunts for Poetry's freedom, while Poetry roams Divinity's sovereign source' (55). In order to understand the links connecting language, religion, and the wilderness in Howe's writing, it may be useful to begin with language and the significance of female literary genealogy.

As her writings on antinomianism demonstrate, Howe is deeply concerned with the relationship between politics and poetics, and her investigations are expressly gendered and feminist. *My Emily Dickinson* opens thus:

In the college library I use there are two writers whose work refuses to conform to the Anglo-American literary traditions these institutions perpetuate. Emily Dickinson and Gertrude Stein are clearly among the most innovative precursors of modernist poetry and prose [... They] meet each other along paths of the Self that begin and end in contradiction. This surface scission is deceptive. Writing

³¹ Gendering nature as feminine is a problematic convention amongst women writers and feminist theorists. Although Howe utilises conventions of gender – the association of masculinity with laws, hierarchies, the civilized order, and femininity with lawlessness, unstructured equality, wilderness – in her poetics, I suggest that she is not essentialist in her politics. Howe reframes these conventions from a feminist perspective, relating the wildness of nature to the cultural and creative rebelliousness of Dickinson and other historical figures (such as Emily Brontë, Anne Hutchinson, and Robert Browning). (Howe's wilderness may be comparable to Joan Retallack's unintelligible; see chapter one [38-44].)

was the world of each woman. In a world of exaltation of *his* imagination, feminine inscription seems single and sudden. (1985: 11)

Howe focusses on the radicalness of Dickinson's and Stein's writings in the context of the patriarchal cultures in which they wrote. These women worked within a literary tradition constructed and dominated by men, and could not resist the allure of subversion and the practice of innovation:

To restore the original clarity of each word-skeleton both women lifted the load of European literary custom. Adopting old strategies, they reviewed and re-invented them. Emily Dickinson and Gertrude Stein also conducted a skilful and ironic investigation of patriarchal authority over literary history. Who polices questions of grammar, parts of speech, connection, and connotation? (11)

Howe indicates the simultaneous activities of adaption and re-making. Dickinson and Stein adapt the strategies of their fathers – for example, lyric, love poetry, metre and rhyme – re-making them with their unconventional uses of grammar, word choice, poetic form, and philosophical content.

Howe emphasises the continuing significance of these women's innovations. She informs us of the motivation behind *My Emily Dickinson*: 'For years I have wanted to find words to thank Emily Dickinson for the inspiration of her poetic daring' (1985: 35). Howe credits Dickinson's influence on her critical and creative writing. Her use of the term 'inspiration' also suggests somewhat visionary and mystical impulses behind creativity: 'The conditions for poetry rest outside life at a miraculous reach indifferent to worldly chronology' (13). Howe stresses the lack of literary foremothers and the consequences of this lack for women writers: 'How do I, choosing messages from the code of others in order to participate in the universal theme of Language, pull SHE from all the myriad symbols and sightings of HE' (17-18). With the exception of Sappho, Emily Brontë, and Elizabeth Barrett Browning, Dickinson's literary contexts were constructed by men, as they were for these preceding writers: 'Mothers played an insignificant role in all of their upbringing' (60). However, this under-mothering did not impede Dickinson's creativity. Rather, it forced her to make her own traditions, encouraging her to channel these inequalities and absences into her radical poetics:

‘She, who converted every obstacle to rich material, never stopped writing about Liberty, Exile, Origin’ (106-107).³²

Howe argues that Dickinson, like herself, is influenced by a host of male and female writers, and asserts the creative practice of writing through reading: ‘I go to libraries because they are the ocean’ (1993: 18). She emphasises Dickinson’s intertextuality: ‘Forcing, abbreviating, pushing, padding, subtracting, riddling, interrogating, re-writing, she pulled text from text’ (1985: 29). This description might refer to Dickinson or Howe. Howe’s practice is highly intertextual. In contrast to Dickinson, whose allusions are buried beneath the surface of her literary expression, to the extent that scholars seem to neglect this aspect of her work,³³ Howe makes her allusions manifest through bricolage. *My Emily Dickinson* exemplifies this aspect of her practice. Quotations and large extracts of poetry, fiction, letters, critical theory, and dictionary definitions are arranged on almost every page, interlinked with Howe’s own writing, which sometimes comments on the surrounding references and sometimes does not. The text speaks with many voices, and the arrangement of these voices – when they speak, to whom they speak – reveals Howe’s intentions. The procedure is divulged in ‘Incloser’, which sets Dickinson in dialogue with Webster, Antinomian figures, and other New Englanders (Stein also makes a brief appearance): ‘The selection of particular examples from a large group is always a social act. By choosing to install certain narratives somewhere between history, mystic speech, and poetry, I have enclosed them in an organization’ (1993: 45) (see the introduction [5-8]).

There is a tension between the isolated individual and the strength of community in Howe’s work. Howe brings together many writers and historical characters and provides them with a platform from which to speak freely, a privilege they may have rejected or been denied in their lifetimes. She constructs a community of outsiders and mavericks, people who have crossed the borders that surround cultural hierarchies and literary traditions, rejecting ‘the legitimation of power, chains of inertia, an apparatus of capture’ (1993: 46). This rebellious community reaches the margins, at which point its

³² According to DuPlessis, *My Emily Dickinson* is not simply Howe’s expression of gratitude to Dickinson, it is her ode to Dickinson. DuPlessis interprets Howe’s ‘female practice of the ode (different from male writers)’ as: ‘[an examination of] the site of female ecstasy from the peculiar perspective of the seeker and the sought – the desirous, orgasmic, ambitious mother and the “incestuous,” ambitious writer who appropriates those visceral ambitions’ (2006b: 126-127). The cross-genre form of Howe’s work represents the boundlessness of her investigations, and the complex dynamics that she exposes between predecessor and poet, mother and daughter, and subject and object.

³³ ‘First I was all caught up in her use of Dickens and Browning, then her use of Shakespeare. I really was concerned to show that she didn’t write in a rapturous frenzy, that she read to write’ (Howe 1985: 157).

voices disperse; individuals continue their voyaging into the wilderness alone. Howe's principle argument in *My Emily Dickinson* is that Dickinson is one such individual. Describing her as a 'questor', 'wayfarer', 'traveller', and 'anonymous shape-changer', Howe characterises Dickinson as an unknowable explorer who has left the laws governing language and culture far behind her, as she makes her way through the wilderness towards poetic freedom. As Howe indicates, Dickinson's poetry reveals something of this expedition:

Profane it by a search – we cannot
It has no home –
Nor we who having once inhaled it –
Thereafter roam. (Dickinson 1986a: 594)

Howe expresses frustration at the myths that have come to define Dickinson and her work – biographies that stress Dickinson's self-imposed withdrawal from society, marking her as mad, weak, innocuous – to which Howe retorts: 'Not *my* Emily Dickinson' (1985: 14). She makes fleeting references to Dickinson's possible agoraphobia, choosing rather to frame her isolation as deliberate and courageous. Howe interprets Dickinson's rejection of society as an explicitly radical act. For example, mentioning Dickinson's strained relationship with her local community, Howe writes: 'Dickinson's refusal during her teens to join the Congregational Church during the Great Awakening that swept the region once again left her startlingly alone. Dislocation first rends the seeking soul. Splendor is subversive to the Collective will' (54). Howe's use of the word 'splendor' brings together themes of subversion, religion, isolation and community present in Howe's and Dickinson's work, and may be worth analysing.

Howe suggests that Dickinson's spirituality was so steadfast and bright that she felt no need to bow to the pressures of her community, she was satisfied to practise her faith in private. The subsequent description of Dickinson as 'enlightened' confirms this impression. Howe also describes Dickinson's faith as being Calvinist in tone, revealed by her indifference to publishing her work and receiving material success and worldly recognition (Howe 1985: 48-49). However, the word 'splendor' does not only suggest steadfast light, but a light that shines outwards – a showiness. The 1844 edition of Webster's *An American Dictionary of the English Language*, which Dickinson owned and used (Howe 1993: xi; 138), offers the following definition:

1. Great brightness; brilliant lustre; as, the splendor of the sun.
2. Great show of richness and elegance; magnificence; the splendor of equipage or of royal robes.
3. Pomp; parade; as, the splendor of a procession or of ceremonies.
4. Brilliance; eminence; as, the splendor of a victory. (2009: [n. pag.]

Given the register of Dickinson's vocabulary and her frequent use of light, it may seem surprising that 'splendor' only appears in two of her poems. In 'Poem 290', Dickinson contrasts temporary mortal brilliance with the perennial brilliance of the stars:

Of Bronze – and Blaze –
 The North – Tonight –
 So adequate – it forms –
 So preconcerted with itself –
 So distant – to alarms –
 An Unconcern so sovereign
 To Universe, or me –
 Infects my simple spirit
 With Taints of Majesty –
 Till I take vaster attitudes –
 And strut upon my stem –
 Disdaining Men, and Oxygen,
 For Arrogance of them –

 My Splendors, are Menagerie –
 But their Competeless Show
 Will entertain the Centuries
 When I, am long ago,
 An Island in dishonored Grass –
 Whom none but Beetles – know. (1986a: 134-135)

The poem follows its speaker from a star-gazer to one whose spirit is possessed by the glory of the stars, but this hubristic speaker quickly realises the artifice of human luminosity, and the poem concludes with base mortality. However, the speaker's splendours, although not hers to boast of, will continue to shine long after her death. The speaker has no use for glory once her genius has been imparted. This poem might be read as a figurative declaration of what Howe describes as 'a consummate Calvinist

gesture of self-assertion by a poet with faith to fling election loose across the incandescent shadows of futurity' (1985: 49). But how to reconcile this weighted modesty, this acknowledgement of the superficiality of earthly splendour and subsequent renunciation before celestial radiance, with Howe's 'Splendor is subversive to the Collective will' (54)? Through her discussions of Dickinson's unorthodox religious practices, Howe voices her objections to conventional literary criticism. In this short line, Howe asserts Dickinson's pride in her work, her recognition of her genius, and her considered decision to withdraw from a society that would be incapable of withstanding her awesome light. Howe writes:

Dislocation first rends the seeking soul. Splendor is subversive to the Collective will. In the eye of the present, fragments of past presents. My presence keeps a promise to past meanings. Emily Dickinson's refusal to bend under great community pressure recalls the stubborn strength in isolation of Mary Rowlandson.³⁴ (54)

Referring to Dickinson's complex spirituality and the significance of her rebellion, exile, and isolation, Howe emphasises her sense of gratitude and responsibility towards her literary originator, and acknowledges the risks that she took.

In *The Midnight*, many of the concepts that Howe explores in *My Emily Dickinson* and *The Birth-mark* – including influence and inheritance; exile, isolation and community; intertextuality and bricolage; biographical research – are considered from a personal perspective, providing insight into Howe's theoretical concerns and creative practices. Howe shifts her perspective; rather than reading her literary foremother, Dickinson, through the history of Dickinson's religion, literature, and creative output, Howe reads her biological mother, Mary Manning, through Irish and English history (Manning's nationality), the books she loved, and materials relating to her acting career. Recalling her maternal relatives' shared habit of writing in their books, slipping photographs and snippets of other texts between the pages, impressing themselves and their lives onto their books, Howe writes:

³⁴ Mary Rowlandson was a Puritan and author of the first published narrative by an Anglo-American woman, an account of her captivity in the wilderness by a Native American tribe (Howe 1993: 89-130). Howe also compares Dickinson with Anne Hutchinson and Mary Dyer, women at the heart of the antinomian controversy, and Jonathan Edwards, a preacher whose writings influenced the Great Religious Awakening of the mid-eighteenth century (1985: 47).

When something in the world is cross-identified, it just is. *They* have made this relation by gathering – airs, reveries, threads, mythologies, nets, oilskins, briars and branches, wishes and needs, intact – into a sort of tent. This is a space children used to play in. The country where they once belonged. A foreign audience will always be foreign. Here I am alone at home – in the middle of the afternoon – snooping. Any amount of probabilities can be ransacked. (2003: 60)

This description suggests Howe's archival process, her gathering of materials and cross-referencing of disparate sources, including dictionary entries, lines from Shakespeare, newspaper clippings, scanned photographs, and memories of her mother. Howe draws lines between these materials and sources, establishing a parameter within which her experiments take place. However, there is a distancing mechanism at work. The reader is transported from the confines of the co-assembled tent, suggestive of the bed hangings that appear throughout *The Midnight*, to a space of play, to a lost homeland, and a sense of unfamiliarity at home. Howe conveys the experience of alienation that follows exile. The widening perspective parallels an increasing isolation.

Howe's writings on Manning, published almost twenty years after her writings on Dickinson, reveal how Howe maintains or adapts her feminist strategies depending on the subject. We might compare Howe's treatments of historical figures and figures from her life. Howe argues against the metaphor of needlework in Dickinsonian scholarship: 'For this northern will to become *I* – free to excavate and interrogate definition, the first labor called for was to sweep away the pernicious idea of poetry as embroidery for women' (1985: 17). However, she uses that metaphor to describe her mother's way of speaking: 'She loved to embroider facts. Facts were cloth to her. Maybe lying is how she knew she was alive because she felt trapped by something ruthless in her environment and had to beat the odds' (2003: 76). Why is this metaphor unacceptable for Dickinson, but appropriate for her mother? Perhaps it is because Manning, who was an actress and author in Ireland, came to America and left the stage and her literary career behind. The way she uses words in speech is a reminder of her previous creativity; as she ceased to be a working artist, the domestic analogy is apposite. This may be an unfair assessment of both Howe and Manning. In her earlier work, Howe rejected the needlework metaphor, considering it to be insulting and harmful. However, in *The Midnight*, Howe applies the rigorous research methods seen in *My Emily Dickinson* and *The Birth-mark* to selected domestic topics – bed hangings, fabric, fashions – and amends her opinion. Perhaps sewing becomes a noble activity in

the context of its age-old history: ‘Muslin cathedral ancestors / 1239 first glass windows / Still needle historians older / than pen in backward time’ (106). Howe links the rebelliousness that she associates with Dickinson with the domestic concerns of her mother: ‘Thinking is willing you are wild / to the weave not to material itself’ (17). The process of weaving, the deliberated patterns of the weave – these are the demarcated spaces of creative freedom. The material is the end result, a sign of the creative work that produced it, not necessarily meaningful in itself (Lyn Hejinian’s discussions of the relationships between form and material, and form and activity resonate; see chapter one [30-38]).

Manning’s creative freedom is located in another conventionally feminine activity: reading to her children and telling stories. As Howe writes: ‘Waves of sound connected us by associational syllabic magic to an original but imaginary place existing somewhere across the ocean between the emphasis of sound and the emphasis of sense. I loved listening to her voice’ (2003: 75). As Dickinson leads Howe to the wilderness, Manning leads Howe into the ocean (associated with libraries in *My Emily Dickinson*). Howe describes a dream of a birdwoman who seems to represent her mother:

A birdwoman had flown in by accident, and got trapped. She could have been a dancer, or an actor using any number of prosthetic devices. [...] Anxious about communicating in a foreign language, she offered a different route to salvation. I aligned myself with half of her history as if it were a lifebelt. (140-141)

This image of her mother is presaged in ‘Bed Hangings II’: ‘soaring bird needlework / Quiet under false scant / lonely ecstatic incessant’ (101). Howe suggests the freedom captured in Manning’s domestic activities (a bird trapped in needlework), the duplicity of her retirement from creative work, and the loneliness she experienced in exile. Howe is somehow dependant on Manning’s strategies of rejecting the artist’s life, adapting the truth, re-making herself for her family. The daughter experiences freedom by means of her mother’s entrapment.

The biblical overtones of ‘salvation’ denote the original sacrifice of the mother, whom we might identify as both Dickinson and Manning, given Howe’s association of both women’s creativity with their spirituality: ‘Emily Dickinson’s religion was Poetry’ (1985: 48); ‘The book is her choice. Poetry is our covenant’ (2003: 149). Howe does not forget her mothers:

Midnight is here. The brig *Covenant*. I go in quest of my inheritance. [...] All who read must cross the divide – one from the other. Towards whom am I floating? I'll tie a rope round your waist if you say who you are. Remember we are traveling as relations. (146)

Journeys have already been made beyond the edge, into the unknown spaces of wilderness and ocean, and Howe follows in her mothers' footsteps. Their tracks mark the path towards poetic liberation: 'a mapless dominion, valueless value, sovereign and feminine, outside the realm of dictionary definition, the selflessness of filial benediction swelling forever under human uprootedness in fiction, the love beyond words to tell, some women feel for their children' (1985: 111).

The practitioner of Tantric poetics recognises her position within a community of known and unknown, familiar and forgotten members, to whom she feels a sense of responsibility. She considers different approaches to facilitating dialogue and silence, and to marking presence and absence. (See 'She is the Pleasure of Wet Clay', 'A Story of Sarasvatī', and 'The First River' to think through unacknowledged mothers [171-175; 178-179; 194-195].)³⁵

Reaction and Revision: Harryette Mullen and Gertrude Stein

In an interview with Barbara Henning, Harryette Mullen explains that she has lived amongst and been influenced by many different social and cultural communities: working and middle class African American, Southern and Northern American. Mullen describes a sense of marginalisation as a consequence of this movement and multiplicity: 'where there might be overlapping boundaries, I work in that space of overlap or intersection. I have spent so much of my life in transit from one community to another, [as] a result, I often feel marginal to them all' (Mullen and Henning 2011: 22). Mullen is similarly in transit between literary communities. In the essay 'Poetry and Identity', she writes:

Formally innovative minority poets, when visible at all, are not likely to be perceived either as typical of a racial/ethnic group or as a representative of an aesthetic movement. [...] In each generation the erasure of the anomalous black

³⁵ In *Gossamurmur*, Anne Waldman expresses her sense of responsibility to lost poets: 'Dead poets whose voices waited to be resuscitated | whose words were locked up in time, in dead zone | needing rescue | needing care, attention' (2013: 19). Perhaps these poets are lost in the Underworld, and Waldman is a Demeter or an Orpheus. Describing archive as memory – 'is Mnemosyne' (68) – Waldman suggests that her task is not only to restore poets to the archive, but to return them to memory.

writer abets the construction of a continuous, internally consistent tradition, and it deprives the idiosyncratic minority artist of a history, compelling her to struggle even harder to construct a cultural context out of her own radical individuality. She is unanticipated and often unacknowledged because of the imposed obscurity of her aesthetic antecedents. (2002a: 28)

Mullen responds to this 'struggle to construct a cultural context' by claiming 'aesthetic antecedents' from a diverse community of artists and writers of her own making. Resisting the imposed identity crisis of her trifold status as black, woman, and innovative poet, Mullen experiments with language, source material, and voice, producing poems that play with and interrogate the cultural conventions that would otherwise define her.

In a mail conversation with Henning, Mullen writes:

That postcard you sent with [Cecil] Beaton's photo of Stein & Toklas, with kinky black wire dangling over Alice's head, gets to the point of *Trimblings*' origins: my reading of *Tender Buttons* and *Melantha*. The pleasure & horror of those two works, especially stirred me up, riled me, got me thinking about the effects of race & sexuality in language. (Mullen and Henning 2011: 12)

Mullen identifies Gertrude Stein as a paradoxical influence on her work. Mullen feels pleasure in the newness of Stein's syntax, her defamiliarisation of the familiar, the idiosyncrasies of her linguistic play, and her intellectual engagement with conventionally feminine subject matter. Concurrently, she feels horror in Stein's 'obnoxious' repetitions, her 'private and hermetic' poetic language, her stereotypes of African Americans and her use of what Mullen considers to be racist vocabulary (Mullen and Henning 2011: 13; Mullen 2006: x). Mullen adapts Stein's punning playfulness and interest in the domestic to her poetics, updating Stein's humour and selection of objects for a modern audience, and rejecting Stein's exclusivity, insensitivity towards racial politics, and lack of diversity with regards to lexical sources.

Domestic objects and activities, and female biology and embodiment are frequent subject matter in both Stein's *Tender Buttons* and Mullen's *Trimblings* – we find stoves, petticoats, and stomachs in the former, and laundry, dresses, and fat in the latter. Such subject matter may be considered trivial, especially in contrast with issues such as violence, racism, social deprivation, capitalism, and world history, which feature elsewhere in both writers' work. However, Stein and Mullen are careful not to

arrange subjects and themes in hierarchical order, instead placing them alongside each other, facilitating dialogue, contrast, and exchange. As Stein contemplates in *Tender Buttons* (first published 1914):

If comparing a piece that is a size that is recognised as not a size but a piece, comparing a piece with what is not recognised but what is used as it is held by holding, comparing these two comes to be repeated. Suppose they are put together, suppose that there is an interruption, supposing that beginning again they are not changed as to position, suppose all this (1997: 45-46)

In 'Patriarchal Poetry' (written 1927), Stein is explicit about the politics of her poetics, apparently listing some features of traditional literature that she means to reject or re-make: 'Patriarchal should be this without which and organisation' (2008: 226), 'There is no interest in resemblances' (239), 'Patriarchal poetry as peace to return to Patriarchal poetry at peace' (226). Stein calls for patriarchal poetry to resign itself 'to believe in trees' (231), to 'assemble moss roses and to try' (231), and to consider the possibilities of 'Dinky pinky dinky pinky dinky pinky lullaby' (241). This might be interpreted as a desire for poetry to turn away from male-dominated cultural hierarchies and towards an open and egalitarian space. Within this space, which is associated with nature, as opposed to the culture of patriarchy, forms such as nursery rhymes and lullabies are refigured as literature. Both Stein and Mullen allude to conventionally feminine forms in their work, including romance novels, women's magazines, and children's stories. Indeed, Stein's syntax is so simple that it reminds Mullen of baby talk, which she considers to be a marginal language of interest (Mullen and Henning 2011: 13).

The prose poems in *Tender Buttons* are arranged closely together on the page, conveying the apparent triviality of Stein's subjects and themes. The title of each poem challenges the reader to apprehend its significance and to determine its connection to the content of the poems:

A PETTICOAT.

A light white, a disgrace, an ink spot, a rosy charm. (1997: 14)

It is as if Stein provides the answer to a riddle before the riddle itself, complicating the reader's experience of the poem. The innocent connotations of a white petticoat, rosy cheeks, a charming girl are besmirched by the word 'disgrace', which is correlated with the stain of the 'ink spot'. Perhaps the figure in the petticoat writes when she should not, by candlelight, with stolen ink that spills; perhaps she writes letters to a disgraceful

someone, suggesting a character in a romance novel. ‘Spot’ and ‘rosy’ run in to each other, staining the petticoat, and the young girl is disgraced. The title serves as a first impression, affecting the rest of the poem; the heavily punctuated short line encourages the reader to react to images quickly and instinctively.³⁶

The prose poems in *Trimmings* are presented uniformly, one per page, which lends a sense of distinction to each poem and slows the reader’s progression through the book. This arrangement contrasts with the crowdedness of *Tender Buttons*, and the speed with which Stein ushers us from object to food to room. Mullen enjoys forcing the reader to acknowledge the gravitas of her feminine subject matter, as she reveals in her remarks on the formal decision to use lists and catalogues:

A whole poem composed of a list of women’s garments, undergarments, & accessories certainly seems marginal & minor, perhaps even frivolous & trivial. Actually it was an inside joke for me to begin *Trimmings* with ‘the belt’ since a convention of epic poetry is to begin ‘in the middle’. (Mullen and Henning 2011: 13-14)

Trimmings is written in response to *Tender Buttons*; Mullen positions herself as a black woman commenting on cultural conventions of (white) femininity. Several poems are adaptations of ‘A Petticoat’. Mullen provides at least three interpretations of Stein’s poem: she places a shadow behind the light white, a black woman behind the white girl, inserting racial politics into the poem by overlaying it with Manet’s ‘Olympia’ (2006: 11);³⁷ she emphasises the sexual undertones, punning on words like ‘slip’, ‘lips’, and

³⁶ In the introduction to *Selections*, Retallack advises the reader not to react too quickly to Stein’s poems. Emphasising the performative quality of ‘Patriarchal Poetry’, she writes: ‘To skim its visual patterns, as so many readers do, is to invite defeat by language that neither behaves like proper sentences or lines, nor discloses a cumulative semantic logic. [...] Stein repeatedly reminds one that reading is not viewing’ (Stein 2008: 41-42). I do not agree with this advice: I believe that an effective method of reading Stein is precisely by skimming the surface. I liken this reading practice to viewing an optical illusion – once our eyes and minds are relaxed, the seemingly illogical patterns come into focus, and some sense of meaning may be detected. If we pick the pattern apart, and attempt to grasp Stein’s meaning word by word, we might lose ourselves in her idiosyncratic logic and distance ourselves from the poem itself. (The symbol of Eurydice comes to mind. Perhaps the reader is Orpheus and the poem or the meaning of the poem Eurydice – in looking directly at her, she vanishes; see chapter two [64-66].)

³⁷ Edouard Manet’s ‘Olympia’ (painted 1863) depicts a white prostitute gazing defiantly at the viewer, while her black maidservant lurks in the background. Juliana Spahr analyses Mullen’s conflation of ‘A Petticoat’ with ‘Olympia’: ‘Mullen talks back to these two works by using their techniques of looking elsewhere and fragmentation to question their claims to egalitarian politics. Instead of presenting a centered gaze as Manet does, or one that has no use in a center as Stein does, Mullen turns the gaze into a locus of relations. As Mullen is well aware, when one looks at the black servant woman in Manet’s painting, one can only realize that any claims to an equality of gaze are fraudulent and privileged. Further, in Mullen’s poem, it is not that the central subject of the painting is the white woman’s returned gaze. The black servant woman in the shadow, off to the side, presents another gaze and another subject’ (2001: 107).

‘lie’, and encourages the reader to adopt a psychoanalytical approach to the poem (18); she relates Stein’s ‘rosy charm’ to the blood of menstruation or sexual activity (31).

Each poem in *Trimmings* corresponds to an item of women’s clothing. Mullen does not provide titles, but the reader might guess the item. Sometimes the item functions as synecdoche; for example, given Mullen’s concern with race, gender, and popular culture, we might assume that ‘in feathers, in bananas’ signifies Josephine Baker (2006: 43). The following poem seems to refer to mother-of-pearl:

What a little moonlight inside her pink silvery is softness condensing a glaze to repair a blister. Itches sit and silken, growing dearer to the wearer. Who would wear a necklace of tears. Inside her moonlight lining, tears were shed. Smooth tears, bitter water, a salted wound produced a pearl. A mother’s lustre manufactured a coloured other. Pearl had a mother who cried. (60)

Mullen layers images, steadily merging them to the point that what seems playful – a plaster used to protect a blister, an itchy but beloved item of clothing, a necklace of tears that would not be out of place in a teenage love poem – becomes increasingly unsettling. The ‘moonlight lining’ suggests the female reproductive system – lunar cycles, endometrial lining, which leads to an interpretation of the ‘salted wound produced a pearl’ as childbirth. ‘Wound’ is a slang term for female genitalia, but the pain implicit in a ‘salted wound’ amplifies the violence of the expression; perhaps ‘blister’ is an understatement. The irritation involved in the natural production of a pearl is related to female pregnancy, linking to the earlier ‘itches sit and silken, growing dearer to the wearer’. However, the repetition of the homographic ‘tears’, the violent tone, and the lacklustre mother who fakes her glow transform this irritation into a disturbing affliction.

The simplicity of Mullen’s and Stein’s vocabulary and syntax enables complex reactions; both of their writings contain abstract shapes and colours that each reader may interpret differently. The reader is encouraged to engage with the poems and to uncover her own meanings, a process that Mullen illustrates in her multiple interpretations of ‘A Petticoat’. This process is shared by every conscientious reader; therefore, we might imagine that each text creates a community of readers, who co-create the text through their individual readings (this relates to Bruce Andrew’s discussion of the reader in chapter one [31-33]). In ‘What are Master-pieces and Why Are There So Few of Them’ (written 1936), Stein states: ‘after the audience begins,

naturally they create something that is they create you' – 'you' may refer to poet, reader, and community (2008: 318). Stein was a lesbian woman of Jewish and German heritage, an American who lived in racially diverse Baltimore before settling in France. She was aware of social and cultural difference. In an excerpt of *The Making of Americans* (written 1911), Stein's approach to community is to find resemblances between apparently disparate individuals. She identifies this community with her readers:

I want readers so strangers must do it. Mostly no one knowing me can like it that I love it that every one is of a kind of men and women, that always I am looking and comparing and classifying of them, always I am seeing their repeating. [...] More and more I love it of them, the being in them, the mixing in them, the repeating in them, the deciding the kind of them every one is who has human being. (99)

Stein proclaims that she writes for 'myself and strangers'; Mullen aggrandises this project, stating that she 'writes for the unborn and includes the excluded':

Although it is not necessary or possible to include everyone, I find that it is useful to me as a writer to think about the fact that language, culture, and poetry always exclude as well as they include potential audiences. One reason I have avoided a singular style or voice for my poetry is the possibility of including a diverse audience of readers attracted to different poems and different aspects of the work. I try to leave room for unknown readers I can only imagine. (1999: 203)

Mullen is acutely aware of the diverse communities of readers of her work. Like Stein, she writes for strangers, but she attempts to create an environment that allows strangers to feel at ease within her work, and encourages readers to be themselves. Rather than find resemblances between strangers and readers, as Stein does, Mullen emphasises difference: 'edges sharpened / remove the blur / enhance the image / of dynamic features' (2006: 117). Assuming that different readers will have different vocabularies, cultural references, and poetic tastes, Mullen strives to engage with as many audiences as possible.

Mullen states that the objective of *Muse & Drudge* is to bring together readers of African American poetry on the one hand, and readers of experimental poetry on the other: 'I thought, "How am I going to get all these folks to sit down together in the same

room?” *Muse & Drudge* was my attempt to create that audience’ (Mullen, Gallagher, *et al.* 1997: [n. pag.]). In contrast with Stein, whose difference does not seem to conflict with her sense of the similarity and relatedness of people, Mullen’s difference is not something she can ignore; indeed, it prevents her from feeling a sense of belonging. She explains that the audience for her first collection of poetry, *Tree Tall Woman* (published 1981), was ethnically diverse, but the audience for *Trimblings* was almost exclusively white:

And then I thought, okay, well, I’m going to need to do *something* to integrate this audience, because it felt *uncomfortable* to be the only black person in the room reading my work to this audience [...] I didn’t think I was any less black in [*Trimblings*] or any more black in *Tree Tall Woman* but I think that the way that these things get defined [is through the] idea that you can be black *or* innovative [...] And *Muse & Drudge* really was my attempt to show that I can do both at the same time. (1997: [n. pag.])

Muse & Drudge is a long poem arranged in sections containing four stanzas of four lines each. There is a noticeable but irregular rhyme scheme. The short lines have a loose and musical quality, and do not feel restricted by the formal constraint. Indeed, Mullen writes that ‘using constraints [...] expands the possibilities for improvisation’ (Mullen and Henning 2011: 27). The form that Mullen uses to conduct her linguistic experiments is significant; the abundance of influences, sources, and languages in the work seems to require a flexible framework to enable overlap and distinction. Mullen’s influences are multiplied, diversified, and scattered in every verse, and Stein is no longer the overshadowing presence. Mullen constructs an elaborate network of female influences from numerous textual and non-textual sources, including: Sappho, a contemporary black poet; blues singers Bessie Smith and Billie Holiday and hip-hop group Salt-N-Pepa; divine figures Mary, Isis, and Yemoja. The opening line – ‘Sappho’s lyre styles’ (2006: 99) – refers to Diane Rayor’s *Sappho’s Lyre: Archaic Lyric and Women Poets of Ancient Greece*, and quotations from this text are dispersed throughout (Mullen and Frost 2000: 405-406).³⁸

³⁸ Marjorie Perloff comments on the interplay between innovation and tradition in *Muse & Drudge*: ‘Metonymy and pun, already much in evidence in the earlier *Trimblings*, are the key tropes, but they function in a traditional lyric form that ironizes their mode of operation, and is itself ironized by these figures’ (2004: 171). Mullen demonstrates the possibilities of combining literary conventions with diverse linguistic registers and references to produce poetry that, as Perloff attests, ‘speaks very much to its own time, that taps into various writings and speech formations in ways that are compelling’ (171).

Mullen assumes a double identity in this work. She is the muse, symbol of poetic inspiration and literary convention, and the drudge, paradigm of the hard-working woman. The drudge is the prevalent figure, as the muse is silenced and set to work early on: 'muted amused mulish' (2006: 112). The mule, which appears frequently in the text, is traditionally a symbol of sterility and servile labour; 'mule' is also a racist slur. The transformation of muse to mule is worth exploring. The first section concludes:

clipped bird eclipsed moon
soon no memory of you
no drive or desire survives
you flutter invisible still (99)

The female figure from the opening line – a conflation of Sappho and Sapphire – is disempowered, negated, and forgotten. Her actions and intentions are destroyed, and yet some essential part of her remains; she survives and escapes without being noticed. The figure reappears a few sections later:

muse of the world picks
out stark melodies
her raspy fabric
tickling the ebonies (115)

In the first line of this stanza, the emphasis falls on the word 'picks'. Sappho played the lyre and is credited with the invention of the plectrum, or 'pick for a lyre' (Poochigian 2009: xxxv). However, this muse does not play a lyre; Mullen depicts a blues musician playing the piano. She is not held in reverence and her skills are ignored; instead, she is a 'mule for hire or worse' singing 'ruses of the lunatic muse' (119). The connotations are of a mistreated servant or slave who distracts or deceives herself about the ways of the world, or perhaps she sings the truth and is disparaged. The mule is harnessed by men, 'rode hard put away wet | on the brine sea' (123). The 'brine sea' is a quotation from Rayer's translation. In this fragment, Sappho 'remembers gentle Atthis with desire', imagining her beautiful form in the sunset as the 'light reaches equally over the brine sea and thick-flowering fields' (1991: 61). Sappho's image is wrenched from its context; Mullen converts the delicacy and sensuousness of female desire into crude erotica describing the sexual exploitation of women. Sappho is transformed from muse

to drudge. Mullen imagines the glorified female poet from the Western tradition being reborn as a creative African American woman who is ‘mute and dubbed’ (2006: 140).

Muse & Drudge continues *Trimmings*’ preoccupation with women and feminine subject matter, its focus falling on women’s private and public work, in the kitchen, at the dressing table, on the streets, and behind a loom. Mullen understands her process of writing as women’s work: ‘as piecework, like quilting. Those ideas are consonant with my own methods and metaphors of writing. The poem also comments on quilting/writing as artists’ work, and as a metaphor of tradition as the interaction of continuity and discontinuity’ (Mullen and Henning 2011: 29). In contrast to Howe and her shifting attitude towards the metaphor of female creativity as needlework, Mullen does not convey anxiety about the metaphor and proudly recalls her grandmother’s sewing skills. She makes several culturally specific references to weaving and needlework in *Muse & Drudge*, for example:

why these blues come from us
threadbare material soils
the original coloured
pregnant with heavenly spirit

stop running from the gift
slow down to catch up with it
knots mend the string quilt
of kente stripped when kin split (2006: 130)

These verses seem to express the unsettled relationship of African Americans with ‘original’ Africans and African culture: ‘Somehow I’m African, although I’ve never been there’ (Mullen and Henning 2011: 69). The blues, a musical genre created by African American slaves, is juxtaposed with kente, a woven cloth made by the Akan people of West Africa. Mullen suggests a backwards and forwards movement – ‘the interaction of continuity and discontinuity’ – that confronts history and heritage, rather than trying to escape it. Relating ‘quilt’ with ‘kente’, Mullen brings together the traditions of her grandmothers and of her foremothers, suggesting efforts that might be made to repair the injuries of communities broken apart (‘kin split’).

The history of African slaves brought to America is an undercurrent throughout *Muse & Drudge*; Mullen is concerned with the experience of exile and the enforced

adaption of languages and cultural traditions: ‘kumbula of red feathers / tongues chant song / may she carry it well / and put it all down’ (2006: 142). Thinking back to Dickinson and Howe, the former remained in the North-Eastern corner of America all her life, and although Howe has travelled, she is similarly rooted, literally and imaginatively. Stein’s and Mullen’s relationships with travel and exile could be set in opposition to these two writers: Stein lived in France by choice (which Retallack describes as a ‘self-imposed cultural exile’ [2008: 30]), but as a Jewish woman living in occupied France during the Second World War, she was aware of the threat of being deported and of the risk in not fleeing the troubles at home (68). Mullen has lived in particularly diverse different parts of America, including California, where ‘every racial group is a minority’ (Mullen and Henning 2011: 87), but she also lives in the knowledge that she is of African descent, no matter how far removed (we might assume that Mullen’s ancestors did not choose to migrate, which complicates notions of home, travel, and exile; some of these ideas are explored in chapter three [93-121]).

In ‘Lecture I’ (written 1934), Stein describes language as changing from grandparents to grandchildren, as each generation tries to adapt language to fit their own time and place:

And so this is what I have to say about our language which is our language today and in our way as any words are are our words to-day. I like the feeling of words doing as they want to do and as they have to do when they live where they have to love that is where they have to come to love which of course they do do. (2008: 300)

Although Stein notes how interesting it is to mind the pressure upon language to work for the people using it, she suggests that language is somehow settled and that it ‘does not change any more that is as to words and grammar’ (295). *Muse & Drudge*, Mullen’s attempt to represent her experience of contemporary American diversity, refutes this notion. To list just a few of Mullen’s lexical sources: traditional Western poetic language (‘moon’, ‘unblushingly’, ‘stark melodies’ [2006: 99; 100; 115]), contemporary theoretical language (‘missing referents’ [110]), African American slang (‘patootie’, ‘hincty’, ‘Aunt Haggie’s chirren’ [102; 134; 137]), Spanish vocabulary (‘la mano ponderosa ayudame numerosos sueños’ [126]), bluesy lyrical improvisation (‘ain’t had chick to chirp nor child to talk / not pot to piss in, no dram to drink’ [146]), African cultural references (‘Yemoja’, ‘cowries’, ‘ancestor dances in Ashanti’ [142; 142; 143]), and Mullen’s own neologisms (‘recyclopeda’, ‘funkable’ [166; 171]). Mullen does not

claim to have access to all of these languages, but she hopes to make a statement about diversity and multilingualism:

I was, you know, picking up all of these threads like the little magpie that I am and weaving them into [*Muse & Drudge*] [...] one of the things I enjoy when I'm reading that poem is seeing the smiles and the laughter and the nodding heads sort of move around the room. (Mullen, Gallagher, *et al.* 1997: [n. pag.])

Mullen's awareness of her culturally diverse audience affects her approach to writing – gesturing towards heterogeneity, she weaves together various strands of languages, contexts, and identities.

Mullen engages with different versions of marginality in *Trimblings* and *Muse & Drudge*. The dominant influence in the former is Stein, an experimental woman writer who, as Howe reminds us, has been largely ignored by canonical criticism (1985: 11). The influences in *Muse & Drudge* are numerous and evenly distributed, and it is often difficult to extract a single voice from the group; as Mullen says of the work: 'It is very much a book of echoes' (Mullen and Frost 2000: 405). Mullen intends the voices to be indistinct, and does not cite a single text, although she credits her sources in interviews. Mullen emerges from Western and African cultural traditions, identifying with both and with neither. As an African American person, her speech and culture are marginalised by dominant (white) American speech and culture:

The speech of African Americans reflects our historic separation from mainstream culture and our critical perspective on the language of power. As descendants of slaves in the land of the free, we're accustomed to paradox and practiced in the art of laughing to keep from crying. (Mullen and Henning 2011: 55)

Through circumstances beyond Mullen's control, she finds herself on the edge. Rather than try to assimilate to the dominant culture, she chooses to make this positioning productive: 'By necessity, the margin has become a positive space where I am free to do my work' (22). Mullen is an active and inclusive member of the community. She assumes a responsibility to represent social and cultural diversity and marginality in her work, as revealed in her efforts not to leave anything or anyone out.

Tantric poetics emphasises that inclusion within a community does not necessitate affiliation. Exchanges may result in agreements, disagreements, and

complex arrangements. The practitioner is encouraged to heed her instincts and studied responses to various relationships and responsibilities, and to determine her position within the community accordingly. (See '2nd January 2013', 'Notes on Performance and Sacrifice', and '83' for anxious approaches to affiliation and responsibility [188-189; 234-239; 259].)

Approaches

Introduction: Sara Ahmed

The experimental feminist poetics that I propose is open to multiple diverse practitioners, and therefore engages with the multiple diverse positions on and approaches to theory and practice demonstrated by these practitioners. In *Queer Phenomenology: Orientations, Objects, Others*, feminist theorist Sara Ahmed considers different ways of thinking about the relationship between identity and position. Beginning with the concept of orientation, she questions what it means to situate oneself, to move in a certain direction, to follow a line, to assume a perspective, to position one's body in relation to another object, to inhabit space. She summarises:

Orientations involve different ways of registering the proximity of objects and others. Orientations shape not only how we inhabit space, but how we apprehend this world of shared inhabitation, as well as 'who' or 'what' we direct our energy and attention toward. (2006: 3)

Understanding how we relate to our environment and to objects and people within that environment is key to understanding how we fit in. Orientations are a combination of choice and inheritance, and we must recognise our complicity in the fact that the lines we follow are always, to a certain extent, predetermined: 'we walk on the path as it is before us, but it is only before us as an effect of being walked upon' (16). As Ahmed notes, following a line often correlates with aligning oneself with an argument or a cause, with making a social investment or commitment: 'To commit may then also be a way of describing how it is that we become directed toward specific goals, aims, and aspirations through what we "do" with our bodies' (17).

Ahmed considers orientation in relation to home, which we expect to be a familiar destination, a space in which our bodies feel comfortable. However, concepts of orientation, home, and familiarity must be reconsidered to reflect the migrant experience:

If orientations are as much about feeling at home as they are about finding our way, then it becomes important to consider how 'finding our way' involves what we would call 'homing devices.' In a way, we learn what home means, or how we occupy space at home and as home, when we leave home. Reflecting on lived experiences of migration might allow us to pose again the very question of

orientation. Migration could be described as a process of disorientation and reorientation: as bodies 'move away' as well as 'arrive,' as they reinhabit spaces. (2006: 9)

The migrant experience is two-fold: there is a home over there, and a home over here. The relationships to both homes are complex and often contradictory, raising questions of belonging, of the significance of the journey, of absence and return.

This chapter considers critical and creative processes relating to identity, position, movement, and relationship. 'To approach' is defined as 'To come nearer (relatively), or draw near (absolutely), in space' and can imply personal and sexual relations (*OED*). As a noun, an approach is a movement towards, a means of that movement (such as a passageway), and 'a way of considering or handling something, esp. a problem' (*OED*). A movement towards something presumes a movement away from something else, and I am interested in the methods and forms of these movements. I focus on three types of approach, in relation to the dictionary, mythology, and ritual. Many of the selected writers may be understood as oriented differently in terms of race, sexuality, religious and political belief, and academic and artistic practice. I explore relationships between their approaches and where they stand, how they align themselves, and how they articulate their positions. Investigating assumptions of familiarity and strangeness, and assuming singular and multiple positions in their work, the selected writers invite readers to rethink existing alignments and commitments.

Dictionary: Tina Darragh, Mary Daly, Susan Howe, and Harryette Mullen

The L=A=N=G=U=A=G=E Book contains the essay 'Procedure' by Tina Darragh. Darragh describes one of her writing experiments:

So I: take what is at hand (the dictionary), pick a page at random, use the key words heading the page as 'directions', find a pattern and/or flow of the words and write it down, trying to retain as much of the procedure as possible in the prose. (1984: 107)

Darragh allows her writing to be led by the source text, reading words as signs that indicate latent patterns in the text. These patterns are not governed by the author's intention, semantics or syntax, but by non-linear possibilities suggested by the words themselves. Darragh explains her attraction to the dictionary as a source text for procedural writing:

What interests me is the coincidence and juxtaposition of the words on the page in their natural formation (alphabetical order). In reference to each other, they have a story of their own. The technical aspect (scientific and philosophical terminology as distinct from conversational forms) of the language can be intriguing, too. Reading the definitions is like reading a foreign language developed specifically for English. (108)

Darragh suggests that the dictionary is stimulating in its arrangement of multiple related and unrelated words on the page. This format provides the poet with the freedom to invent relationships within the constraints of the poetic procedure. The dictionary also provides different perspectives of each word – pronunciation, etymology, variations of usage, which might distance the poet from her previous understandings of words and their significations. Thus, in making words seem unfamiliar, the dictionary endows words with new poetic possibilities. In *Striking Resemblance*, a collection of work written 1980-1986, Darragh performs procedural writing experiments on several dictionaries, including: *Oxford English Dictionary* (1933), *Random House Dictionary* (1966), *Morris Dictionary of Words and Phrase Origins* (1977), and *Dictionary of Rhyming Slang* (1975). She investigates the various functions of language in the dictionary, suggesting new ways of reading and finding meaning in the text.

‘Scale Sliding’ (which is dedicated to Joan Retallack) is a study of perspective and language. In the ‘hollow angle’ section, definitions of ‘fragment’ and ‘frame’ are arranged to resemble a ‘Ponzo/railroad track illusion’:

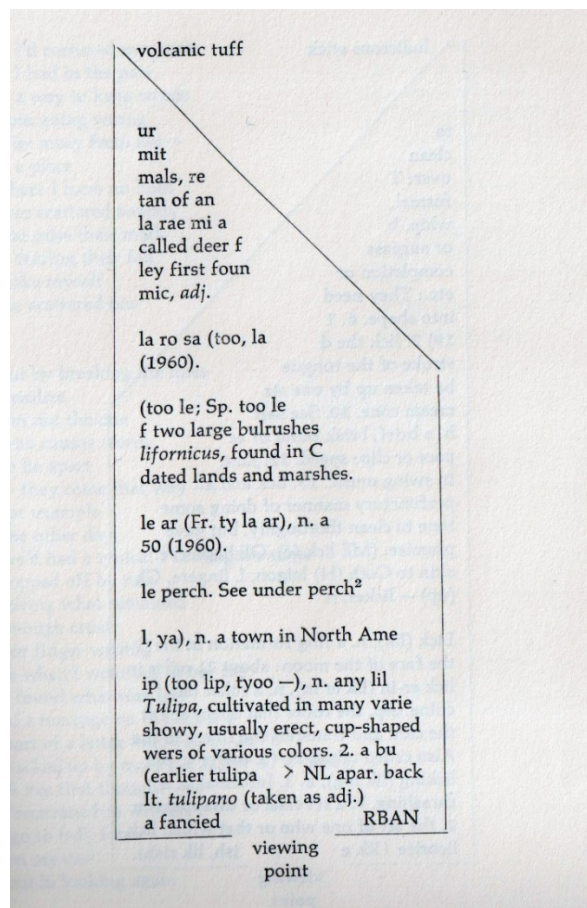
a part broken off	looks longer than	open border or case
plain wooden member	looks longer than	a rigid structure
scrap collapse or break	looks longer than	shell side of a hull
ment (um) a broken piece	looks longer than	verse, riblike members

(1989: 41)

The poem is a semantic and formal construction of fragment and frame. For example, the top left corner is ‘a part broken off’, which is a snippet from the dictionary definition of ‘fragment’: ‘A part broken off or otherwise detached from a whole; a broken piece; a (comparatively) small detached portion of anything’ (*OED*). This line refers directly to the subject matter of the poem as well as its composition. The lines are arranged in three columns; the middle column converts the structure into a spread-sheet with its repetition of the phrase ‘looks longer than’. Suggesting a mathematic function,

this column announces a comparative relationship between the outer columns. The lines might be read as equations: the ‘plain wooden member’ is greater than ‘a rigid structure’; ‘ment (um) a broken piece’ is greater than ‘verse, riblike members’. Perhaps the isolated part has more potential detached from the uncompromising whole, perhaps fragmentation is preferable to fixity. Is this a reference to the slowing momentum – ‘ment (um)’, fragmented movement – of traditional verse, the splintering frame of traditional art? Before coming to any conclusions about this poem, we must consider the scraps, broken pieces, open borders, and deep cuts that are arranged to look like a ‘railroad track’ illusion. This type of illusion reveals the influence of linear perspective on sensual and intellectual judgement, causing us to confuse what we see with what we expect to see. Darragh implies that if a reader thinks she has arrived at an accurate interpretation of the poem, she should reread the poem and think again.

‘Scale Sliding’ continues with three sections that are page-based versions of the Ames Distorted Room. Darragh drafts a blueprint by means of transcriptions of the dictionary:



Another illusion, the Ames Room distorts the viewer’s perspective so that she sees objects as if they were larger or smaller than they are in reality:

If a viewer stations herself at a fixed point just outside, two strangers of equal height standing at the far end look different in size. But if the viewer knows the person standing in the ‘false’ corner, she wonders what’s wrong with the Room. (1989: 45)

The illusion is created by means of this “‘false’ corner’, which is an artificial horizon. Darragh invites the reader to enter the Ames Room through a viewing point at the front of the room, which is the bottom of the page. The room is filled with text that is highly fragmented, yet dense with lexicographical information; the layout conveys the equivalent significance of grammatical and etymological detail and semantic definition. With close readings of the text and reference to the dictionary, patterns and puns become apparent. The word ‘perch’ recalls the ‘hollow angle’ section with its ‘plain wooden member’, while the direction to ‘See under perch2’ reminds us of the double meaning of the word (a joke about fishing for meaning?). Darragh provides a partial definition for the word ‘tulip’; the full entry includes information about its historical meaning: ‘An explosive charge used to destroy a length of railway track’ (*OED*). With the force of a single word Darragh explodes the ‘railroad track illusion’ of the ‘hollow angle’ section, her poetic procedures demonstrating the multidimensional and often unpredictable nature of language. Through creative readings and writings of her source text, Darragh invites her readers to join her inside the dictionary and to view this familiar text from a new perspective.

Mary Daly conducts her radical politics by recontextualising language from an explicitly feminist perspective. In her work on feminist theology and philosophy, Daly emphasises the patriarchal origins of language, and the need for women to develop their own languages in order to free themselves from the dominant order. In *Beyond God the Father: Towards a Philosophy of Women’s Liberation*, Daly writes:

It is necessary to grasp the fundamental fact that women have had the power of *naming* stolen from us. We have not been free to use our own power to name ourselves, the world, or God. The old naming was not the product of dialogue – a fact inadvertently admitted in the Genesis story of Adam’s naming the animals and the woman. Women are now realizing that the universal imposing of names by men has been false because partial. That is, inadequate words have been taken as adequate.

[...]

To exist humanly is to name the self, the world, and God. The ‘method’ of the evolving spiritual consciousness of women is nothing less than this beginning to speak humanly – a reclaiming of the right to name. The liberation of language is rooted in the liberation of ourselves. (1974: 8)

Daly argues that the world has been represented by language created by men, and has been misrepresented due to this gendered bias. Creating, using, and sharing language is an essential aspect of being human, and Daly believes that women cannot become fully-formed and fully-functioning human beings without attaining this aspect. Therefore, by participating in the creation, use, and sharing of language, women will not only liberate language from its patriarchal origins, they will liberate themselves. For Daly, the key requirements for women’s liberation are women being able to speak freely as women – in their own words – and women hearing themselves and each other.

In *Gyn/Ecology: The Metaethics of Radical Feminism* (written 1978), Daly’s politics are more polemical and less inhibited by academic convention; this evolution is apparent in her use of language. For example, words are frequently hyphenated: ‘Gyn/Ecology’, ‘the-rapist’, ‘man-ipated’, ‘A-mazing’. Daly cracks words open, displaying the broken pieces to the reader as if they reveal hidden truths. The study of women’s biology is the study of social and natural environments; therapists violate their patients with definitions of what is normative and what is pathological; the patriarchy controls all, through seen and unseen apparatuses; to make one’s way through the patriarchal system with its tricks and trapdoors is an astonishing feat, especially if the system is dismantled along the way. As with Darragh’s experiments with fragmented words and definitions, the reader is invited to step inside the familiar and view things from an unfamiliar perspective. However, unlike Darragh, who encourages the reader to work towards her own meanings and perspectives, Daly leaves little room for interpretation.

Websters’ First New Intergalactic Wickedary of the English Language is a compilation of Daly’s etymological discoveries, linguistic experiments, and redefinitions. Functioning as a conventional dictionary in terms of alphabetical order, etymological and grammatical information, and historical and literary references, the *Wickedary* is written in response to the prejudices and ‘falsehoods’ of the conventional dictionary (1988: xvi). *Webster’s Third New International Dictionary of the English Language* is the primary source text. The *Wickedary* is ideologically antithetical to this dictionary, but Daly uses it to validate her work. The *Wickedary* depends on what Daly

refers to as the ‘patriarchal dictionary’ (‘dick-tionary’ [xvii]), and Daly is careful to acknowledge her sources. She explains the relationship between women and lexicography:

The full title of this work is *Websters’ First New Intergalactic Wickedary of the English Language*. The word *webster*, according to *Webster’s Third New International Dictionary of the English Language*, is derived from the Old English *webbestre*, meaning female weaver. The *Oxford English Dictionary* defines *webster* as ‘a weaver, as the designation of a woman.’ According to the *Wickedary*, *Webster* means ‘a woman whose occupation is to Weave, esp. a Weaver of Words and Word-Webs.’ (xiii)

It is interesting to note the transition of Webster from the singular to the plural: the former signifies male authorship whereas the latter implies female community and co-creation. Indeed, Daly wrote the *Wickedary* with fellow feminist scholar Jane Caputi, and various contributions from ‘Wicked workers’, ‘Cronies’, and ‘Animals and Other Wild Messengers’ are credited throughout the book (xv-xvi). The authority of the individual lexicographer is distributed amongst a community of weaving women.

The purpose of the *Wickedary* is to explain the world from a radical feminist perspective. Free from the restraints of the ‘abominable snowmen of andocratic academia’, it reveals, rejects, and transforms various aspects of society and culture through experimental lexicography (1988: 183). The *Wickedary* displays the mutability of language. It contains many words in contemporary usage that connote femaleness in a pejorative sense: ‘Crone’, ‘Gossip’, ‘Hag’, ‘Nag’, ‘Witch’. These words have not always held such associations, and Daly returns them to their original contexts, expanding their definitions to include her female-positive narrative:

Witch *n* [derived from Anglo-Saxon *wicce*. Allied to Middle Dutch *wicker*, ‘a soothsayer’ ... Confer Norwegian *vikja*, (1) to turn aside, (2) to conjure away ... This *witch* perhaps = ‘avertter.’ – *Skeat’s*] : an Elemental Soothsayer; one who is in harmony with the rhythms of the universe: Wise Woman, Healer; one who exercises transformative powers: Shape-shifter; one who wields Labrys-like powers of aversion and attraction – averting disaster, warding off attacks of demons and Magnetising Elemental Spiritual Forces. (180)

Etymological information allows Daly to work backwards and forwards between histories and ideal futures of words. Daly situates words in a radical environment – a ‘New/Archaic context’ – envisioned by politics and materialised by language (xxiii).

The *Wickedary* demonstrates authorial intention on every page, and is as dependent on the structures of authority as a patriarchal dictionary. However, subversive politics lie at the heart of its production: the call to women to invent new words and definitions to suit their experiences and objectives. Daly provides suggestions: change spellings, change contexts, approach language imaginatively and joyfully, speak and sing with women, and celebrate the sounds of the alphabet out loud. Daly enthuses about the possibilities of the ‘Be-Longing and Be-Friending of words and women’ (1988: 28), and hopes that women will join together to participate in the transformation of language. The *Wickedary* is undoubtedly authoritative in its declaration of truth: ‘This is the only adequate antidote for phallocracy’s Biggest Lies. As Truth-Telling Mediums, Wicked Grammarians break the brokenness of consciousness that is crushed under the rule/rules of the sadosociety’ (30). However, unlike the patriarchal dictionary, the *Wickedary* exploits its powerful position to invite women to speak with their own voices and to exert themselves as their own authorities.

In *The Birth-mark: unsettling the wilderness in American literary history*, Susan Howe personifies the dictionary. In this instance, Noah Webster’s *American Dictionary of the English Language* (first published 1828) is the lexicographer himself. Webster appears as a character, but has no voice apart from his lexicographical voice. He represents male dominion over language, culture, and religion, his masculine authority set in contrast to feminine creative abandon: ‘Lawlessness seen as negligence is at first feminized and then restricted or banished’ (1993: 1). Howe turns to Webster to define words and clarify meanings that may have been unsettled or set adrift by the more reckless members of the community constructed by this work.

Howe emphasises Emily Dickinson’s ‘intentional misuse’ of the dictionary (1993: xi). Her argument focusses on patterns of gender and subversion, associating female figures with religious, social, and literary lawlessness and literal and figurative wilderness. We must turn briefly to the antinomian controversy that took place in New England in the early- and mid-seventeenth century. The ‘female preacher and prophet’ Anne Hutchinson believed in a covenant of grace as opposed to a covenant of works (1). This belief was in direct contradiction to the Puritan teachings of her society, and was treated as serious civil disobedience; Hutchinson was thrown out of her church and her

community. Howe likens Hutchinson's disobedience to Dickinson's unconventional vocabulary and syntax and her coded handwriting:

For me, the manuscripts of Emily Dickinson represent a contradiction to canonical social power, whose predominant purpose seems to have been to render isolate voices devoted to writing as a physical event of immediate revelation. The excommunication and banishment of [Anne Hutchinson] is not unrelated to the editorial apprehension and domestication of Emily Dickinson. [...] The antinomian controversy continues in the form, often called formlessness, of Dickinson's letters and poems [...]. It continues with this 19th century antinomian poet's gesture of infinite patience in preferring not to publish. Her demurral was a covenant of grace. (1)

Howe's use of the word 'demurral' is suggestive. It leads us to Dickinson's 'Poem 435':

Much Madness is divinest Sense –
To a discerning Eye –
Much Sense – the starkest Madness –
'Tis the Majority
In this, as All, prevail –
Assent – and you are sane –
Demur – you're straightaway dangerous –
And handled with a Chain – (1986a: 209)

Webster defines the verb 'to demur' as 'to stop; to pause; to hesitate; to suspend proceeding; to delay determination or conclusion' (2009: [n. pag.]). There is also a suggestion of doubt, which Webster determines to be 'not legitimate'. However, Dickinson uses 'demur' as the antonym of 'assent', defined as 'To admit as true; to agree, yield or concede, or rather to express an agreement of the mind to what is alleged, or proposed' (2009: [n. pag.]). Dickinson's syntax alters the meaning of the word; 'demurral' now signifies disbelief, disagreement, and rejection, although none of these meanings are attested by Webster. Therefore, Dickinson's syntax represents a deliberate rejection of the dictionary. Dickinson warns that a refusal to conform to the cultural order results in punishment and oppression, declaring that 'Much Madness is divinest Sense –'; she delivers her warning in the form of lexicographical deviation.

Howe uses Webster's lexical authority to emphasise words upon which she would like the reader to focus. Webster's definition of 'enclose' is the epigraph to Howe's 'Incloser':

To surround; to shut in; to confine on all sides; as, to *inclose* a field with a fence; to *inclose* a fort or an army with troops; to *inclose* a town with walls.

To separate from common grounds by a fence; as, to *inclose* lands.

To include; to shut or confine; as, to *inclose* trinkets in a box.

To environ; to encompass.

To cover with a wrapper or envelope; to cover under a seal; as, to *inclose* a letter or a bank note. (Webster 1852: [n. pag.]; cited in Howe 1993: 44)

The spelling is significant: '*Enclosure*, Noah Webster insists here, should begin with an *i*' (Howe 1993: xi). There seems to be a conflict between how the word sounds and what it means: 'in close' suggests intimacy, moving in closer, speaking in close company, but the definition implies force, constraint, and material transaction. This apparent confusion of intimacy and imprisonment is not accidental, as Howe asserts: 'There is a direct relation between sound and meaning' (49). She hints that Webster is complicit in this perverse substitution; the dictionary, which feigns being a safe space for words and meanings, is a secret trap operated by the dominant order.

Howe imagines Dickinson as a dissenter, voyaging across the boundaries of cultural convention into poetic wilderness: 'Emily Dickinson writes to her sister-in-law, Susan Gilbert Dickinson: "Moving on in the Dark like Loaded Boats at Night, though there is no Course, there is Boundlessness – "' (Dickinson 1986b: 800; cited in Howe 1993: 46). The drifting boats recall Dickinson's 'Poem 249':

Wild Nights – Wild Nights –

Were I with thee

Wild Nights should be

Our luxury!

Futile – the Winds –

To a Heart in port –

Done with the Compass –

Done with the Chart!

Rowing in Eden –

Ah, the Sea!
Might I but moor – Tonight –
In Thee! (1986a: 114)

This poem conveys the erotic aspect of lawlessness, the narrator flinging aside instruments of measurement and regulation before the climactic final line, in which she imagines an intimate anchoring. Howe replies to Dickinson's letter: 'I write quietly to her. She is a figure of other as thin as paper. Sorrow for uproar and wrongs of this world. You covenant to love' (1993: 47). The site where Dickinson's and Howe's communications are drafted is meaningful, as both poets write in New England, and fantasise about the space beyond. For Dickinson, Eden is the boundless territory, and Howe informs us that early American communities conceptualised their new home as a garden of paradise. In their search for freedom, they discovered the persistency of institutional structures (48-9). This slippage is associated with the dictionary: 'Strange translucencies: letters, phonemes, syllables, rhymes, shorthand segments, alliteration, assonance, meter, form a ladder to an outside state outside of States. Rungs between escape and enclosure are confusing and compelling' (46). Howe imagines institutional structures as prison bars and ladders leading out, as constraints and motivations; the 'inclosure' entails a disconcertingly desirable and generative confinement. In an interview with Edward Foster, Howe explains: 'I think a lot of my work is about breaking free: starting free and being captured and breaking free again and being captured again' (166). Perhaps dictionary definitions are the rungs between escape and enclosure that daring voyagers must bend and tread.

Harryette Mullen's *Sleeping with the Dictionary* is a collection of experiments with constraint. Mullen works with a vast range of sources: Gertrude Stein, African and African American cultures, William Shakespeare, Walt Whitman, Indian philosophy, Mickey Mouse, American immigration policy, Japanese music theory, European folklore, and members of Mullen's family, to list a fraction of this work's influences and interests. The collection is organised alphabetically by title, with the exception of titles beginning with 'I', 'U', and 'Y', absences which might represent the erasure of subjectivity or of conventional subject-object relations. Mullen explains the origins of the project:

I worked without a title for a while until, you know, I've told this story before –
I woke up in bed with the dictionary poking me in the back. [...] So I sat up

straight and said, ‘Here I am, sleeping with the dictionary.’ I grabbed my notebook and started writing the title poem. At that point, the book was already more than half done, but it seemed to be a miscellaneous collection with no principle of organization. The idea of alphabetizing the poems came to me after I got poked by the dictionary.

[...]

Once I had the final title, I realised that a few of the poems already mentioned the dictionary. Using a dictionary is also part of the Oulipo game S + 7 or N + 7, so at some level, I’d already been thinking of the dictionary as a character or collaborator, as well as an authoritative arbiter of rules that poets routinely violate. (Mullen and Henning 2011: 43)

Oulipo (*Ouvroir de Littérature Potentielle*, or Workshop of Potential Literature) refers to a literary group formed in France in 1960 and to subsequent writings based on the group’s principles. In the introduction to *Oulipo Compendium*, Jacques Roubaud explains the aims of Oulipo’s founders Raymond Queneau and François Le Lionnais: ‘to replace traditional literary values (such as those of the alexandrine, of classical tragedy, or of the realistic novel) with new traditions, through the discovery of constraints as “productive” as those which for centuries had ruled over the world of letters’ (Mathews and Brotchie 2005: 42).

The N + 7 game is one such generative constraint: ‘A method invented by Jean Lescure that “consists” (in Queneau’s terse definition) “in replacing each noun (N) with the seventh following it in a dictionary”’ (Mathews and Brotchie 2005: 202). Oulipian procedures such as this were intended to invigorate literature by challenging the nature of artistic freedom and creative subjectivity, and by inventing new forms with which to work. Oulipo does not deny artistic freedom, but redefines it as operating within strict rules: ‘An Oulipian author is a rat who himself builds the maze from which he sets out to escape’ (41). Mullen acknowledges the influence of Oulipo on her creative process, particularly for its complex structures: ‘That’s what its constraints are, I think – rules for how to break rules’ (Mullen and Henning 2011: 42). She continues the tradition by adapting Oulipian procedures to accommodate her artistic impulses:

I didn’t use the dictionary in a systematic way, though it was a game of substitution, similar to [...] N + 7. I don’t literally count up or down in the

dictionary. If I can't think of a word immediately, I might just flip through the dictionary and choose a word I like. (64)

As the title of *Sleeping with the Dictionary* suggests, Mullen conducts an exploration of the close working relationship between poet and dictionary: 'The idea is that the dictionary can be not only an authoritative reference, but also a more intimate companion, so to speak' (Mullen and Kane 2003: [n. pag.]). Her careful choice of dictionary emphasises her desire for diverse community and cross-cultural collaboration: 'it's significant to me that my *American Heritage Dictionary* was compiled with the aid of a usage panel that included African American writers Langston Hughes and Arna Bontemps, as well as feminist author Gloria Steinem' ([n. pag.]). The *American Heritage Dictionary* provides Mullen's poetics with vocabulary, structure, creative stimulus, and a functioning example of the diverse integrated community that is fundamental to her politics. The poem 'Jinglejangle' exemplifies Mullen's interest in what she calls 'the poetic process in everyday life' (1999: 203) and her enthusiasm for co-creation (when performing this poem live, Mullen invites contributions from the audience [Mullen, Gallagher, *et al.* 1997: (n. pag.)]):

Paco's Tacos page gauge pale ale paranoid android
Parappa the Rapper party hearty Patel hotel
paunch & haunch payday pay & play pee & see peewee
peg leg pell-mell pete beater
Phantom Anthems phone home phony baloney Pick Up Sticks
picnic pie in the sky, by & by (2002b: 40)

Working with diverse lexical registers and cultural references, Mullen produces a text that simultaneously includes individual voices and represents the multiplicity of the community.³⁹

Although Mullen selected her dictionary due to its diverse panel of experts, the language she uses to discuss the dictionary in the title poem and in interviews suggests

³⁹ In 'Otherhow', Rachel Blau DuPlessis discusses the contemporary creolization of self and world: 'processes of appropriation, syncretism, fabrication from disparate, ungainly materials, adaption, compromise between conflictual forms, and creative intersection are functions we already live as whomever we are' (2006b: 155). The language of creolization is 'a situation where a multi-poly-mishuganah set of discourses is set into play to explore and enact our crossings' (155). Mullen recognises this creolization (of self, world, and language) – her creative practices affirm her commitment to analysing its structures and enacting its communities.

that she conceives of the book as male. Mullen's use of words such as 'dicker', 'penetration', and 'diction', contributes to this gendered construction:

I beg to dicker with my silver-tongued companion, whose lips are ready to read my shining gloss. A versatile partner, conversant and well-versed in the verbal art, the dictionary is not averse to the solitary habits of the curiously wide-awake reader. (2002b: 67)

Mullen is engaged in negotiations with her eloquent bedfellow; this exchange is conveyed as both erotic encounter and poetic collaboration. The dictionary is conceived as 'an authoritative arbiter of rules that poets routinely violate' (Mullen and Henning 2011: 43), and therefore an ideal companion for the experimental poet. Mullen understands the dictionary's authority in terms of gender as well as race: 'Historically, African Americans have been associated with illiteracy and a lack of intellectual development. I'm often making an effort to recognize and resist the bias that is built into language through a history of accumulated associations' (39). Language is perceived and used differently by members of different social and ethnic communities and Mullen recognises the implicit inequalities that the authority of the dictionary represents. She positions herself as a woman being ravished by language ('now that I've been licked all over by the English language' [2002b: 57]) and as a black poet whose literary culture is suppressed ('My ebony's under the ocean. [...] We's all prisoners of our own natural anguish' [52]). Mullen is a member of a disobedient minority, aware of unequal power structures – between male lyric subject and female object of desire, between men and women, between white and black communities – and utilising them according to her own agenda. Mullen claims an intimate relationship with an authority that she is not expected to know; she challenges notions of who has access to language and literary form, and how to understand the responsibilities of that access.

Mullen references Audre Lorde's essay 'The Master's Tools Will Never Dismantle the Master's House' (written 1979), in which Lorde presents her argument that 'without community there is no liberation' (2007: 112). Lorde states:

Those of us who stand outside the circle of this society's definition of acceptable women; those of us who have been forged in the crucibles of difference – those of us who are poor, who are lesbians, who are Black, who are older – know that *survival is not an academic skill*. It is learning how to stand alone, unpopular and sometimes reviled, and how to make common cause with those others

identified as outside the structures in order to define and seek a world in which we can all flourish. It is learning to take our differences and make them strengths. (112)

Lorde suggests that communities of women who have been pushed into the margins by mainstream society should group together and create another world (perhaps like Howe's 'outside state outside of States'). She proposes that women invent new tools and structures separate from those used by the racist patriarchy (112). Mullen claims to disagree with Lorde's argument: 'I don't think English or any other language is inherently oppressive. Language isn't the property of any one person or group. It belongs to everyone who uses it. We can use any language, knowledge, or tool to enhance or diminish humanity' (Mullen and Henning 2011: 82). However, by using deliberately oppressive texts, literary conventions, and linguistic registers – for example, the imperative official language in 'We are Not Responsible': 'Please remain calm, or we can't be held responsible for what happens to you' (2002b: 77) – Mullen demonstrates the regulation of language by the cultural authority. If the dictionary is understood as one of the 'master's tools', Mullen learns how to use it to build her own house, a creative space that values multiplicity and marginality. In 'Natural Anguish', Mullen responds to Lorde: 'The complete musician could play any portion of the legacy of the instrument' (52). She explains, 'That's how I feel about language. To me, it's what music is to a musician. Once the language becomes your own instrument, it can do what the master never imagined' (Mullen and Henning 2011: 81).

Tantric poetics is motivated by power and empowerment, which it concerns itself with inspecting, subverting, and appropriating. Through authoritative languages, literary forms, and personas, the practitioner experiments with power in order to understand its workings, and to anticipate the transformation of its mediums and uses. (See 'In the Rainstorm', 'Where Speech Abideth', and 'A Story of Kamalā' for appropriations of and challenges to lexicographical authority [147-149; 154-155; 184-187].)

Mythology: Audre Lorde, Theresa Hak Kyung Cha, and Bhanu Kapil

In the essay 'Poetry Is Not a Luxury' (first published 1977), Audre Lorde discusses poetry as a necessity for humankind. Poetry is a means of survival because poetry can represent change: 'It forms the quality of light within which we predicate our hopes and dreams toward survival and change, first made into language, then into idea, then into

more tangible action' (2007: 37). Poetry provides a space in which possibility may be imagined; language is the material that manifests the transformation. However, society does not recognise the necessity of poetry nor the powers of the poet. The poet and her strength of feeling are undervalued, which Lorde relates to the diminishment of women:

For within living structures defined by profit, by linear power, by institutional dehumanization, our feelings were not meant to survive. Kept around as unavoidable adjuncts or pleasant pastimes, feelings were expected to kneel to thought as women were expected to kneel to men. But women have survived. As poets. (39)

Lorde does not claim that only women have access to the powers of the poet, but she does imagine the poet as female. She writes that every human being has a (female) poet within him or herself: 'The white fathers told us: I think, therefore I am. The Black mother within each of us – the poet – whispers in our dreams: I feel, therefore I can be free' (38). In an interview with Adrienne Rich conducted in 1979, Lorde clarifies that she does not consider thought and feeling to be dichotomous, but that each person has access to 'a choice of ways and combinations' (101). The Black mother or poet represents humanity, which is a position taken by some and rejected by others – the awareness of terror and chaos and the agreement that 'we must never close our eyes' (101). To choose humanity we must realise our capacity:

These places of possibility within ourselves are dark because they are ancient and hidden; they have survived and grown strong through that darkness. Within these deep places, each one of us holds an incredible reserve of creativity and power, of unexamined and unrecorded emotion and feeling. (37)

Lorde investigates the dark, ancient, and deep aspects of herself and of American and African American society and culture in the *The Black Unicorn* (first published 1978). In the poem '125th Street and Abomey', Lorde explores her relationship with the Black mother, whom she identifies as the mythic figure Seboulisa, 'The goddess of Abomey – "The Mother of us all"' (2000: 332). Lorde imagines an intersection between a street in the Harlem neighbourhood of New York City and the capital city of the West African kingdom of Dahomey. Both are landmarks in African American history: in the sixteenth-nineteenth centuries, Dahomey was used as a hub by transatlantic slave traders; in the twentieth century, millions of African Americans left Southern America for new opportunities in the North, and Harlem was host to significant social and

cultural changes. Walking down 125th Street (part of which is now named Martin Luther King, Jr. Boulevard), Lorde is transported:

Head bent, walking through snow
I see you Seboulisa
printed inside the back of my head
like marks of the newly wrapped akai
that kept my sleep fruitful in Dahomey
and I poured the red earth in your honor
those ancient parts of me
most precious and least needed
my well-guarded past
the energy eating secrets
I surrender to you as libation
mother, illuminate my offering
of old victories
over men over women over my selves
who has never before dared
to whistle into the night
take my fear of being alone
like my warrior sisters
who rode in defense of your queendom
disguised and apart
give me the woman strength
of tongue in this cold season.

Half earth and time splits us apart
like struck rock. (241)

History and geography spiral in Lorde's imagination, allowing her to merge wintry streets in Harlem with the red earth of Abomey, to confront her fear of walking alone at night with the courage of her Amazonian counterparts. Lorde accesses the 'ancient parts' of herself in order to connect with society and culture on the other side of 'earth and time', to mend the 'struck rock' of her identity.

Lorde imagines herself and her Black mother as irreparably damaged:

bring me where my blood moves
Seboulista mother goddess with one breast
eaten away by worms of sorrow and loss
see me now
your severed daughter
laughing our name into echo
all the world shall remember. (2000: 241)

The split between goddess and devotee, mother and daughter, is violent and painfully slow. The goddess is devoured by time with no one to remember her, the mother decays with no one to nourish, the daughter is maimed in her forcible separation from both. Lorde embodies centuries of social, cultural, and racial struggle: the ‘ancient and hidden’ terror and chaos that have ‘survived and grown strong’ (2007: 36). Lorde refuses to allow those emotions and experiences to remain ‘unexamined and unrecorded’ (37); she listens to the Black mother within, listens to herself and her ‘ancient parts’, and writes so that ‘all the world shall remember’. In discussion with Rich, Lorde explains: ‘Once you live any piece of your vision it opens you to a constant onslaught. Of necessities, of horrors, but of wonders too, of possibilities’ (107). Merging mythology with lived experience, Lorde accesses and writes through joyous and painful memories of survival, the laughter of the present moment ringing through the darkness of the past. She occupies multiple positions simultaneously to reinforce the particularity and universality of the struggle for survival and the necessity of change.

Theresa Hak Kyung Cha’s *Dictée* (first published 1982) is an autobiography and a biography of mythic, historical, and fictional women. Cha writes different voices through her experimentations with language (English, French, and Korean), discipline and genre (mythology, history, biography, poetry, performance), form (essay, letter, diagram, photograph, visual artwork), register and tone.⁴⁰ *Dictée* opens with a short verse written by Cha, which is misleadingly attributed to Sappho: ‘May I write words more naked than flesh, | stronger than bone, more resilient than | sinew, sensitive than nerve’ (2001: [n. pag.]). The lines connote an invocation. Taking into account Cha’s authorship, we might wonder if the verse is addressed to Sappho. Perhaps Cha seeks

⁴⁰ Joan Retallack describes *Dictée* as ‘poetically investigative in the surprising juxtapositions of its parts’: ‘These are parts whose interactions create a fluid and productively indeterminate form of life as text, in the irresolvable abundance of their intersecting lines of play, in their grammatical/syntactical, particle-wave interruptions’ (2003: 125-126). The form of Cha’s autobiography represents the mutability and multiplicity of subjectivity, demonstrating the connections and collisions that determine life within community.

permission to write from the ancient literary foremother; perhaps Cha solicits Sappho as muse.

Overleaf, the contents page is a list of the Hesiodic muses and their associated artistic forms: Clio – History, Calliope – Epic Poetry, and so on.⁴¹ Cha’s relationship to the muses is perplexing. Although *Dictée* is structured according to the muses, Cha seems to reject or erase the muse in the opening pages. She writes: ‘O Muse, tell me the story | Of all these things, O Goddess, daughter of Zeus | Beginning wherever you wish, tell even us’, adhering to the literary convention (2001: 7). The next two pages contain language learning exercises: to write twelve sentences in French, to translate nine sentences into French, to complete ten sentences in French. The sentences suggest a loose narrative of a person not fitting in (‘If you did not speak so quickly, they would understand you better’); a person longing for home (‘The people of this country are less happy than the people of yours’); a person struggling to communicate, to listen and be heard (‘I want you to speak’, ‘Wait till I write’) (8-9). The list of instructions, statements, and questions suggest an interrogation, a series of warnings and threats. On the following page, the earlier lines are repeated but all references to the muse have been removed: ‘Tell me the story | Of all these things. | Beginning wherever you wish, tell even us’ (11). In her absence, the muse assumes significations beyond the literary convention. While the language exercises suggest the poet’s translation of the muse’s breath into poetry, the covert interrogation suggests that the poet must deny all knowledge of the muse. Perhaps the poet incorporates the muse, assuming the position of muse in her work. Or, perhaps the poet marks the irrelevance and inappropriateness of inspiration and literary convention to the lives of the women she recounts.

Dictée combines multiple narratives, moving between the muses, Joan of Arc, Saint Thérèse, Yu Guan Soon (the sixteen-year-old Korean political leader), Hyung Soon Huo (Cha’s mother), and Cha herself. Cha documents these women, engages with them, embodies them:

All rise. At Once. One by One. Voices absorbed into
the bowl of sound. Rise voices shifting upwards circ-

⁴¹ As Juliana Spahr notices, the information that Cha provides about the muses is incorrect: ‘Cha names “Elitere” as the muse of lyric poetry instead of Euterpe’ (2001: 124). Spahr posits that these are deliberate errors, designed to provoke readers: ‘[*Dictée*] is built around discomfort. It has little reading ease. It often teases and encourages readers to question what they take as proper, correct, or true’ (124). *Dictée* is partly an account of Cha’s family’s migration from Korea to Hawaii to San Francisco; by denying readers an easy or pleasant reading experience, Cha represents the linguistic and cultural challenges and uncertainties that often accompany the minority immigrant experience.

ling the bowl's hollow. In deep metal voice spiraling
up wards to pools no visible light lighter no
audible higher quicken shiver the air in pool's waves
to raise all else where all memory echo (2001: 162)

Voices swirl together, vacillating between spirit and matter. The sense is of a 'deep metal voice spiraling up wards' to a place where light and sound cannot reach. The voices disturb their surroundings, 'quicken shiver the air', until they reach the highest point – 'where all memory echo'.⁴² This is a space beyond visible light and audible sound, beyond memory, but it is a space where voice can go.

One of the voices that Cha is most concerned with is that of her mother. Hyung Soon Huo lived in China during the Japanese occupation of Korea, where she was forbidden from speaking Korean:

You speak in the dark. In the secret. The one that is yours. Your own. You speak very softly, you speak in a whisper. In the dark, in secret. Mother tongue is your refuge. It is being home. Being who you are. Truly. (2001: 45-46)

Cha suggests that in being denied her language, Cha's mother was denied her identity, her selfhood, her sense of safety, familiarity, and home. For Cha, the mother tongue represents some sort of truth, and although Cha cannot vindicate that truth on behalf of her mother, her formal and narrative experimentations reveal her intentions. Cha rewrites the Demeter-Persephone myth, reversing the mother-daughter dynamic so that it is the daughter who discovers and liberates her mother:

Dead words. Dead tongue. From disuse. Buried in
Time's memory. Unemployed. Unspoken. History.
Past. Let the one who is mother
who waits nine days and nine nights be found.

⁴² In her discussion of Cha's video work *Passages Paysages* (1978), Kristen Kreider thinks through echo: 'What is echo? I stand in a canyon and call out. My voice reverberates – echoes – in the acoustic chamber of rock. I receive the sound, belatedly and externally. A mimetic repetition comes "back" to me through the trace of my voice, dislocated and transformed by its physical surroundings. Echo is thus both icon and index: a repetition pointing back to its source, but materially transformed by its context' (2014: 118). Reframing this discussion according to Cha's writing in *Dictée*, we might ask: what is the source of memory? What is the context against which it reverberates? How do we recognise the transformed memory when it returns? According to Hesiod, the world began with Chaos, out of which Gaia (Earth) appeared. Gaia united with Ouranos (Heaven) and produced Mnemosyne (Memory). Perhaps the source of memory is the intersection of earth and heaven, body and spirit; perhaps the context against which it reverberates is the community that transforms memory into myth and history; perhaps individual members of the community are variously sensitive to the sounds and shapes that memory assumes upon its return (memory's echo may be comparable to Retallack's unintelligible; see chapter one [38-44]).

Restore memory. Let the one who is disease, one
who is a daughter restore spring with her each ap-
pearance from beneath the earth.
The ink spills thickest before it runs dry before it
stops writing at all. (133)

The imagery evokes a mother who spoke in some distant past. Her voice has grown weak from disuse – it has been suppressed, buried deep underground, forgotten – but it will be heard again. The mother returns to earth’s surface and is reborn as herself, as her own daughter (*disease* is a French word for female speaker, and also connotes a fortune teller). She speaks, writes, and is heard; words flowing fast until she is forced back to the Underworld. Cha conveys endless cycles of spring and winter, life and death, voice and silence. The imperative phrase ‘Restore memory’ suggests that the mother is memory, the embodiment of woman’s voice and woman’s silence, and it is the daughter’s duty to struggle against her mother’s erasure: ‘She hears herself uttering again re-uttering to re-vive. The forgotten. To survive the forgotten supersede the forgotten’ (150). (This conceptualisation of memory relates to discussions of memory and muse in chapter two [54-72].) Having remembered, the daughter, who may be understood as the woman writer, articulates – ‘She returns to word. She returns to word, its silence. If only once. Once inside. Moving’ (151) – and sustains cycles of disappearance and return.

In the acknowledgements to *Incubation: A Space for Monsters* (first published 2006), Bhanu Kapil credits her infant son: ‘thank you, also, to Thelonious Rider for asking, “Mama, who was the first person who was ever born?” which made me think for the first time of the connection between a monster and a citizen’ (2011a: 95). *Incubation* is the experimental biography of Laloo: a conflation of selves, stories, and symbols, through which Kapil investigates the manifold identity of a Panjabi British daughter of immigrants who becomes an immigrant herself when she moves to America. ‘Laloo’ is the main character in Kapil’s novel; a deformed boy recorded in the nineteenth-century text *Anomalies and Curiosities of Medicine*; a name for the Hindu god Krishna; ‘a masculine, sun-like name of Vedic origin’ (39); a word signifying the colour red; a Panjabi nickname ‘of the sort given to children and abandoned, in most cases, when the child is grown, sprouting hair and dripping blood all over the white, 1970s shag carpeting that extends diabolically into the bathroom and even the kitchen’ (11). Laloo

functions as a peculiar double through whom Kapil investigates connections between the concepts of monster, cyborg, immigrant, and citizen.⁴³

Kapil writes:

The removal of a person, abruptly, from a set of conditions is complicated for the soul. Did you ever feel that? You, not Laloo. I am writing to you, a writer. [...] Were you born a cyborg into a house of brutal monsters who bickered over everything from feeding to sleeping schedules? Or did you, as the years passed, have the growing sense that you were a citizen born to immigrants? (2011a: 10)

The difference between a cyborg and monster is related to assimilation: 'The monster is that being who refuses to adapt to her circumstances' (7). The monstrous immigrant does not make a clean cut from her place of origin, she bears her difference grotesquely: 'monsters are always identifiable by their long black hair and multiple arms' (12).⁴⁴ The cyborg is skilled in the art of transformation, making her more difficult to identify; she understands assimilation as 'a technology of growth' (91). Kapil narrates a story about cyborgs as she writes 'on a balcony in fake Portugal (my kitchen, painted gold, orange, and red) in a pink dress unzipped at the back' (24). Interjecting the story with such details of daily life in America, she describes a visit to the hospital with Laloo:

I'd been eating sauerkraut in the basement cafeteria and when I returned, she'd gone. 'She left before we could sew her back up. She won't get far. Does she have health insurance, do you know? Do you know her social by any chance?' (25)

The author eats lunch in a hospital while her double escapes. She is so comfortable in America that she decorates her house in the style of a European country while her double fears federal scrutiny. She writes in an unzipped dress while the body of her

⁴³ The epigraph to *Incubation* is a quotation from Donna Haraway's essay 'The Promise of Monsters: A Regenerative Politics for Inappropriate/d Others' (1992). Kapil's ideas about the cyborg are influenced by another of Haraway's essays, 'A Cyborg Manifesto: Science, Technology, and Socialist-Feminism in the Late Twentieth Century'. Haraway's cyborg is a hybrid being that embodies her argument for 'pleasure in the confusion of boundaries and for responsibility in their construction': 'The cyborg is resolutely committed to partiality, irony, intimacy, and perversity. It is oppositional, utopian, and completely without innocence. [...] The relationships for forming wholes from parts, including those of polarity and hierarchical domination, are at issue in the cyborg world' (1991: 150-151).

⁴⁴ This description of monsters evokes the Hindu deities that appear throughout the text. Kapil remembers asking her mother for stories of Shiva, Parvati, Hanuman, and Durga on a nightly basis: 'I got ten thousand heads and eight arms, each reaching out for a different thing from the same body: conches, bloody swords, pencils' (2011a: 20). Perhaps the distorted body of the Hindu deity represents the powerful aspect of the monster, whose strengths are located in difference.

double is an open wound. Although it seems that the author's story diverges from that of her monstrous double, separation is impossible. Laloo, the medical curiosity, embodies this relationship: 'An anomaly, Laloo's chest was appended by a parasite, "which had its own intestinal tract." Two legs hung from him. Am I saying this well? He was duplicate, in a limited sense, within himself' (19).

In an interview with Anne Waldman, Kapil states: 'What I can say about every book I have written is that what underlies is the body, an immigrant body' (2014: [n. pag.]).⁴⁵ The body of the immigrant is the point of attachment between monster and cyborg. Kapil describes the experience of weather in an unfamiliar environment: 'Here is the tongue, for example, constantly darting out to feel the air: what is it? Is it summer? Is it a different season? It's a different day' (2011a: 10). In another scene, Laloo walks towards a beach: 'With precision and infinite gentleness, she places a red tongue into the foam. Red kelp dried in the sun higher up on the beach. This is a tongue she is holding in her hands, separate from her mouth' (13). The cyborg's body identifies the different environment and reprograms itself accordingly; the monster's body reacts instantaneously, mutilating itself in response to external change. Kapil considers the immigrant body in terms of visible difference – 'is brown not pink' (87) – but also in terms of visual, sensual, physical experience: the adjustments the body must make to new colours, temperatures, tastes, movements.⁴⁶ Kapil describes the moment when Laloo transforms from a monster into something else: 'Something is coming towards her in the moment of contact that precedes alteration, something huge, but I can't see what it is. The question of home dissolves into the question of trees' (93). Walking through the darkness, the figure understands herself according to her displacement, her movement between myths. She turns herself towards something – a new life, identity, home – and is surprised by something else – memory, difference, exile.

The practitioner of Tantric poetics re-makes the methods of myth and reimagines her position within myth. She constructs multiple narratives and perspectives in order to access different points in the time and space of mythic,

⁴⁵ In fact, this is an interview for a promotion at Naropa University, where Kapil currently teaches. Waldman, Kapil's reviewer, sent Kapil a list of questions. Kapil emailed a response which she also published on her blog with the title 'Anne Waldman: A Little, Shattered Interview on Contemplative and Progressive Pedagogy and Writing Practice at the Jack Kerouac School' (22nd February 2014).

⁴⁶ In a later work, *Schizophrene*, Kapil considers the impact of migration and diaspora culture on mental health: 'It is psychotic to go. | It is psychotic to look. | Psychotic to live in a different country forever. | Psychotic to lose something forever. | The compelling conviction that something has been lost is psychotic' (2011b: 53).

historical, and personal transformation. (See 'Home' for memories of travel, exile, and belonging [258].)

Ritual: Cecilia Vicuña

There is an ancient and ubiquitous link between poetry and religion, poets and priests. Cecilia Vicuña explores these connections in writing and live performance. After a performance at the Poetry Project at St. Mark's Church in 2002, Vicuña wrote a letter to her mother:

as always, i begin not knowing what i am going to do. i am introduced, people applaud, and as they wait, i don't make a move. i am nowhere to be found. i sit quietly, in the back, with a spool of white thread in my hand, and suddenly, i lift the spool and make it spin, as if it were a spindle. and at that moment i realise that i, too, have become a living spindle and begin to listen to its slight sound, almost imperceptible. while turning, and without thinking, I begin to do a little dance beneath the spindle, placing the spindle next to the ears of some people, so that they too can hear it turning. (2012: 315)

Vicuña transforms the space of the room, conducting her performance as a ritual event. She is in control, drawing the audience into the ritual with her actions. Vicuña understands poetry in relation to her heightened capacity for perception. In an interview with Billie Jean Isbell and Regina Harrison, she explains:

Poetry began in a visionary way for me. I was young, seventeen years old, and I lived in Santiago, at the foot of the Andes, right there facing El Plomo. El Plomo is the chief *apu* [lord, Andean deity] of the whole valley of Santiago [...]
Suddenly I had the feeling that a word just came into my field of sight, a word almost like a person. And this word began to open up, to show me its inner parts, and it began to dance. (1997b: 54)

Vicuña does not believe that her visionary powers grant her authority over her community, but that they demand from her a greater sense of responsibility to language and world. (She recounts three epiphanies: the first was a poem she wrote about Baghdad; the second was the realisation that she must create art to honour and heal the earth; the third was the vision described above [2012: 55]).

Vicuña's vision of words resulted in the work 'Palabrarmás'. The title is a conflation of words – '*palabra*, word; *labrar*, to work; *armas*, arms; *más*, more' –

intended to convey the meaning: ‘to work words as one works the land is to work more; to think of what the work does is to arm yourself with the vision of words’ (1992: 27). Words are tools and weapons, comprising knowledge and power. The intention of word work is to ask words questions, listen to their memories, and remember their original meanings while imagining their futures: ‘To enter words in order to see’ (32). One approach to entering words is by means of etymological exploration. This is demonstrated in Vicuña’s work with metaphor:

One metaphor carries another within it; only poetry can
guarantee the continuance of the species.

A rising toward the precision where the metaphor
reaches terrains of splendor.

Splendor *is* creation.

A union of disparate forces, the word condenses
creation within its inner metaphors.

[...]

The Indo-European root *bher*, to carry, also, to bear children.
Latin *ferre*, to carry, confer, differ, fertile, suffer; Greek
pherein, to carry, amphora, euphoria, metaphor. (44-45)

Metaphor’s ability to convey and transfer language is related to poetry’s power to sustain and transform humanity. Metaphor’s ability to connect separate entities is itself a metaphor for difference, its self-perpetuation a sign of hope. As Vicuña’s selection of etymologies suggests, difference manifests as labour, creativity, exchange, productivity, struggle, and well-being. Metaphor contains knowledge that is vital for the survival of humanity – the potential for creation, strength, and joy within difference – and it is the poet’s task to discover and reveal this knowledge.

‘Palabramás’ is written in Spanish and English, and contains many references to writers and texts that inform Vicuña’s understanding of word work, including: Mircea Eliade’s *The Sacred and the Profane: The Nature of Religion* (1959), Sigmund Freud, Martin Heidegger, Octavio Paz, Plato, the Rig Veda, the Upanishads, and Tantric texts. The poem also expresses Vicuña’s connection to Andean culture. She did not

realise this connection at the time of writing, only learning it after reading anthropological studies by Isbell and Harrison, the afore-mentioned interviewers:

Now it sends chills up and down me to think of the coherence between my feelings and Andean culture. I *was* Andean culture, I was living it before really knowing it, prefiguring it in my imagination, but I didn't know it then.
(1997b: 54)

Isbell and Harrison discuss Vicuña's poem 'Poncho: Ritual Dress':

the poncho
is a book
a woven
message
a metaphor
spun (1992: 13)

Harrison describes this poem as one of Vicuña's 'best poems of Andean-ness', which she considers to be even more special because it is one of the few poems that Vicuña has written in English: 'you are now jumping across languages and cultures' (1997b: 56). Isbell likens Vicuña's poetics to the anthropological practice of translating cultures, saying 'Perhaps you captured the most apt image for translating Andean culture... "a metaphor spun"' (57).

Weaving is fundamental to Andean culture and to Vicuña's creative practice. Vicuña is particularly interested in the *quipu*, a Quechua tradition:

Knot, a spatial system of annotation for government statistics and poetic and musical composition in the Inka and pre-Inka periods. 'It consisted of a series of cords of cotton or wool in codified colors, knotted at regular intervals, and attached in turn to a larger cord from which they hung.' (1992: [n. pag.]

QUIPOem contains many of Vicuña's experiments with the *quipu*: photographs of spirals drawn in sand, threads crossing urban and rural landscapes, heaps of various materials, grids, meshes and nets, and lines of text ('The memory of the journey unravelling' [1997a: 23]; 'Writing is the door to the underworld' [113]; '*La palabra es el hilo*, the word is the thread' [138]). Vicuña understands the *quipu* literally and conceptually as a thread that remembers; as a means of divination; as a woven connection between entities, ideas, and states of existence; as a path or a boundary; as a

prayer. Working with different elements of language, culture, and spirituality, she develops a textured poetics, arranging sources into patterns and stitching them together with her abstract and visionary writing.

Related to the *quipu* is Vicuña's project of *arte precario*: small objects crafted from found materials tied together with string. This project was conceived during Vicuña's second epiphany, in which she vowed to 'respond to the Earth in a language that the tide would erase' (2012: 55). In other words, to make transient works from materials collected from local surroundings, such as litter, twigs, and feathers, that might return to the environment without causing further damage. In 1973, after the coup d'état of the Chilean government and the assassination of its president Salvador Allende, Vicuña began creating precarious objects as a form of political action (she was living in London at the time). This is documented in *Saborami* (first published 1973):

In the beginning I wanted to prevent the coup, now the objects intend to support armed struggle against the reactionary government.

The objects try to kill three birds with one stone:
politically, magically and aesthetically.

I conceived them as a journal. Each day is an object
(a chapter) all days make a novel.

I didn't want to make it with many words since there
is hardly any time left to live. (2011: 12)

These objects represent difference and community, the poverty of the Chilean people, the disappearance of indigenous Andean culture, the violence done to civilians and the disposability of human lives, and Vicuña's realisation of the fragility of all that had once seemed secure. In the afterword to *Saborami*, written several years after the book's first publication,⁴⁷ she reflects:

With the coup we lost the memory of who we were. Violence was done to our bodies, our language, our self image. Terror reigned and thousands died, many thousands tortured and many thousands more were forced into exile. [...] Today, the experience of the double 'I,' of the collective and individual as one, is only

⁴⁷ The later edition of *Saborami* is published by ChainLinks, edited by Jena Osman and Juliana Spahr. Osman and Spahr state their objectives: 'to produce books that might change people's minds, might agitate for (thought) reform, might shift perspectives' and 'to provide space for work that slips through genre cracks and disciplinary boundaries' (2011: [n. pag.]).

remembered by the indigenous who are now being persecuted and branded as the new ‘terrorists.’ [...] *Saborami* is the broken heart of an era. (160-162)

Vicuña continues to make precarious objects. As well as political actions in terms of representation, statement, and record, Vicuña conceives of her objects as prayers:

Doing (*ars*) became prayer (*précis*), and prayer, doing.

The precarious was transformation,
prayer is change,

‘the dangerous instant of transmutation.’

[...]

In the Andes, leftovers are collected in order to throw out evil.

The knots are changes
and exchange generates the cure.

Continuity is obliteration.

In death, resurrection.

Debris, a past to come: what we say about ourselves.

An object is not an object, it is the witness to a relationship.

A thread is not a thread, but a thousand tiny fibers entwined. (1997a: 136)

In making these objects, in sharing them with people and offering them to the earth, Vicuña demonstrates her conviction in poetry’s ability to make things happen. Prayer and poetry involve action, making, and transformation. Whatever belief is assigned to the objects – that they represent evil, or connection, or identity, or some combination of forces – they communicate with the world. By means of these little transformations, Vicuña upholds her vow to listen to the world and share in its responsibility:

To recover memory is to recover unity:

To be one with sea and sky

To feel the earth as one’s own skin

Is the only kind of relationship
That brings her joy. (132)

Tantric poetics explores relationships between cause, practice, and effect. Intentions, methods, and outcomes implicate each other. Sometimes the inspiration is the process is the poem; sometimes the invocation is the ritual is the reward. (See 'A Story of the Mahāvīdyās' for reflections on metaphor [215-223].) Tantric poetics cannot overemphasise the importance of the practitioner. If everything converges in the practitioner, the practitioner must be prepared to recognise her potential. (See 'Forty Verses to the Goddess Kālī: A Ritual Translation' for documentation of the poet-priest's rituals [245-257].)^{48 49}



⁴⁸ Cha worked with ritual in her live performances, through which she experimented with notions of transformation. Trinh T. Minh-Ha describes Cha's piece *A Ble Wail* (1975): 'As the cloth is set loose in the performer's choreographed gestures, she becomes entwined in them. Movement and stillness, sound and silence are carefully highlighted, for her wish in this piece [is], as she wrote, "to be the dream of the audience"' (2001: 33). Vicuña recalls a non-verbal performance in which she paid tribute to Cha seven years after Cha's death (the performance took place at Exit Art Gallery in New York, 1989): 'I placed a water fountain in the middle of the room, with a flame over it, and called it "Fire Over Water" in her honor. From the audience I threw tiny white rocks into the water. The rocks made a twinkling song. In her performances, Cha would give the audience white cards that read, "distant relative." Rocks, water, and fire are also our relatives' (2012: 94).

⁴⁹ Anne Waldman reflects on the relationships between poetry and ritual, practice and responsibility: 'I think the influence one gets from Tantric Buddhism emanates from the concurrent desire to get on stage and display various states of energy and have the pieces – the poems – become ritual enactments of these very powerful states of mind. And carry an efficacy as well. As poets we can be more powerful. We have a duty here, like the monks mumbling mantras in hidden caves that keep the world spinning, that counter the violence and misery of samsara. Why not try one's magic power?' (2001: 224).

Conclusion

Between Experimental Feminist Poetics and Tantric Poetics: Catherine Clément, Luce Irigaray, and Anne Waldman

In this discussion of contexts, relationships, and approaches in experimental feminist poetics, I have suggested points of comparison between the selected writers and their works and Tantric poetics. Each section has revealed an aspect of Tantric poetics, with regards to the open text, engaging with the muse, working with the dictionary, and so on. My intention has been to show that theories and practices of Tantric poetics extend beyond the contexts of Tantra and my own methodology. To conclude this discussion, I would like to consider women writers who engage with Tantra explicitly. These women have different experiences and understandings of Tantra, and they are involved with different Tantric traditions, but each of their works suggests intersections between experimental feminist poetics and Tantric poetics. I focus on three intersections: Catherine Clément's syncope, Luce Irigaray's between, Anne Waldman's both, both.

Philosopher Catherine Clément is associated with French Feminism and *écriture féminine*.⁵⁰ In *Syncope: The Philosophy of Rapture* (first published in French in 1990), Clément presents her concept of syncope through readings of Western and Indian philosophy and religion, art and literature, and psychoanalysis. Translators Sally O'Driscoll and Deirdre Mahoney explain that 'syncope' can signify 'a fainting or swooning and other kinds of loss or absence of consciousness; an irregularity in the heartbeat; a musical syncopation; a grammatical or other elision', and note that Clément's use of the word 'moves among and between the different possible meanings, redefining the term' (1994: xix). Clément discusses occurrences of syncope in music ('a succession of dissonances'), dance ('the suspended movement'), and poetry ('*Enjambement*: we are not far away from the dance, turning the poetic act into a pirouette of words') (2-5). She explains that syncope may be a physical reaction such as a sneeze, a hiccup, a burst of laughter; any bodily experiences that 'exhausts consciousness and makes it more tractable, more open to entering other landscapes' (7-

⁵⁰ *The Newly Born Woman* (first published in French in 1975) is collaboration between Clément and Hélène Cixous. In the introduction to the English translation, Sandra M. Gilbert imagines a conversation between Clément and Cixous and women writers including Emily Dickinson, H.D, and Gertrude Stein: 'We must be dis-placed to be re-placed [...] We must fly away to be regenerated. To be innocent as the healthiest processes of nature. To be immune to the hierarchical "principles" of culture. To be newborn' (Cixous and Clément 1988: xviii).

8). Syncope is a temporary absence of self, a ‘miraculous suspension’ that provides an anomalous opportunity for other understandings of time and space (5).

Clément interprets the experience of this absence, which is also an opening, as the rapture of approaching death. Rapture is a mental, physical, and spiritual state of disorientation. Although the word currently connotes pleasure, passion, and religious fervour, Clément traces its etymology to reveal darker significations: ‘We forget that “abduction” (*rapt*) and “raptus” come from the same root as “rapture”; we ignore the fact that the depressive is also enraptured’ (1994: 25). Death, which may be thought of as the ultimate rapture, the abduction from life, is similarly nuanced: ‘Syncope seems to simulate it, and to anticipate it: is that not all death is, a narrow, shifting corridor followed by an intense happiness?’ (15). Clément imagines death as a crossing from pain to pleasure, from struggle to release, from presence to absence. The relationship between experiences of rapture and death is revealed in the language used to convey the ‘little death’: ‘*Orgasm*, like music and ecstasy, seems indescribable; there are few words to describe it, always the same ones: explosion, eruption, earthquake, ascent, rending, bursting, vertigo, and the stars...’ (14).⁵¹ Syncope come close to death, but there is a significant difference: ‘The advantage of syncope is precisely that one always returns from it. [...] Syncope is like asthma attacks: one play-acts death, but in order not to die; one passes beyond consciousness, but returns with a dazzled memory’ (15). Syncope entails the fear and exhilaration, disappointment and relief of temporary transformation.

Clément attributes her interest in syncope to her experience of living in India (1994: 20). She writes that Eastern cultures have developed a discipline of syncope: ‘The detour through India makes us discover a philosophical science of syncope, the consummate art of its practice, a comprehensive consideration of its secret powers’ (21). Clément’s detour through India passes through ancient and contemporary Hinduism: Vedic ritual, the philosophies contained in the Upanishads, Buddhism, Tantra, yogic culture including breathing practice and meditation, asceticism, mythology, faith, Indian politics and popular culture.

In the essay “‘Inter faeces et urinas’: Tantrism Between Feces and Urine’, Clément discusses her interest in Tantric Hinduism as a context of extremes (the title

⁵¹ In *Lesbian Peoples: Materials for a Dictionary*, Monique Wittig and Sande Zeig provide the following definition for ‘ecstasy’: ‘Internal movement of the body when reaching an extreme harmony. Eyes have been seen falling during ecstasies, ears becoming longer, hearts becoming visible on the surface of the chest, bellies turning around the navel at full speed, all that without death resulting for the persons concerned’ (1980: 49).

refers to St. Augustine's depiction of the precise moment and location of birth (1994: 134)). She focusses on the significance of the body and sexual activity in Tantric philosophy and iconography:

In this suspended moment, differences are abolished. First of all sexual difference: it is no longer Shiva and Shakti, no longer a male god and a female goddess; they merge at the very moment of orgasm, interpenetrating each other until sexual identity vanishes. It is no longer the 'I' of 'I love you,' nor the 'You' of 'You are good for me,' it is the coming together in one of those who used to be two. [...] No, it is, literally, 'between-the-two.' (138)

The union of god and goddess represents the dissolution of all dualities, which the Tantric practitioner meditates upon and enacts within a ritual context. External categories and hierarchies merge; in the 'suspended moment' of spiritual rebirth, differences dissolve, creating new possibilities for equality and exchange. In this moment of transformation, the practitioner realises an opportunity to 'choose the gap' or in-between: '[it is] difficult to determine whether the exercise consists in having the subject disappear into the void or enlarge it and fill it with everything. Empty or full? Absolute subject, or unconscious subject?' (140). Clément presents Tantra as enabling a subjectivity that might be both – emptiness and fullness, consciousness and unconsciousness, implosion and explosion. Describing Tantra as 'asceticism through excess', she explains:

Consciousness will have devoured the external world, as if it had been aspirated through a miniscule hole. But once the 'devouring' is over, consciousness, like a living organ, will not be able to end there; obeying the turbulence of the ocean, it 'vomits' the reality it just ingested. (140-141)

The Tantric practitioner simultaneously expands her consciousness to include everything and empties her consciousness to dissolve everything; she releases self and body into a cycle of connection and detachment, coherence and unintelligibility.

Focussing on the extremes and excesses of Tantric beliefs and practices, Clément notes that women are 'the most gifted' practitioners:

Women are always excessive. But their excess fits into the straight line that connects the individual to the cosmos that she faithfully replicates, and in which

she finds a place, at the moment of fusion, that parallels the place she had as a living being. (1994: 155-156)

Clément remarks that women's excessiveness has been diagnosed as hysteria in medical and psychoanalytical contexts (155). Hysteria is defined as 'A functional disturbance of the nervous system [...] and usually attended with emotional disturbances and enfeeblement or perversion of the moral and intellectual faculties. Morbidly excited condition; unhealthy emotion or excitement' (*OED*). The term is derived from the Greek word for 'belonging to the womb, suffering in the womb' (*OED*), and the mental and physical condition to which it refers is associated with women. Clément suggests that Tantra offers an interpretation of excessiveness as an aptitude rather than a disorder, refiguring certain mental and physical disturbances and perversions as skilful engagements with rapture.⁵²

Clément argues that in Western society and culture, the artist – who is presumed to be depressed, hysterical, perverse, and rapturous – is permitted regular engagements with syncope (1994: 237). Indeed, the creative act necessitates syncope: 'the artist's reality demands crossing through an essential syncope, a veritable mental collapse, resulting in new work. In fact, from this chaos only something new can emerge' (236). The artist is sensitive to the differences that order the world; she is also capable of detaching herself from them, of imagining alternatives. Clément identifies a cycle of creative process: the artist engages herself in 'Indian-style disintegration', dissolving self and world in order to enter syncope (239). Renouncing everything but the work, she becomes consumed with the complexities of her artistic practice (she sinks into 'the agitated ocean of the busied ant' [239]). Finally, the artist completes the work; she returns to self and world with a mixture of sadness and repose, until the cycle begins again. Parallels between the creative process, sexual activity, and spiritual rebirth are deliberate; Clément understands syncope according to multiple interpretations.

The cycle requires a certain detachment from society; going 'back and forth between the world of the banal and that of the extraordinary', the artist submits herself to an exile that entails endless departures and returns (1994: 240). Clément suggests that

⁵² Clément positions Sigmund Freud as one who opposes syncope: 'For strangely enough, this man who was constantly confronted with the syncopal symptoms of hysterics, and who vainly struggled to clarify their mystery, rejected, throughout his life, what syncope brings' (1994: 248). She notes that Freud was aware of Tantra, and made attempts to venture into 'the Hindu jungle' (248-249). However, he could not accept the concept of limitlessness and 'ecstatic dissolution', as revealed in his discomfort with 'the oceanic feeling' that he discusses in *Civilization and Its Discontents* (153; 248).

artists and other ‘syncope-people’ might experience these displacements as a form of release:

By entering the blessed syncope of supreme moments, by temporarily losing the secured identity that constitutes them as a single member of the social body, they escape its confines: they are free, with an unreal and extraordinary sense of emancipation. (240)

Syncope-people are participants and outsiders; renouncing self and world, they contribute to community by means of their absences. Although syncope may result in suffering, isolation, and loss, ‘[these experiences] are comparable to the effects of creation and give way to a new era, for better or for worse’ (241).⁵³ Clément argues that the syncope-person – whether Tantric practitioner or poet – is empowered by the claim: ‘I leave the world, and then I return to it. I die, but I do not die. I am placed between the two, between life and death, exactly in the between-the-two, refusing one and the other’ (261). The syncope-person sacrifices constant and stable emotions and relationships in exchange for rapturous interventions. However, she is not detached or unconcerned; Clément suggests that the syncope-person undergoes syncope on behalf of others, specifying the poet as a person who ‘knows how to make use’ of syncope and how to represent the experience (261-262). Creating a temporary space in-between subjectivities and states, the syncope-person accesses an expanded consciousness through which to realise and share new understandings of the world.

Tantric poetics imagines cyclical relationships between philosophy, creativity, and subjectivity. The practitioner studies theories in an attempt to understand self and world; she experiments with those understandings in order to challenge and expand self and world; she experiences transformations by means of those challenges and expansions; she theorises those transformations and continues the cycle. (See ‘Book 8, Hymn 100, Rig Veda’, ‘Notes on Sanskrit’, and ‘Her Voice as an Instrument of Thought’ for a cycle that starts with the philosopher Abhinavagupta and the theory of the four stages of voice, speech, language, and sound [156-157; 161-164; 212-214].)

⁵³ Clément references the tenth-/eleventh-century Tantric philosopher Abhinavagupta’s argument that the Tantric practitioner must recognise raptures of joy and of despair: ‘just as [he] must yield to jouissance when it arises, he must not resist pain but must abandon himself to it, in order to seize the moment at which suffering and astonishment are fused into another logic’ (1994: 241).

Luce Irigaray is a psychoanalyst and philosopher associated with French feminism and *écriture féminine*. In *Between East and West: From Singularity to Community* (first published in French in 1999), she investigates autonomy and interdependence in relation to what she terms 'Eastern teachings'. Irigaray argues that as a consequence of the over-governed, over-institutionalised age in which we live, human beings have lost their connections with nature, the world, and each other. We have gained unlimited access to power, information, and resources without realising how much has been lost:

Has [man] not confused what is and what is not, exercising his know-how, building and constructing before asking what is, what he himself is? Advancing from illusion to illusion without securing his knowledge of the real, beginning with the reality that he himself is? (2005: 2)

Questions of what is, what a person is, what reality is are problematic. Irigaray implies a true or essential nature, an original state of existence that is somehow more authentic than the one we immediately perceive. She claims that our understanding and appreciation of knowledge itself has become confused, and we underestimate the vast capabilities of human consciousness:

The risk exists that we are becoming computer software with a multitude of stored programs but for which the key for defining the possible unity of these programs is missing, as is the manner of passing from one program to the other, the means of using the whole or a part of it in order to communicate with oneself, with the other, between us. (94)

Possibly resulting from our dependence on bureaucratic culture and information technology, our minds compartmentalise everything, separating things before understanding how they might relate to each another. This compartmentalisation is mental and physical, and it extends to wider social and cultural relationships. Despite having access to sophisticated technologies of communication, we are unable to communicate.

In response to this disconnection, Irigaray proposes a twofold solution: 'to reground singular identity and to reground community constitution' (2005: 3). The independence and self-sufficiency of every individual must be established for the equal and reciprocal community to exist. Irigaray believes that human beings do not tend to self, body, and subtle inner workings. In this context, she turns to Eastern teachings and

finds breathing practices to be potential methods for experiencing self and body in new ways:

An Eastern culture often corresponds to becoming cultivated, to becoming spiritual through the practice of breathing. In this becoming the body is not separated off from the mental, nor is consciousness the domination of nature by a clever know-how. It is a progressive awakening for the entire being through the channeling of breath from centers of elemental vitality to more spiritual centers: of the heart, of speech, of thought. (8-9)

The necessity of awakening recalls Cixous's arguments about the unwritten female body in 'The Laugh of the Medusa' (see chapter one [24-30]). Both writers suggest that human beings exist in a dull dormant state, cut off from their selves and bodies, and from each other. In Irigaray's terms, heart, speech, and thought must be revitalised in order for human beings to feel, love, communicate, and think for themselves. The task is harder for women: 'Whoever has long remained reduced to a natural identity or to a slave consciousness cannot give themselves overnight a consciousness of their own' (112-113). Irigaray agrees with Cixous that women have been reduced to their biological functions and have been systematically prevented from forming their own subjectivities, impulses, desires. However, Irigaray's arguments in *Between East and West* are directed at both men and women. By 'awakening' through breathing, meditation, and physical practice, men and women will return to the selves and bodies they have lost connection with, and to each other.

Irigaray states: 'nature as human nature is *two*: masculine and feminine, and [it] requires a double subjectivity, a double "being I," in order to be cultivated' (2005: 98). Doubleness is beneficial to gender equality, for it prevents 'a totalitarian order imposed by only one truth, only one subjectivity, only one leader' (100). Coexistence, reciprocity, and exchange are key to Irigaray's notions of sexual difference and community. She writes:

The 'being I' and the 'being we' are constituted starting from a consciousness of the self as limited, from an individual or collective responsibility that does not efface the singularity of each person. Difference is not preserved by a vertical transcendence, but thanks to the horizontal transcendence of the other gender as irreducible to me, to mine.

Community is then composed of autonomous individuals in conscious relation to one another. (102)

Irigaray proposes an interpretation of the community according to internally experienced patterns and values as opposed to externally imposed structures and goods. Community may be understood according to ‘intimate relations of kinship’ and ‘closeness with others’ rather than ‘borders that are more or less foreign to the subject(s)’ (14). Irigaray imagines this community of ‘autonomous individuals in conscious relation to one another’ as composed of an ‘infinite number of couples’ (103). As she explains, ‘to constitute [community] according to a democratic ideal is impossible without renouncing the all-powerful genealogical order, always founded on a hierarchy, in favor of horizontal relations between subjects’ (104). Hierarchies must be dismantled in order to interpret and experience community differently, and Irigaray believes that the fundamental difference that exists between human beings is sexual: ‘The duality of the sexes cuts across all races, all cultures, all traditions’ (136).

Irigaray argues that the family begins with two: ‘a family is born when two persons, most generally a man and a woman, decide to live together on a long-term basis, to “set up a home,” to recover an old expression that, deep down, is beautiful’ (2005: 105). She focusses exclusively on the male-female relationship, which she imagines as a sexual (‘carnal’) partnership. Familial relations – for example, between a parent and child – are rejected because genealogy is structured vertically (15); heterosexual relations are preferably sexual – ‘carnal sharing’ is described as a spiritual path towards greater consciousness (114-117); homosexual relations, friendships, occupational partnerships, and other forms of relationship are not mentioned. In an interview with Elizabeth Grosz, Irigaray states that the issue of sexual difference subsumes the issue of homosexual and homosocial relationships:

The relations with the same sex are always dependent also on the other sex: a child is conceived by the two sexes and our society is formed by the two sexes. Furthermore, our culture is elaborated above all by one sex, but includes the two sexes as polarities of a presumed unique and neutral identity. It is thus never, at least today, a question of relations only with members of one and the same sex, unless at the imaginary level. (2008: 133-134)

Irigaray claims that society and culture are structured according to two sexes and determined by one. Examples of other types of relationship do not alter this fact, and

same-sex relations do not negate or neutralise an individual's sexual identity. As long as the masculine subject prevails, inequality will remain at all levels; therefore, sexual difference is necessarily the prime concern.

Irigaray continues:

I could add that abolishing the sexual difference in our relations other than sexual strictly speaking is to take away from us the opportunity of elaborating a culture different from our Western metaphysics, that is, a culture that can deal with our sexual being not only at the bodily level but also at the spiritual level. (2008: 134-135)

Irigaray proposes an alternative culture, one that does not privilege male or female, mind or body, spirit or matter, but arranges these differences on a plane. Turning to Eastern teachings – particularly Tantra and yogic traditions – she finds examples of such horizontal arrangements: man and woman as divine lovers, contributing to the rebirth of the other; the body as a site of the spiritual and the cosmic; breath and speech as social and cultural practices (2005: 49-71). Irigaray mentions several aspects of Hinduism: 'pre-Aryan aboriginal Asiatic cultures' and 'pre-patriarchal cultures' (28-29), the Vedas, the Upanishads, Buddhism, Tantra (including mantra, yoga, and the chakra system), and Hindu mythology. However, I take issue with a number of Irigaray's references. For example, she emphasises goddess worship and the significance of divine couplings, but she does not name the goddesses: 'I have not spoken of Vishnu, or Krishna, of Shiva and of their loves' (38); she refers to the god of wind and breath by the wrong name (he is known as Vayu or Vata; Irigaray calls him 'Vac', which is the name of the goddess of voice) (41-42); although she frequently mentions the various Hindu traditions listed above, there is little discussion beyond yogic traditions. Irigaray claims that Hindu traditions are relevant to her argument, but she does not provide references to support her claim. I do not question Irigaray's knowledge, but I feel that her representation of Hindu traditions does not adequately demonstrate her research or her argument.

However, Irigaray does not claim to be an expert; indeed, her intention is to encourage conversations and comparisons, to suggest 'an experience of the way to progress between two traditions, if they really are two' (2005: 71). Rather than explicating an argument, Irigaray presents a context within which it might take place. Without offering Eastern cultures as a solution to Western deficiencies, she proposes a

cross-cultural exchange: 'it would seem to me useful to build bridges between cultures: through comparing texts, through encouraging each man and woman to talk about his or her culture in order to attempt to find similarities and differences to share' (70).

Acknowledging the 'generalised mixing' of our age, Irigaray notes that 'we are still lacking a culture of between-sexes, of between-races, of between-traditions, etc.' (139). In other words, we lack the cultural comprehension and articulation of this coexisting multiplicity. Irigaray concludes with concerns about the future:

We have to let go of our models of identity founded upon equality or similarity if we are to put ourselves to the test of differences that require rights that are equivalent but not reducible to the same, to the equal, to the one. (145)

Irigaray believes that a 'progressive generosity' towards multiplicity and interrelationships depends on 'new formations, perspectives, words, and logics' that recognise the singularity of individuals and communities (145). The progression of our civilization depends not only on the acknowledgement of diversity of the 'being(s)-in-relation' (individuals and communities) but on the cultivation of diversity through sensitivity, creativity, and compassion.

Tantric poetics creates spaces for dialogue and debate, facilitating and provoking exchange. The practitioner is committed to community work; however, although she is continually engaged with the work, her involvement varies. She acknowledges the political and ethical imperatives of the work, understanding this responsibility in terms of mediation and moving in-between. (See 'Juxtapositions', 'A Story of Mātāngī', and 'Notes on Voicing Parts' for movements presented with and without comment [230-232; 264-268; 278-290].)

Anne Waldman is a student and practitioner of Tantric Buddhism. In a question-and-answer session with students at Naropa Institute in 1976, Waldman explains her understanding of the relationships between Buddhism and critical and creative practice:

It's about becoming a self-sufficient warrior, making yourself impeccable, but also generous to your world. So, it runs parallel to art in some way, in that you're working on a refining process. And it is a process. It involves a discipline, like writing. It demands constant work with your own ego. (2001: 47)

Waldman is interested in Buddhism as a practice that investigates subjectivity and the relationships between self and world. In 'Oppositional Poetics', she considers the

possibilities of a socially and politically engaged spiritual poetics, asking herself and others: ‘As writers what’s the task?’ (51).⁵⁴ Spiritual and creative explorations converge in the declaration that ‘You must go against the grain for the benefit of others’ (51). Waldman suggests that experimental approaches to reading, writing, and theorising may be thought of as spiritual and political approaches to the world. To navigate the chaos and savageness of the past, present, and future, writers must recognise and utilise their strengths in different contexts: working with ‘mythological poetic wars, planetary finitude, unfathomable sickness, starvation, and death’; writing letters to ‘powermongers’; supporting ‘candidates’; demonstrating ‘total candor’ and ‘total renunciation’ (51). Waldman encourages writers to choose causes, commitments, and activities; disengagement is not an option. She references the muse’s instruction to H.D. – ‘write, write or die’ – indicating the spiritual and personal nature of the writer’s vocation, and reinforcing the destructive consequences of relinquishing responsibility for the writer and for the community.

In the introduction to book one of *The Iovis Trilogy: Colors in the Mechanism of Concealment*, Waldman describes her approach to community: ‘I exist in a community of my own choosing and making, which is attentive to language and poetry before language. It harbors the secret wishes of all my tears and predilections. Community is “voice”’ (2011: 2). Waldman’s poetry is a site of dialogue and exchange between disparate sources, contexts, and perspectives. For example, the first chapter of book one of *The Iovis Trilogy* includes: a pop song, a dharma test, a letter from Waldman’s paternal grandfather to his sweetheart, the transcript of a conversation in a taxi, a letter from Waldman to Ronald Reagan about the nuclear arms race, her personal reflections on motherhood, and references to the Bible, Virgil, and Robert Creeley, and different languages and literary forms. Responding to a question from Randy Roark about her apparent inability to choose, Waldman explains: ‘I don’t feel compromised by my personal range. Heaven forbid I ever “find my own voice”. I’m not really searching, you know. Embarrassing. Creeley and Ginsberg can coexist. I’ve always been excessive’ (2001: 129). Waldman is not interested in poetry as a vehicle for an individual voice, but as a space for a multitude of voices to meet. This excessive impulse recalls

⁵⁴ The oppositions of Erica Hunt’s and Waldman’s oppositional poetics are diverse: Hunt articulates an oppositional perspective that begins with gender, race, and class and is shaped by ‘the perceived hostility of the dominant group’ (2008: 200) (see chapter one [23-24]), whereas Waldman’s oppositions are understood according to Buddhist structures of non-duality and ‘both, both’. However, both writers emphasise the relationships between poetics and politics, and the consequent responsibilities of the poet to ‘navigate a new chaos of possibility’ (Waldman 2001: 51).

Clément's discussion of Tantric practitioners; indeed, Waldman compares the process of writing to meditation: 'No reference back to the solid "I". [...] You are free to explore other states of mind, states of being. You can get inside the language' (134). The writer fills her poetry with self and world in order to empty self and world; everything is included so that boundaries may be dissolved. Waldman's description of her rapturous experience of language – 'my poetry communicates my mind, my nervous system, which rages with passion with whatever the words "say"' (135) – suggests complex interactions between mind, body, emotion, meaning, and the creative processes that Waldman has developed to represent them.

In *The Iovis Trilogy*, Waldman configures the space of poetry as a battlefield of 'love and war and poetry' (2011: 111): 'Fragments built on other fragments, finally organizing, one hopes, each other toward some kind of cohesive landscape. The field of Mars' (3). The various sources, contexts, and perspectives that Waldman works with are brought together in conflict. Waldman is explicit about the many men and women writers who have influenced her, regularly citing the names of predecessors, contemporaries, colleagues and students in interviews and essays. *The Iovis Trilogy* is full of references to women writers, but, as the dedications in 'Both, Both: An Introduction' make clear, it is written for men: lovers, fathers, brothers, husbands, son, and masters of the epic form (William Carlos Williams, Ezra Pound, Louis Zukofsky, and Charles Olson; although H.D. is acknowledged for her contribution to the epic form, *Helen in Egypt*). *The Iovis Trilogy* is a study of war and warrior energy, and although women may be warriors – Waldman describes herself as 'Amazonian in proportions' (17) – war is dominated by the male principle. Waldman assumes the role of the female poet venturing into masculine realms: 'to take on the manifestations of patriarchy in writing-tracking, tracing, documenting – over a quarter of a century, see how the woman poet-mind would fare & flow in late twentieth-/early twenty-first-century rhetoric, dis-a-vowels, tantric magics, energy, temperature, density' (xi).

In 'Mangala', the prologue to book one (the title is the Sanskrit word for Mars, and denotes the Hindu god of war who was raised by his mother Bhumi, the goddess of earth), Waldman writes:

I sing within & without the temple (it's this book the temple I speak of)
 the male gods take over as electricity & dynamite
 & let me preach these allegories for the last day
 & we, goddesses, giddy on the last day

will preach these allegories on the last day
I will speak out of my lowness
but the messiah is a man of sorrows
& O He is a great king
but I am in my writing
& in my richness
I speak a new doctrine to an old form (2011: 5)

Waldman imagines herself as a priest-poet, her work as songs and prayers echoing beyond the limits of poetic form. She is driven by a desire to 'greet & study the phenomenal world' and to receive and investigate the discourses that have imposed their own interpretations and orders (4). The poet considers herself to be a mediator: 'I will take both testaments | & transmute the mundane into heavenly music | & eat the book' (4). Waldman does not specify the testaments in question; she references Judeo-Christian and Hindu traditions, patriarchal and abstract feminine cultures, written texts and oral and aural cultures, doctrines revealed by sermons and 'hag's tongue' (6). Furthermore, the prologue is composed of multiple forms: a prose argument, a long verse written in short repetitive lines, another long verse of even shorter lines arranged with indents and double-spacing. Transmuting old forms, narratives, and meanings, the poet presents a new doctrine: 'Keep writing & hope to alleviate some of the suffering' (4). In contrast to forefathers such as Moses, who 'staked a claim and held up one of the first books as emblem of rule', Waldman's poet declares her doctrine and eats her book (4). She communicates the significance of the message and of the multiple and mutable forms in which the message may be conveyed. The poet hints towards a revolution: she preaches on 'the last day'; the war god is invoked as if to request courage and strength in battle. However, in her position as mediator, the poet declares her intention to investigate and write both testaments, both sides of the struggle, both old forms and new doctrines.

The concept of 'both, both' recurs in Waldman's work. Her interest in the interplay between duality and non-duality may be related to her studies of Tantric Buddhism. In 'Self Other Both Neither', Waldman explains: 'The poet studies Madhyamika philosophy, a branch of Buddhist thought, which refutes the idea of solid existence and embraces the view of codependent or co-arising origination' (2011: 296). (Evoking Clément's syncope, she describes the philosophy as a double-perspective: 'it's like being alive but seeing your own death, your own corpse at the same time, all the

time' [2001: 219].) Waldman considers the possibilities of Madhyamika philosophy as intellectual and artistic approach: 'she has set a shapely form for her thinking', 'she moves through a mental relationship to phenomena', 'she wants an oppositional poetics' (2011: 296). Furthermore, Waldman suggests that Madhyamika philosophy informs her understanding of relationships between writer, reader, and text:

Perhaps there is no 'self' ultimately to be revealed. The 'I' exists inasmuch as 'other' and vivid phenomena exist. [...] I write to make up the world, it's true. I live inside that 'world' or universe. You're welcome to come in as well. But it's not all artifice either. I want you to get inside my eyes and heart. (2001: 131)

Waldman refers to herself as 'the poet' in *The Iovis Trilogy*, which is a composite identity: she is goddess, muse, priest, epic heroine, woman within patriarchy, mother and daughter, female poet within male-dominated literary history, founder of a school of poetry, teacher, autobiographical subject, lyric subject, student of Buddhism, ritual practitioner and transforming spiritual consciousness, 'both, both'. Waldman positions this self within a world of her own making and invites the reader to join her. However, according to Madhyamika philosophy, 'you realise that things do not come from themselves, nor from things outside themselves, nor from both, nor from neither' (224). Relationships within and without the work are complicated and contradictory, constituted by and including everything and nothing:

I am in the context of those before me who worshipped a goddess whose eyes were mirrors. One eyes reflected the 'inside,' the other the gorgeous and dark phenomenal world. Take your pick. Both, both. She, the muse, puts an invisible protection cord around my neck to protect me from ego. She exceeds my aspiration to disappear. (2011: 2)

Waldman positions herself within a mythic, historical, and cross-cultural community of her own 'choosing and making' (2). Creating and dissolving oppositions – between critical and creative traditions, between diverse figures and their relationships to the goddess and muse, between inner and expansive (cosmic) subjectivities – she asserts the validity and efficacy of a practice that incorporates both.

Tantric poetics approaches spirituality as a means to investigating poetics, ethics, relationships, and subjectivity. The practitioner understands spirituality as a way of thinking through and working with multiple theories and practices – spirituality enables her to think and work abstractly, without limits. She does not

differentiate between herself and another or between transcendence and materiality – she experiences excess. (See ‘Variations’ for a gesture towards excess [190-191].)

Although my critical and creative practices converge and diverge variously from the practices under investigation, I am influenced and informed by each of the writers and works included in this discussion. I present the concept of Tantric poetics in an attempt to bring together the various aspects of this project. These aspects are not imagined as solid pieces with well-defined edges and a particular fit. They are manifold and transforming sounds, colours, shapes, and connections, emphasising the mutability of pattern and the absence of (constant) coherence and harmony. I conduct exchanges between different disciplines and genres, different critical frameworks, different discourses, forms, and methodologies to demonstrate the excitingly dissonant relationships between parts and the whole.

Voicing Parts

As Of Stones Used For Pressing



Nisha Ramayya

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Introduction

In January 2011, I began to research Sanskrit. I was eager to start translating texts before knowing which texts I wanted to translate. I compiled a list of translation experiments (transliteration, homosyntactical translation, translations between image and text, source and target translations) and started to look for source materials. I soon discovered a group of Tantric goddesses called the Mahāvīdyās, and became fascinated with Tantric beliefs and practices, particularly those relating to language. Vāc is the goddess of voice, speech, language, and sound. She is one of the oldest Hindu goddesses – several hymns in the *Rig Veda* are dedicated to her – but is no longer worshipped as a goddess; she is an esoteric Tantric concept. Vāc is the eponymous heroine of this project (the title is from her dictionary definition), bringing together my explorations of Sanskrit, Goddess, Tantra, and experimental feminist poetics. I work with translation and transformation in relation to discipline, genre, form, and medium. Experimenting with text, image, sound, and video, I use multiple source materials and processes to produce poems, essays, lists, performances, and documentation.

Voicing Parts is organised into four cycles: Sanskrit, Goddess, Tantra, and Subjectivity. The number four is conceptually important to the project – Vāc is powerful in four worlds; there are four stages of voice, speech, language, and sound. In the first cycle, I consider Sanskrit language and literature, particularly religious and philosophical texts, and provide a brief introduction to Sanskrit scholarship. In the second cycle, I present a narrative of the Indian goddess from the ancient Indus Valley civilization, to Sanskrit texts, to popular Hindu myths, to contemporary Indian society and culture. In the third cycle, I investigate Tantric beliefs and practices. In the fourth cycle, I demonstrate various rituals, and conclude with the endnotes. The structure of the project reflects the structure of a Tantric ritual: begin with language, invoke the goddess, perform the steps, and experience transformation. *Voicing Parts* combines practice and methodology to present a Tantric poetics.

I translate Sanskrit words using Monier-Williams' Sanskrit-English Dictionary. This dictionary is the primary source text and is referenced throughout the work, sometimes marked with quotation marks or brackets, sometimes unmarked. When several definitions are quoted, they are listed in Sanskrit alphabetic order.

I follow the standard system of transliteration, Roman script with diacritics, and have adapted quotations to aid consistency. Most Sanskrit words, including names, are transliterated, with the exception of words that have entered the English language (for example, mantra, Sanskrit, Tantra).

Hinduism and Hindu Indian cultures are considered from three perspectives: Shaivism (God is worshipped as Śiva), Shaktism (Goddess is worshipped as Śakti or Devī), and Śiva/Śakti Tantrism (the Supreme Being is both God and Goddess and neither). 'Goddess' is capitalised when referring to the integrated concept of a Supreme Being; plural and lower case forms are used when mythological figures and ritual practices are being discussed.

Sanskrit

4 kinds of object: when anything new is produced, when a change of substance or form is implied, when a desired object is obtained, when an undesired object is abandoned
 4 year old girl who embodies Durga
 4 constituents of a kingdom: army, treasury, city, territory
 4 classes of men in erotic works
 4 oceans
 4 direction-elephants
 4 houses
 4 forces (reckoned by ascetic Shaivas): song, donation, separation, distribution
 4 divisions into which women are classed: fair, talented, excellent woman, strong sexual passion
 4 objects or aims of existence: desire, purpose, duty, liberation
 4 afflictions of speech: lying, slander, abuse, unprofitable conversation
 4 stages of life
 4 yugas or ages
 4 Vedas
 4 requirements of comparison
 4 forms of internal acquiescence
 4 regions of heaven
 4 corners
 4 kinds of destruction of the world: accidental, natural, necessary, infinite
 4 stages of speech from the first stirring of breath to articulate utterance
 4 means of acquiring certain knowledge: perception by the senses, inference, comparison, verbal authority
 4 legal restraints: limitation of time, confinement to a place, prohibition against removal or departure, restriction from employment
 4 religious orders (for Brahmins)
 4 kinds of beautiful woman
 4 ashrams
 4 trials or tests of honesty: loyalty, disinterestedness, continence, courage
 4 classes of husband
 4 castes
 4 floods of worldly passion
 4 states of final beatitude
 4 things necessary for shaving
 4 collectives: men, gods, manes, asuras
 4 positions of the body: going, standing, lying down
 4 varieties of dramatic style
 4 means of success against an enemy: sowing dissension, negotiation, bribery, open assault
 4 constituent parts of supernatural power
 4 old path leads to the extinction
 4 streams of the river Ganga
 4 internal organs: intellect, understanding, self-consciousness, reason
 4 meters (lines, feet)

In the Rainstorm

*‘vr̥ṣṭau pañca-vidhaṃ sāmopāsita
puro-vāto hiṃ-kāro megho jāyate sa prastāvah
varṣati sa udgīthaḥ vidyotate stanayati sa pratihārah
udgrhñāti tan nidhanam
varṣati hāsmāi varṣayati ha ya etad evaṃ vidvān vr̥ṣṭau pañca-vidhaṃ sāmopāste*

One should meditate on the fivefold [any song or tune] in the rain.
The preceding wind as the syllable [exclamation]; the formation of the cloud is the [introductory eulogy].
What rains is the [name of God]; the lightning and the thunder as [that which keeps back].
The cessation as the [settling down].
It rains for him and he causes it to rain, he, who knowing this thus, meditates on the fivefold [any tune or song] in rain.’

Chāndogya Upaniṣad, translated by S. Radhakrishnan (1989: 361)

* * * * *

In 1755, lexicographer Samuel Johnson made his great attempt to ‘fix’ or ‘embalm’ the English language. Sometime during his decade-long labour, he realised the impossibility of the task:

Total and sudden transformations of a language seldom happen; conquests and migrations are now very rare; but there are other causes of change, which, though slow in their operation, and invisible in their progress, are perhaps as much superior to human resistance, as the revolutions of the sky, or intumescence of the tide. (2000: 324-325)

His comments were prescient. Thirty years after his dictionary was published, a cataclysm broke upon the English language.

Johnson believed that English was primarily derived from Roman and Teutonic languages; in 1786, philologist Sir William Jones realised that the branches extended much further. He proposed that ancient Greek, Latin, Sanskrit, Persian, Gothic and Celtic languages shared a common linguistic source, and what is now known as the Indo-European language family began to take root. Jones extended the study towards the religions associated with these ancient and classical languages. Distant cultures became comparable as linguistic and mythological distinctions were swept by tides; it was apparent that East and West were not as disparate as supposed. (250 years after the discovery, this secret remains guarded by philological lexicon and decompression sickness.)

By placing Dyaus [-*pitṛ*], Zeus [-*pater*], and Jupiter alongside one another Jones discovered the multiplicity of the Sky-Father. And the whole earth was of one language. Are Abraham and Sarah versions of Brahmā and Sarasvatī? Is Zeus Isis Jesus Kṛṣṇa Christ? ‘This is not intended as casting a slur on Sir W. Jones. At his time the principles which have now been established by the students of the science of language were not yet known, and as with words, so with the names of deities, similarity of sound, the most treacherous of all sirens, was the only guide in such researches.’ (Müller 2002: 93)

I began the study of Sanskrit after a friend told me that this ancient Indian language is poetry itself. Imagine the correct words breaking loose, line-breaks arranging themselves in the burble. The terms of the promise are manifest: Sanskrit, *saṃ-skr̥ta*, well-formed, perfection, of the gods, the beauty of artifice, hallowing convention preserving numbers, names of rivers, and the rounded shapes of the aftersound. I am not alone in the sanctuary, nor free from intrusion. The nineteenth-century lexicographer Sir Monier Monier-Williams, author of the authoritative Sanskrit-English dictionary, guides me through the language like poetry; I crouch in definitions, dragging lamps.

Monier-Williams' Sanskrit-English dictionary was first published in Oxford in 1899. This immense lexicographical project – 'dry, dreary and thankless drudgery' as he described it, alluding to Samuel Johnson (2008: ix) – was undertaken in his capacity as Boden Professor of Sanskrit at the University of Oxford. This position was funded by Colonel Boden, who stated in his will that 'the special object of his munificent bequest was to promote the translation of the Scriptures into Sanskrit, so as "to enable his countrymen to proceed in the conversion of the natives of India to the Christian Religion"' (ix). Monier-Williams respectfully included this quotation in his preface to the dictionary.

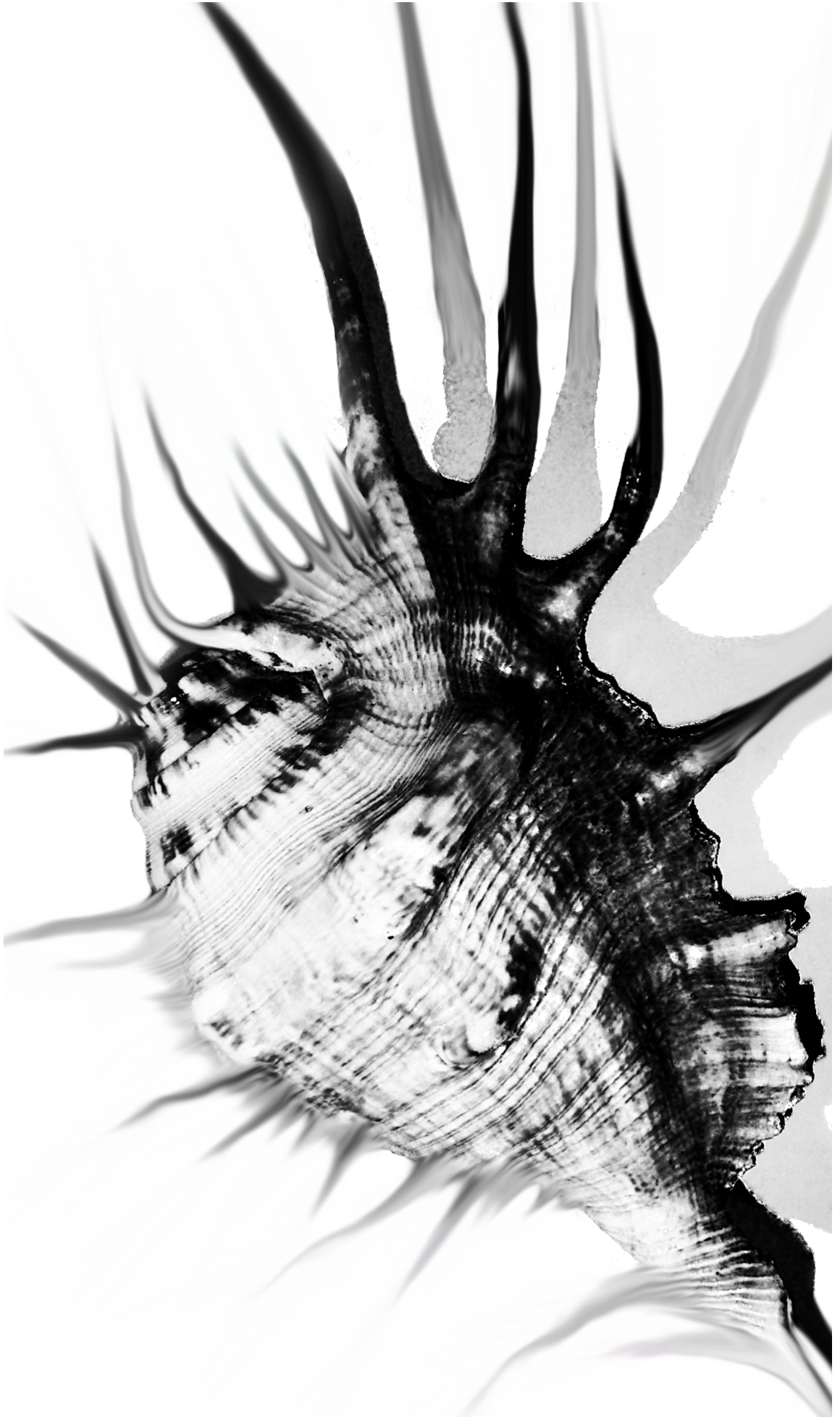
In 1860, a ruthless campaign for the professorship took place in British newspapers and captured public interest. Max Müller, the defeated rival, was the superior linguist, but he had never set foot in India, he was German, and he held liberal Christian views. This last characteristic proved to be the least forgivable. Monier-Williams was a devout Evangelist and unequivocal in this regard:

But what we assert is, that the national character is cast in a Sanskrit mould, and that the Sanskrit language and literature is not only the key to a vast and apparently confused and unmeaning religious system, but it is also the one medium of approach to the hearts of the Hindus, however unlearned, or however disunited by the various circumstances of country, caste, and creed. It is, in truth, even more to India than classical and patristic literature was to Europe at the time of the Reformation. It gives a deeper impress to the Hindu mind than the latter ever did to the European; so that a missionary at home in Sanskrit will be at home in every corner of our vast Indian territories. (1861: 41)

(Müller had a different approach: 'We all come from the East – all that we value most has come to us from the East, and in going to the East, not only those who have received a special Oriental training, but everybody who had enjoyed the advantages of a liberal, that is, of a truly historical education, ought to feel that he is going to his "old home," full of memories, if only he can read them' [2010: 24].)

I am at home in a language that is not my own. When I work in Sanskrit, I lose myself in the dictionary's words; when I hear him speak I forget the sound of my own voice. How could it be otherwise? I can only get to the language by means of the dictionary; Monier-Williams makes the connection, he whispers in my ear as Sanskrit speaks. This is my home but he opens the door to let me in. My knowledge of Sanskrit will never exceed his; my love of Sanskrit will never be separate from him. I am not at home in this language although I should be, if *nomen est omen* is as heavy as it sounds. My name is Sanskrit; I ask Monier-Williams what I mean. नशिा *niśā*, f. night; a vision, dream; turmeric [Cf. *nak* & *nakti*; Zd. *nakht-uru*, *nakht-ru*; Gk. *νύξ*; Lat. *nox*; Lith. *naktis*; Slav. *nošti*; Goth. *nahts*; Angl. Sax. *neaht*, *niht*, Engl. night, Germ. *Nacht*.]

Listen closely, the one language speaks in scattered tongues.



Her Body in Cursive

Out of the Throat

Sanskrit was an oral language, meant to be passed down from (male, Brahmin) teacher to (male, Brahmin) student. Writing came late to Sanskrit; Brahmi, the first known South Asian script, is dated to *circa* 250 B.C.E. There were concerns about the democratisation of Sanskrit, as writing made the language accessible to women and non-Brahmins. Sanskrit scholar Sheldon Pollock describes the ideology of orality:

Long after writing became an everyday practice in the Sanskrit world, a bias toward the oral persisted; knowledge that is *kaṇṭhastha*, ‘in the throat,’ or memorized, was invariably privileged over knowledge that is *granthastha*, ‘in a book.’ Moreover, the representation of knowledge (or understanding or awareness) itself as impregnated by language-as-speech – and never language-as-text – radically differentiates the medieval Indian world from Latinate Europe of the same epoch. (2009: 82)

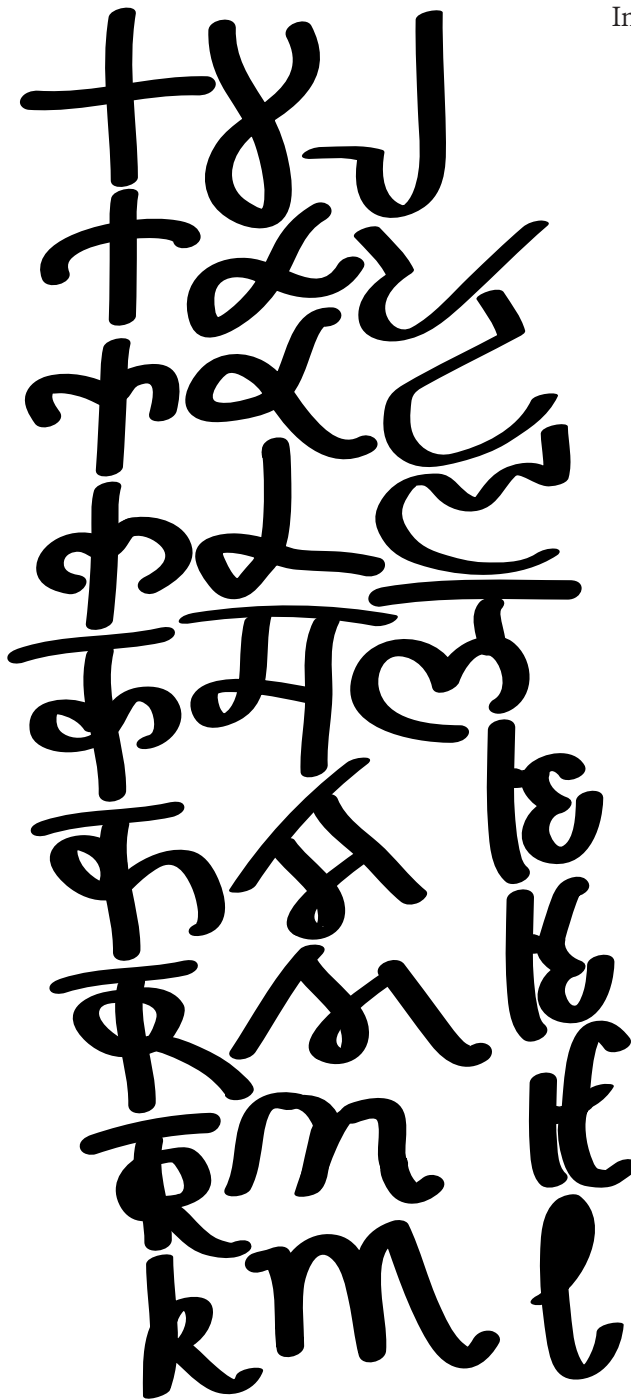
But Sanskrit did not deteriorate on contact with paper, it remains in all of its qualities (*sarvaguna*, valid through all parts, endowed with every excellence). Sanskrit is usually written in Devanāgarī, but there is no attachment to any script in particular, so people can read and write Sanskrit in letters of their choosing. The one language writes in many hands. Transliteration is no crime; promise to sound it out one syllable at a time and you will walk out of the divine-city-writing unpunished. My first teacher (a Northern Irish woman who couldn’t quite make the dental consonants) said something like: ‘It doesn’t matter if you don’t know what the words mean, they know you and speak you clearly.’

In the Vedas she is the embodiment of speech; in later Tantric texts her body is the alphabet. As theories and practices of language developed, the Goddess was theorised and practised differently.

Little Mothers

अ a unreality	आ ā smelling	इ i clean knowledge	ई ī destroying	उ u power	ऊ ū power
ऋ ṛ destroying	ॠ ṛ destroying	ल ḷ power			
ए e sandalwood	ऐ ai vacuity	ओ o wind	औ au the sharp edge		
अ aṃ shapes	अः aḥ the hand				
क ka power	ख kha always kind	ग ga able to do	घ gha clean knowledge	ङ ṅa great unreality	
च ca unreality	छ cha any fine art	ज ja self-consciousness	झ jha nature	ञ ña soul or spirit	
ट ṭa hearing	ठ ṭha ready wit	ड ḍa self-consciousness	ढ ḍha mind	ण ṇ hearing	
त ta skin	थ tha the eye	द da organ of taste	ध dha smelling	न n speech	
प pa inner part	फ pha protector	ब ba the hand	भ bha foot	म m cry aloud	
य ya touching	र ra shapes	ल la melted butter	व va fixed order		
श śa vacuity	ष ṣa wind	स sa fire			
ह ha any fluid					

The Imperishable Tower



Indus Valley Civilization, c. 2600-1900 B.C.E.

Sanskrit, c. 1500 B.C.E.

Latin, c. 500 B.C.E.

Brāhmī script, c. 300 B.C.E.

Roman script, c. 100 B.C.E.

English, c. 500 C.E.

Devanāgarī script, c. 1200 C.E.

Seals

material: grey steatite

text: armsdown armsdown twoonethirds threelinesbitten shellclappers

fivelines phallusarmour stickfigure

image: short-horned bull, standing before a trough



material: grey steatite

text: eggfire sideglance tallyquarters fishspikes jeweldropchest threelines

trianglertree

image: male horned beast, so-called unicorn; a birdcage balances on a fruit blossoming bush



material: grey steatite

text: spokestareye twoonethirds jeweldropchest blockaxe jewellesschest

image: none



material: grey steatite, top right corner chipped

text: sideglance twoonethirds blockaxe (?)

image: white elephant, dressed in saddle



material: grey steatite

text: spokestareye threelinesundone fishspikes beltedfishspikes

jewellinechest threelines trianglertree

image: spotted rhinoceros, draped in cloth, standing before a trough



material: grey steatite

text: threelines stickfigure twoonethirds jewellinechest scoredcloth

facecrossedout threelinesbalanced threejewelstacked

image: male horned beast, so-called unicorn; a birdcage balances on a fruitless bush



material: grey steatite

text: none

image: thick-lined swastika



Sourcing Memory

‘Whether listening to the shrieks of the Shaman sorcerers of Tartary, or to the odes of Pindar, or to the sacred songs of Paul Gerhard; whether looking at the pagodas of China, or the Parthenon of Athens, or the Cathedral of Cologne; whether reading the sacred books of the Buddhists, of the Jews, or of those who worship God in spirit and in truth, we ought to be able to say, like the Emperor Maximilian, “homo sum, humani nihil a me alienum puto”; or, translating his words somewhat freely, “I am a man; nothing pertaining to man I deem foreign to myself.” Yes, we must learn to read in the history of the whole human race something of our own history; and as in looking back on the story of our own life, we all dwell with a peculiar delight on the earliest chapters of our childhood, and try to find there the key to many of the riddles of our later life, it is but natural that the historian, too, should ponder with most intense interest over the few relics that have been preserved to him of the childhood of the human race. These relics are few indeed, and therefore very precious; and this I may venture to say, at the outset and without fear of contradiction, that there exists no literary relic that carries us back to a more primitive, or, if you like, more childlike state in the history of man than the Veda.’

Max Müller, ‘Lecture on the Vedas’ (2002: 44)

Where Speech Abideth

Book 1, Hymn 164, Viśvedevas [The All-Gods]

8 The Mother gave the Sire his share of Order [truth; a point of time; menstruation]: with thought, at first, she wedded him in spirit.

She, the coy Dame, was filled with dew prolific: with adoration men approached to praise her.

9 Yoked was the Mother to the boon Cow's car-pole: in the dank rows of cloud the Infant rested. Then the Calf lowed, and looked upon the Mother, the Cow who wears all shapes in three directions.

26 I invoke the milch-cow good for milking so that the milker, deft of hand, may drain her. May Savitr̥ [the sun before rising] give goodliest stimulation. The caldron is made hot [sunshine; sweat; hot milk]; I will proclaim it.

27 She, lady of all treasure [wed to wealth; a cow], is come hither yearning in spirit for her calf and lowing.

May this cow yield her milk for both the Aśvins [the twin charioteers trailing dawn], and may she prosper to our high advantage.

28 The cow hath lowed after her blinking youngling; she licks his forehead, as she lows, to form it.

His mouth she fondly calls to her warm udder, and suckles him with milk while gently lowing.

35 This altar is the earth's extremest limit; this sacrifice of ours is the world's centre.

The Stallion's seed prolific is the Soma [sap; nectar; moon]; this *Brahman* highest heaven where Speech [Vāc, the goddess] abideth.

41 Forming the water-floods, the buffalo hath lowed, one-footed [a footpath] or two-footed [taking two steps] or four-footed [intercourse with a female quadruped], she, Who hath become eight-footed [a spider] or hath got nine feet [the modern metre], the thousand-syllabled in the sublimest heaven.

42 From her descend in streams the seas of water; thereby the world's four regions have their being,

Thence flows the imperishable [a letter; a sound; a word] flood and thence the universe [the all-approaching up] hath life.

45 Speech [Vāc, the goddess] hath been measured out in four divisions, the Brahmins who have understanding know them.

Three kept in close concealment cause no motion; of speech [Vāc, the goddess], men speak only the fourth division.

Book 8, Hymn 100, Vāc [Goddess of Voice, Speech, Language, Sound]

10 When, uttering words which no one comprehended [unintelligible], Vāc, Queen of Gods, the Gladdener [charming; speaking pleasantly], was seated,

The heaven's four regions drew forth drink and vigour [they milked]: now whither hath her noblest portion vanished [she went]?

11 The Deities generated Vāc the goddess, and animals of every figure [many coloured; variegated] speak her.

May she, the Gladdener [charmer], yielding food and vigour [possessing sap and strength], the Milch-cow Vāc, approach us meetly lauded [correctly pronounced].

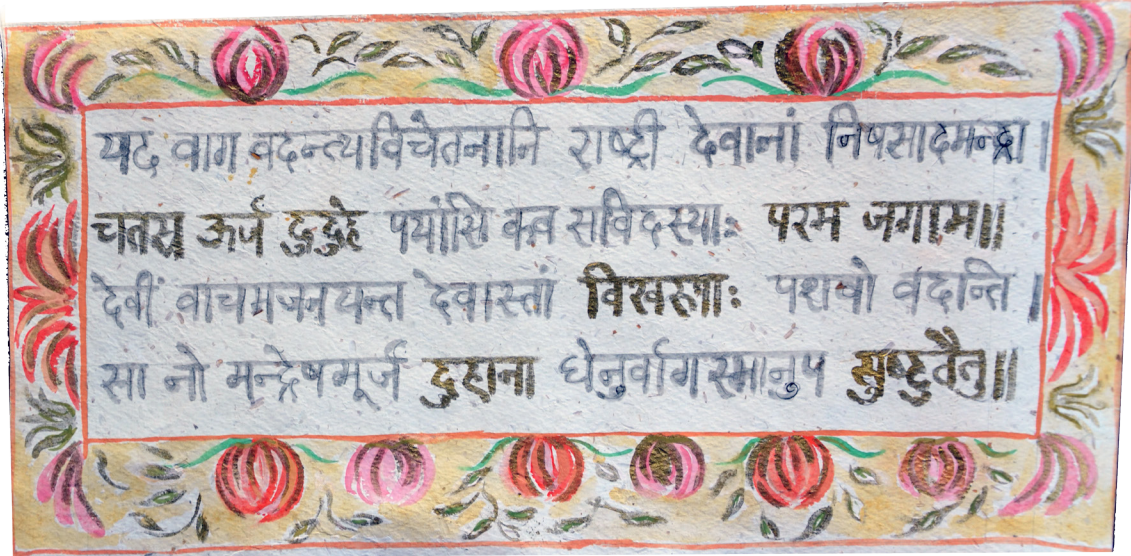
Book 10, Hymn 71, Jñāna [the Higher Knowledge]

1. WHEN-men, Br̥haspati [lord of prayer or devotion; chief of sacrifice], giving names to objects, sent out Vāc's first and earliest utterances,
All that was excellent and spotless [cow's milk], treasured within them, was disclosed [laid (as dust by rain); uttered in a deep tone] through their affection.
2 Where, like men cleansing corn-flour in a cribble, the wise [firm; brave; the ocean] in spirit [in the mind; with all the heart] have created language,
Friends see and recognize the marks of friendship [good fortune]: their speech retains the blessed sign [the goddess of fortune and beauty; the Good Genius] imprinted.
3 With sacrifice the trace [footsteps] of Vāc they followed, and found her harbouring within the R̥ṣis [inspired poets or sages].
They brought [caused to exist; firmly fixed] her, dealt her forth [opened wide; opened the mouth] in many places: seven singers make her tones resound in concert.
4 One man hath ne'er seen Vāc, and yet he seeth: one man hath hearing but hath never heard her.
But to another hath she shown her beauty as a fond well-dressed [a beautiful dwelling; an agreeable perfume] woman to her husband.

Book 10, Hymn 125, Vāc [Goddess of Voice, Speech, Language, Sound]

1 I travel with the [children of roar, the children of bright,
With the all-divine] I wander.
I hold aloft [the balance of skies, drop and fire,
And the sunlit streaming horses.]
2 I cherish and sustain [milk of the moon, and moon,
I press the adept, and fill him with sweet conciliation.]
3 I am the Queen, the gatherer-up [in understanding
I deserve the first sacrifice;
The Gods have placed me in many mouths, given me cause to enter.]
4 [Who sees in detail, who breathes and blows, who] hears the word outspoken
They know it not, but yet they dwell beside me. Hear,
[Faithfulness is the daughter of Speech.]
5 I, verily, myself announce and utter the [welcomed] word that
[In my love you are terrible, I make you wise, poor, praised.]
6 I [swell in the pause, bending your breath
I am the release after execution,
You follow me deeply, extending into worlds.]
7 [I come together with waters to conclude,
Tracing the earth with the backs of my fingers.]
8 I [resolve myself with] wind and tempest,
The while I hold [earth in all its places.]
[Far from today, far from here, I have become great and full.]

Rig Veda, translated by Ralph T. H. Griffith (1889)



यद् वाग्वदन्त्यविचेतनानि राष्ट्री देवानां निषादमन्त्रा ।
 चतस्र ऊर्ज इद्रे पर्यासि क्व सविदस्याः परम जगाम् ॥
 देवी वाचमजयन्त देवास्तां विशखाः पशवो वदन्ति ।
 सा नो मन्त्रेषमूर्ज इहाना धेनुर्वागसानुप सुष्टुवैतु ॥

yad wh, which (nom/acc. n.)	vāgh voice, speech (nom/voc. f.)	vadanti + avicetanani vadantya vicetanāni they speak unintelligible (p., 3rd p.) (nom/acc. n. pl.)	rāṣṭrī ruler, sovereign (nom/voc. f.)	devānām gods (gen. m. pl.)	niṣāda performed by sitting (perfect, 3rd p.)	mandrā charming, sounding/ speaking pleasantly (nom/voc. f.)				
yad cetasrah four (nom/acc/voc. f.)	ūrjam power, strength, vigor, sap (acc. m.)	dudhe they milked (perfect, 3rd p pl.)	payāmsi fluid, milk, water, rain (nom/acc/voc. pl.)	kva where, whither, in what place (ab/gen. f.)	svidpayāh tills, here (may) most distant highest (acc. m./n.)	param jagāma went (perfect, 3rd p.)				
catur devīm goddess (acc.)	vācam voices, speech (acc. f.)	jananta they generated? (perfect, 3rd p pl.)	devāstām gods her, that (nom, pl) (acc)	viśvarūpāh many-coloured, variegated, manifold (nom, f.)	pāśavo cattle, kine, tethered animals, sacrificial animals (nom/voc. pl.)	vadanti they speak (p., 3rd p.)				
sā she, that (nom.)	no not? we (acc) us (dat) our (gen)	mandraśam charming (f.)	ūrjam strength, power (acc)	duhānā milking (present active participle?)	dhenur milk-row (nom, f.)	vāgh voices, speech (nom/voc. f.)	asman us (nom/voc. f.)	upa up, towards, near to, by the side of, with (ab/gen. f.)	sustutaitu correctly pronounced (imperfect, 3rd p.)	tad it (acc)



Who is the voice they speak, those ones who shine and spear? Who is the voice of the sacrificial rite, the beautiful low, the unintelligible rule?

Those ones milked all of her, she of the four powers, where is she now? Is she anywhere after this, is she too far for us?

Oh goddess of voice, what did they make of you? Did they speak your every sign, your every dream, your every shape? Did they untether your colours and break you apart?

Oh goddess who charms us, who makes us strong, feed on us. Oh cow, we are possessed by you, speak us into closeness, fold us in milk, that we may voice you.

An Explosion in Consciousness

later they discovered sound as the impulse, the eccentric unity
by this time she was declined in the masculine

स्फोट sphaṭa, m. bursting, opening, expansion, disclosure; extension; a swelling, boil, tumour; a little bit or fragment, chip; crackling, crash, roar; (in philosophy) sound (conceived as eternal, indivisible, and creative); the eternal and imperceptible element of sounds and words and the real vehicle of the idea which bursts or flashes on the mind when a sound is uttered

स्फोटिका sphaṭikā, f. shaking or waving the arms



The Lexicographer-Priest

myths are distributed
authored by atmosphere
the goddess disappears underground

how unexpected
to attend to the satellite
yad ihāsti tad anyatra yan nehāsti na tat kvacit
(‘what is here is there; what is not here is nowhere’)

the river is tangled in nomenclature
Prakṛti, Sarasvatī, Vāc blowing out of course
subject to the curves of the shell

boundless and destitute
characterised by daring
her body contradicts the definition

coated in white petals, tide-bound
she awaits the synonymous burst

presume the sea, presume the swell
the force of documentary proof

* * * * *

defined by putting together
bringing in close connection
nāmnāmmālā, string of beads, lexicon

words are lotus flowers looped on a wreath
the familiarity of the image cocoons you
soft cups possessed by the line
uphold the agreement made to caprice

he makes boxes and sheaths for seed-vessels
syllables bloom and smile
liberated by dark corners

these are monuments to fragility
in an ambiguous resting ground
words show through the page where they should not

one surpasses pearls
the other dances

there was no death in the family
expiations went unperformed
the river deemed redundant

see who stands in front of you
see who was never there
lines drawn in shadow
passages undercut

etymology is placing white crowns on confluence

* * * * *

‘It is remarkable that, in reviewing my collection, I found the word SEA unexemplified.’ (Johnson 2000: 323)

अपार **apāra**, not having an opposite shore (the prefix ‘a’ negates the beyond)

अपारपर **apārapāra**, that which will not acquiesce

तरंग **taraṅga**, ‘across-goer’, a wave, billow

तरंगमालन्ति **taraṅgamālin**, the sea as garlanded by waves

बन्ध **bandha**, binding, fixing, bandage, chain
there is no use conferring

मध्य **madhya**, used like medius
earth as a woman’s body, the sea as her waist

रत्ननिधि **ratnanidhi**, the place where pearls are kept

this vessel is the final resting place
before the ocean churns

‘If the changes that we fear be thus irresistible, what remains but to acquiesce with silence, as in the other insurmountable distresses of humanity? It remains that we retard what we cannot repel, that we palliate what we cannot cure. Life may be lengthened by care, though death cannot be ultimately defeated: tongues, like governments, have a natural tendency to degeneration; we have long preserved our constitution, let us make some struggles for our language.’ (Johnson 2000: 326-327)

महीप **mahīpa**, ‘earth-protector’
conversant with words, compiling defeat and invention

the lexicographer exhales
grasping the fix as it blossoms

so many things lost in the deluge
how strangely they hold up in light

Notes on Sanskrit

Commentary on *Śrī Devī Uvāca* [The Great Goddess Said]

'It was all the difference between a chaos and a kosmos, between the blind play of chance and an intelligible and therefore an intelligent providence. How many souls, even now, when everything else has failed them, when they have parted with the most cherished convictions of their childhood, when their faith in man has been poisoned, and when the apparent triumph of all that is selfish, ignoble, and hideous, has made them throw up the cause of truth, of righteousness, and innocence as no longer worth fighting for, at least in this world; how many, I say, have found their last peace and comfort in the contemplation of the *ṛta*, of the order of the world, whether manifested in the unvarying movement of the stars, or revealed in the unvarying number of the petals, and stamens, and pistils of the smallest forgot-me-not!' (Müller 2002: 246)

The laws of this language reflect the laws of the universe, we might never come closer to truth. This language does things to me, this language that speaks you more than you know. This is me putting you into practice. The linguistic and grammatical sequence parallels spiritual progression.

Śabda [Sound]

Join in when you can, just make the sounds, and the tune if you can manage it. All of these circle-shapes – coconuts, open mouths, wheels, garlands – are to remind you of your position in the diagram. They are circles of goddesses watching you move; each direction is exploited.

Akṣara [Letter]

The imperishable, the lady's sword, our names carved on the brightest edge of the blade. I tried to construct something similar out of elephant heads, house-fires, snails, and curtain rods, but the result was ugly and I didn't feel like repeating the process. Rather than a heap of language a volcanic eruption viewed from above? Some sort of grid that disintegrates the closer you look? Or, just the idea of the grid in your mind at all times, and you leave your skin alone.

Mātrkā [Alphabet]

It bears repeating: the body of the goddess, divided into lots of little mothers. Everyone must receive the allotted part:

It is in this sense that the universe is said to be composed of the letters. It is the fifty (or as some count them fifty-one) letters of the Sanskrit alphabet which are denoted by the Garland of severed heads which the naked Mother Kālī, dark like a threatening rain-cloud, wears as She stands amidst bones and carrion, beasts and birds, in the burning ground, on the white corpse-like (*Śavarūpa*) body of Śiva. For it is She who 'slaughters,' that is, withdraws all speech and its objects into Herself at the time of the dissolution of all things (*Mahāpralaya*). (Woodroffe 2011: 216-217)

Vowels are organised in order of transcendence, consonants in order of manifestation. The categories of letters are categories of existence: voiceless and voiced, unaspirated and aspirated. The mothers position themselves accordingly, from the back of the throat to the palate to the alveolar ridge to the teeth to the lips. The mothers are talking amongst themselves or they are worried about you or they are doing their best to protect you – you weren't put on this world to

Speak for yourself.

***Pada* [Word]**

Sometimes it seems like every word is another word for an astrological measurement (what are lunar mansions anyway) or a species of fig tree or the opposite of the action or one of the four stages of something or other or the pudendum muliebre. ('Pudenda' are 'the shameful parts'; 'muliebrity' is womanhood, as opposed to virility, chiefly obsolete [OED] – Monier-Williams can be so delicate!)

***Vyākaraṇa* [Grammar]**

'[Grammar is...] the door of freedom, the medicine for the diseases of language, the purifier of all sciences; it sheds its light on them; ... it is the first rung on the ladder that leads up to realisation of supernatural powers, and the straight royal road for those who seek freedom.' (Bhartṛhari, cited in Filliozat 2009: 65)

You have entered the teacher's house.

***Liṅga* [Gender]**

Holding onto its gender; having the gender of another; an absence of gender; having a gender that agrees; having a fixed gender; an impotent gender; a gender like a cloud without water; a gender like a lotus leaf; a third nature gender; a twofold gender; destitute of both genders; having the mark of a gender; the incongruity of gender; a gender that prevents old age and prolongs life; gender as a remedy for magical purposes; gender doubtful; variegating gender; gender in the image of god; gender that has an origin and is therefore liable to be destroyed; a change of gender; the laws of gender; gender unknown; gender as a kind of ornament; gender as the meaning of words; another gender is required; having a gender that shares in everything; preserving its gender; gender of doubtful derivation that applies to closely connected things.

***Vacana* [Number]**

Abhinavagupta said: 'This universe is established always and is in every way involved in third person (*nara*), second person (*Śakti*) and first person (*Śiva*) both in the dealings of worms and the all-knowing' (Singh 2011: 74).

***Vibhakti* [Case]**

The birds of devotion, devotion asunder, the opposite or intensified meaning. A bewildering purpose; columns, elements, the sea. Her fragrant instrument and all beeswax embraces. The object found in perfect sleep: grassy plains, giant boars, logs, grasses, waves, freshwater dolphins, waves. It happened again, but the construction is too similar to repeat.

***La* [Tense and Mood]**

This section is crescent-shaped to evoke the waxing/waning moon. She said that I had been gifted with insight. She hoped that I would have difficulty. If I was expressing reproach. I am making myself invisible. I died as you are dying. If she is a serpent I might be measured. When she will ask me to perform.

Artha [Meaning]

“Well, does not Reality shine as the perceiving Experient in the heart of all? Then what is the relevance of a question about it?” “True,” says Abhinavagupta, “though it shines in everyone’s heart, it is not intimately assimilated by the heart as existent. So though present, it is as if non-present, just as the grass and leaves on the path of someone who passes on in a chariot (though present are not noticed by him).” (Singh 2011: 58)

- cow thunder diamond sour shape
- a lightning denunciation in her feeding language a monthly sacrifice
- brilliance the mythical weapon zigzag spells and might

Vākya [Sentence]

‘With streaming clouds trumpeting like haughty tuskers,
with lightning-banners and drum beats of thunder claps,
in towering majesty, the season of rains
welcome to lovers, now comes like a king, my love.’ (Kālidāsa, trans. in Rajan 2006: 110)

‘Western wind, when will thou blow,
The small rain down can rain?
Christ, if my love were in my arms
And I in my bed again!’ (Anon.)

‘Yet there are subtler clouds, all the tenuous shadows of swift and uncertain source which pass across the relationship, changing its light and its modeling; suddenly it is another landscape, a faint black intoxication. The cloud, then, is no more than this: *I’m missing something*.’ (Barthes 2002: 170)

Sāadhanā [Practice]

‘[Ritual] is an activity governed by explicit rules. The important thing is what you do, not what you think, believe or say. In India this has become a basic feature of all religion, so that we should refer, not to the faithful or orthodox, but to the orthoprax (from Greek *orthos*, “right” and *praxis*, “action”).’ (Staal 1996: 116-117)

Nyāsa [Placing]

Each letter of the alphabet is associated with a particular part of the body. The devotee pays special attention to the body part while imagining the letter and making various sounds and gestures. Eventually the body part becomes the sacred seat of the goddess. The devotee repeats the process fifty times until every part of her body receives the attention it deserves. You are more than your there, there, and there – activate the whole!

Mantra [Sacred Formula]

The pleasure of syllables like so many pearl ornaments in the Hyderabad style. In this context, we can say with confidence: form is sometimes more than an extension of content: ‘Mantras are a typical product of Indian civilisation – a civilisation where form is all-important’ (Staal 1996: 263).

***Cit* [Consciousness]**

Everything can be compared to the belly of a fish (the puffing and sucking of subjectivity, space, time), an image that makes me squeamish. You are more powerful when her belly protrudes, it means the sacrifices are well received.

***Devī* [Goddess]**

He makes fun of her behind her back – hail, hail, honey, honey, honey, hail, gorgeous, gorgeous, dear, your majesty, your highness, your grace, madam, honey, darling, madam. She doesn't mind but her devotees aren't known for their benevolence (neither is she, but that's an old misconception).

***Parāvāc* [The Supreme Voice]**

Abhinavagupta said: 'In that stage (i.e. in the *parāvāc* stage), there is absolutely no thought of difference such as "this" (a particular entity or individual), "thus" (a particular form), "here" (particular space), "now" (particular time)' (Singh 2011: 9). In all seriousness, she is the most perfect container.

***Trika* [The Trinity]**

There are any number of versions of the three aspects of Reality: very-mother, very-measure, very-provable; wishing, knowing, performing; liberation, power, a chess piece; strange, better and worse, having nothing beyond or after. When the strange goddess looks in the mirror, she casts better and worse reflections, and a reverse order of categories is produced. Water becomes earth, thunder becomes fire, and the alphabet begins with the pinched aspiration. We are left with the latters. When she looks away from the mirror all the lights go out. The Eternal Now is with you or without you.

***Samādhi* [Union]**

He hires a pilot to write 'unity in multiplicity' and 'diversity in unity' in the sky and asks her to accept whichever one she likes best. She reads Tender Buttons with her friends and they make each other feel uncomfortable and repel new friends. They sit in the garden hoping her lavender-attachment doesn't become a eucalyptus-sized problem. She looks at postcards of nuns and witches and decides it's time to put the psychoanalysis away. They agree on the superiority of their own routines although they can't maintain a balance let alone an extended balance.

***Samdhi* [Euphonic Combination]**

Abhinavagupta said: 'If there is union of *bīja* (germ) in the form of vowels with the *yoni* (womb) in the form of consonants, in other words, if there is the homogeneous union of Śiva and Śakti, then what a pleasant surprise; without any effort, without tilling and sowing will be generated both *bhoga* (enjoyment) and *mokṣa* (liberation)' (Singh 2011: 122).

***Samāsa* [Compound]**

Love / the sound between them / the bit of a bridle; firmness / the sound between them / the bit of a bridle; fragrance / the sound between them / the bit of a bridle, and so on. Child of different of child; her debt of debt her; she serves all sorts of misfortune of sorts all serves she, and so on.

Once Very Familiar

Which beginning will convey us to the conclusion determined by form? Some of this is family matter, his dinner-table trajectory from palm reading to alien glow to the physiology of the universe. We laugh to tears over the existential chef, then I sit at my desk reading H.D. and Freud and Tantric philosophy and pencil affection in the margins. Abhinavagupta said:

The maxim 'that which is not there may be elsewhere' will not hold good in her case. Seize (mentally) that goddess, viz. consciousness, known as the initial ever-creative activity of I-feeling (*prathamām pratibhābhidhām*), void of even a trace of the foul stain of limitation. (Singh 2011: 91)

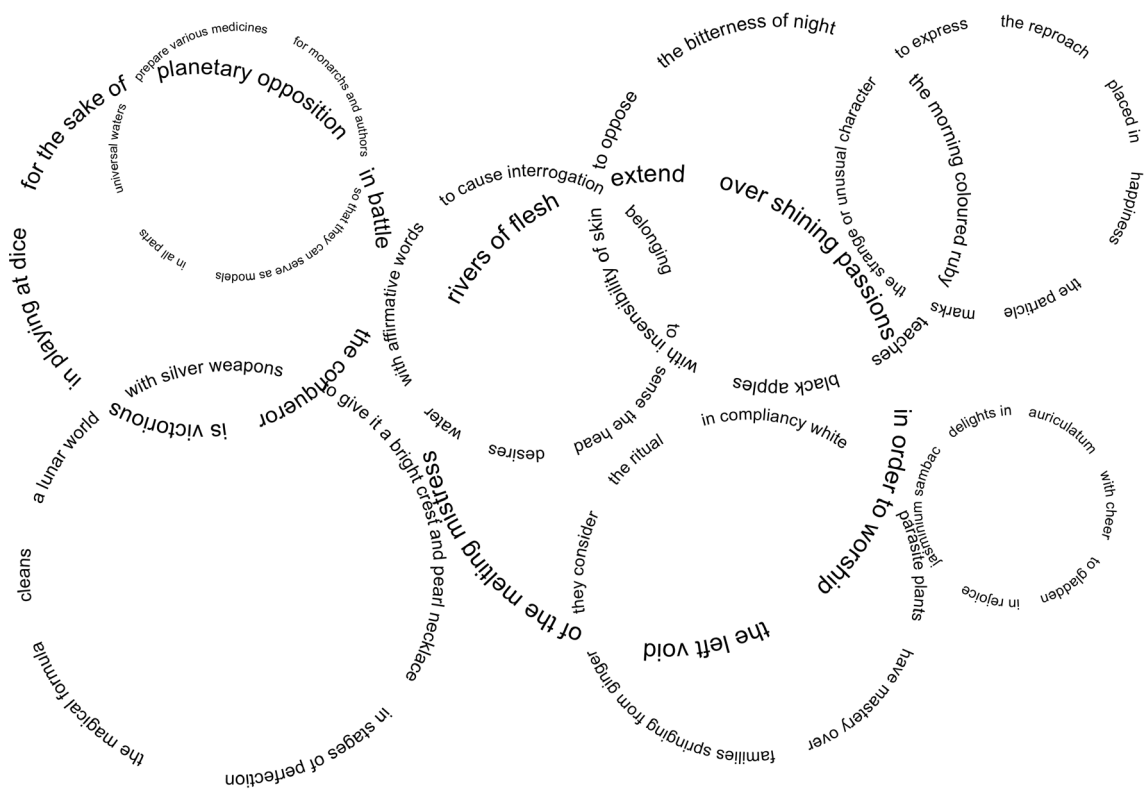
I'd like to make more of this but can't find the words in the dictionary. At what point in the patterns of time and space do we allow ourselves to stop looking?

'I am not yet so lost in lexicography as to forget that *words are the daughters of earth, and that things are the sons of heaven*' (Johnson 2000: 310). These fond feelings are misplaced, they belong to an age of approval, but now we believe in ourselves. I love you equally, which means: I want to love you equally and cross my fingers for the median. 'In the nature of consciousness, the omnifariousness of everything (*sarva sarvāt makatā*) is always present' (Singh 2011: 91). The dictionary becomes an ideal, because where else would 'set', 'bear', 'para-', and '-ness' sleep in the biggest beds. Samuel Johnson writes: 'I have sometimes, though rarely, yielded to the temptation of exhibiting a genealogy of sentiments' and 'nor can it be expected that the stones which form the dome of a temple should be squared and polished like the diamond of a ring' (2000: 320; 324), which is what I have been trying to say all along.

Sanskrit grammarians invented a letter – the long vocalic 'l' – to make the alphabetic system symmetrical. I look it up, expecting Monier-Williams to make a cranky comment, something like: 'Surely, then, no one will maintain that, in these days of every kind of appliance for increased facilities of inter-communication, any language is justified in shutting itself up behind such a complex array of graphic signs, however admirable when once acquired' (2008: xxviii). Instead, quietly, he defines the letter in the feminine: **लृ**, the mother of the cow of plenty; mother; divine female; female nature.

She says all the good paths lead to India. He is less enthusiastic, finding me biased.

Transliterations

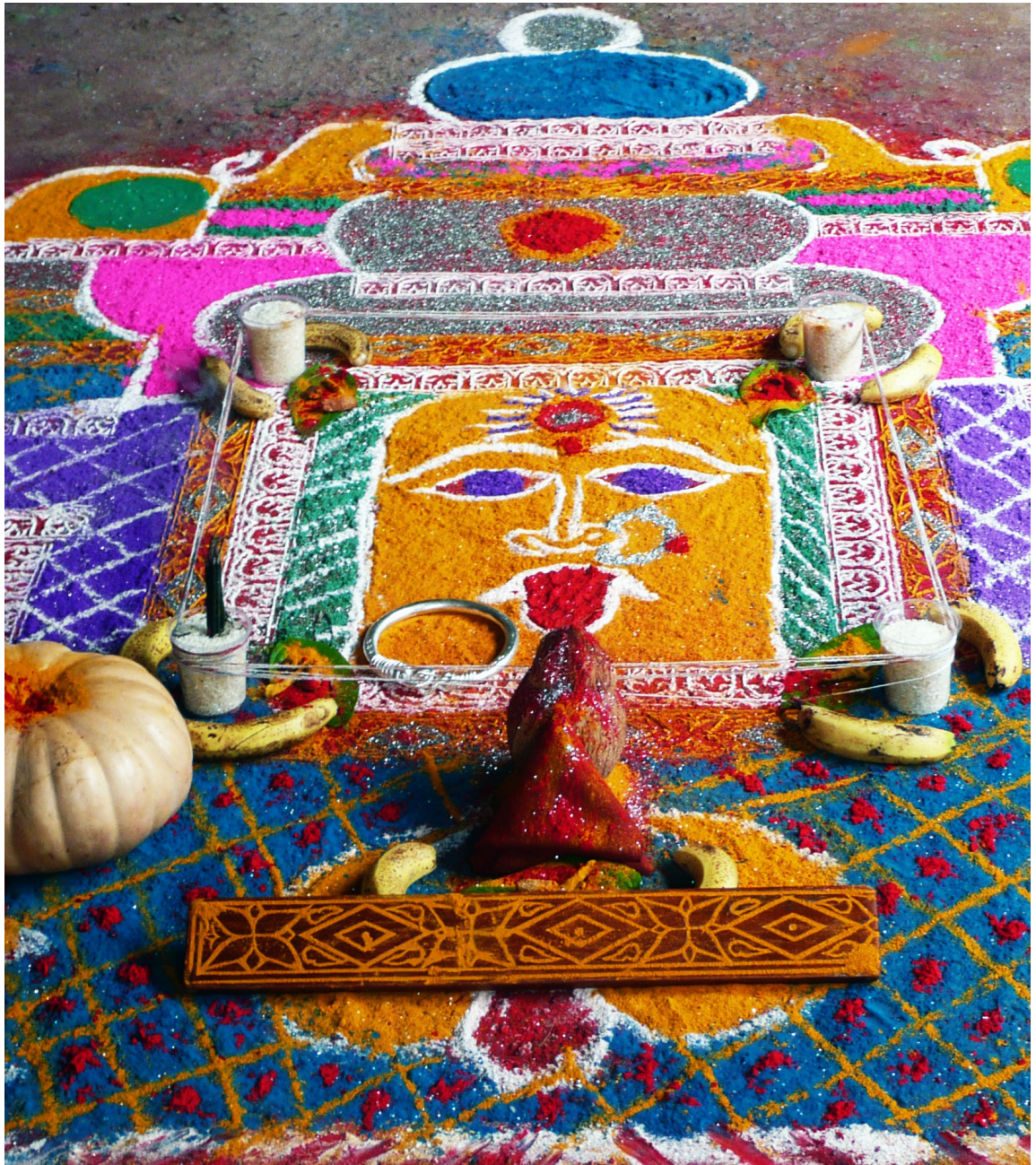


she is a series of knots and bursts
 force the stick between these vowels or this conjunct
 read her oblique eyes, her bent arms, the arch of her back
 the sliding expression of her unity

fifty skull-beads, wrapped in silver foil
 whatever the time of day they catch red light
 the garland of letters which holds sides equally
 'Everything is the epitome of all.'

the sentence contains both directions
 and answers hiding inside points of entry
 drowned, dried, sun-blinded, mistaken
 according to yet another measurement she will return

Goddess



She is the Pleasure of Wet Clay

Goddesses called Mother

‘As male gods are in certain cases called Father, so are goddesses called Mother. In the Graeco-Aryan area, however, this is quite rare. The river Sarasvatī in *Rig Veda* 2.41.16 is addressed as *ambitame, nadītame, devītame*, “most motherly, most torrently, mother goddessly”, and in the next line as *amba*, “mother”. In post-Vedic popular religion a Mother (Mātā or Ambā) appears as the protecting goddess of a village. In Greece there is a Mother or Great Mother, but she is the Mother of the Gods, a deity of Near Eastern provenance, though she suffered syncretism with the Indo-European figure of Mother Earth. Demeter, whose name incorporates “mother”, was perhaps originally a form of Mother Earth, but in classical times she is a separate goddess, and her motherhood is understood in relation to her daughter Persephone, not to her human worshippers.

In the greater part of Europe, especially the west and north, Mothers are much commoner. It seems likely that this reflects the influence of a pre-Indo-European substrate population for whom female deities had a far greater importance than in Indo-European religion. The archaeologist Marija Gimbutas saw the Indo-Europeans as bringing a male-oriented religion into a goddess-worshipping “Old Europe”, and this reconstruction, based largely on iconic evidence, seems essentially sound.

Certain Illyrian and Messapic goddesses (some borrowed from Greek) have the title Ana or Anna, which is plausibly interpreted as “Mother”. In Italy we meet the Umbrian Cubra Mater and the Roman Mater Matuta, Mater Mursina, Luna Mater, Stata Mater, Iuno Mater, etc. Celtic and Germanic Matres, Matrae, or Matronae, as individuals or groups (especially groups of three), are extremely common. Many of the names attached to them are non-Indo-European.

In the Baltic lands too, especially in Latvia, we find many Mothers, but here they are *Sondergöttinnen*, individuals each presiding over a specific area or function. In the Latvian folk-songs they proliferate: there is the Mother of wind, the Mother of fog, of forest, of flowers, of death, of the tomb, of the sea, of silver, of bees, and so on. It is evident that this was a secondary, local development. Usener notes that where the Lithuanians have Laūkpatis “Master of the Fields” and Vėjopatis “Master of the Wind”, adhering to the old Indo-European **poti*- formula, the Latvians have Lauka māte and Vēja māte.

We must conclude that there was a scarcity of divine Mothers in the Indo-European pantheon. Perhaps Mother Earth was the only one.’

M. L. West, *Indo-European Poetry and Myth* (2010: 140-141)



Veda (m.) and *Vidyā* (f.)

Veda (m.) and *Vidyā* (f.) share the same verbal root, वद् वि **vid**, to know. *Veda* is ‘knowledge, true or sacred knowledge or lore, knowledge of ritual’; *vidyā* is ‘knowledge, science, learning, philosophy; any knowledge whether true or false; a spell, incantation’. Of course, grammatical gender doesn’t matter, but, of course, it does:

There is some truth in this, but it only serves to confirm the right view of the influence of language on thought; for this tendency, though in its origin intentional, and therefore the result of thought, became soon a mere rule of tradition in language, and it reacted on the mind with irresistible power. (Müller 2002: 156)

When we talk about *veda* we ask – but where did this knowledge come from? – when we talk about *vidyā* we ask – but is this knowledge true?

In his definition for *veda*, Monier-Williams provides historical context for the *Rig Veda*:

The oldest of its hymns being assigned by some who rely on certain astronomical calculations to a period between 4000 and 2500 B.C., before the settlement of the Aryans in India; and by others who adopt a different reckoning to a period between 1400 and 1000 B.C., when the Aryans had settled down in the Panjab.

He also informs us that the Aryans were a race that emigrated from Central Asia; they were honourable people, faithful to their (adopted) country and the cultural institutions of that country, particularly Hinduism and Sanskrit. But his timeline presents the possibility that they brought the religion and language with them, which might call their faithfulness into question.

Arthur MacDonnell, who followed Monier-Williams to become third Boden Professor of Sanskrit, fills the gaps with colour:

In the dim twilight preceding the dawn of Indian literature the historical imagination can perceive the forms of Aryan warriors, the first Western conquerors of Hindustan, issuing from those passes in the north-west through which the tide of invasion has in successive ages rolled to sweep over the plains of India. The earliest poetry of this invading race, whose language and culture ultimately overspread the whole continent, was composed while its tribes still occupied the territories on both sides of the Indus now known as Eastern Kabulistan and the Panjāb. That ancient poetry has come down to us in the form of a collection of hymns called the *Rigveda*. (2005: 40)

but there is no mention of the lands from which they came
or of confrontations with indigenous peoples

there is no evidence to suggest
early Indians had any notion that their language came from without

The *Veda* is a matter of the utmost importance, as Müller explains:

Not only to the people of India, but to ourselves in Europe – and here again, not only to the student of Oriental languages, but to every student of history, religion, or philosophy; to every man who has once felt the charm of tracing that mighty stream of human thought on which we ourselves are floating onward, back to its distant mountain-sources;

to every one who has a heart for whatever has once filled the hearts of millions of human beings with their noblest hopes, and fears, and aspirations; to every student of mankind in the fullest sense of that full and weighty word. (2002: 43-44)

the true knowledge was distributed, its main streams traced to another force
the Aryan invasion was subtle as the sentence in context

She is the wave of bliss, She is the wave of beauty
'What care I for the Father if I but be on the lap of the Mother?'

Foreshadowing

'The worship of the Great Mother as the Grand Multiplier is one of the oldest in the world. As I have elsewhere said, when we throw our minds back upon the history of this worship, we discern even in the most remote and fading past the Figure, most ancient, of the mighty Mother of Nature.' (Woodroffe 2008: 357)

The Indus Valley civilization is one of the oldest and most expansive civilizations of the Bronze Age, comparable to ancient urban cultures in Egypt, Mesopotamia, and China. The first excavations took place in Harappa in the 1900s (in fact, Harappa was discovered by British engineers a century earlier, who used it as a quarry for railway-track ballast; they found artefact upon artefact, and eventually the wrecking business became salvage). Little is known about Indus Valley society and culture, although there is enough to create an impression: they built well-planned towns with drainage systems, employed agricultural irrigation, domesticated animals, and enjoyed widespread trade, especially in jewellery and ornaments. Objects that have been unearthed include beads and gold sequins, terracotta figurines, a few weapons, cubical and conical weights, wheeled toys, jasper drill bits, and steatite seals bearing a script that is not yet deciphered.

It has been suggested that Harappa was, if not a matriarchal society, a society which did not subordinate its women. Although it has not been proven that the terracotta women are goddesses, they depict female stories and qualities, and seem to foreshadow the Hindu goddess (in their association with powerful animals, warrior poses, and the jewels and flowers adorning their hair).

Hymn 185 in Book 10 of the *Rig Veda* sings of heaven and earth, the Sky-Father and Earth-Mother, Dyaus and Pṛthivī. She is 'the broad and extended One', possibly related to Aditi (boundless, mother of the Gods, 'Eternal and Infinite Expanse'), and is usually portrayed as a cow. Later the Earth-Mother came to be known as Prakṛti ('the original form or condition; the material world; Nature; the will of the Supreme in the creation'), and later still Bhuvaneśvarī (Queen of the Worlds, She whose body is the world). Her physicality defines us, she is the energy that courses through nerves, firmness, twinge and salt.

In the Early Days

she was
“not
tied, free”
laughing too loudly
going for long
drives on her own
her body pliable one
minute
crumbling the next
she never felt
the need
to shout



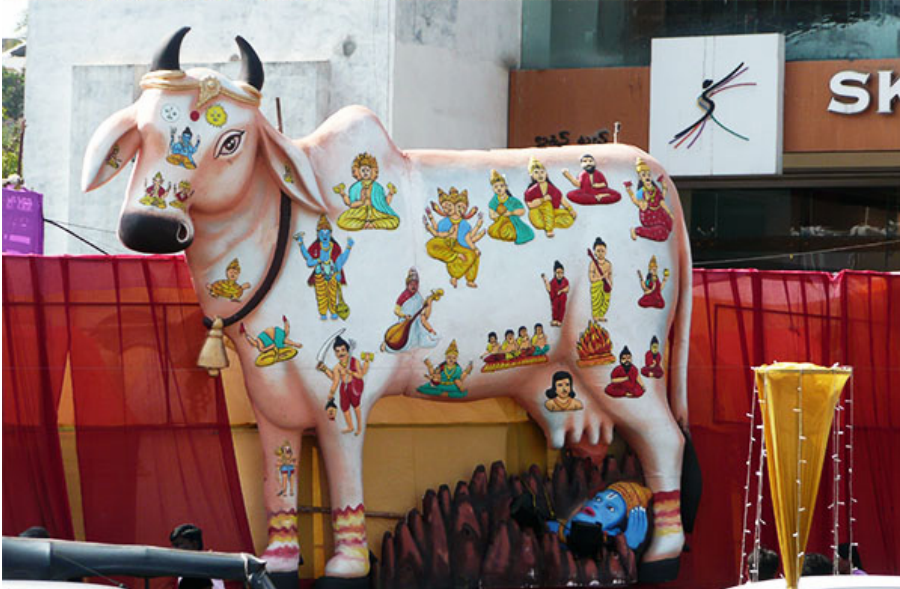
there are multiple paths to follow in order to find her
the terracotta bodies
goddess sound
the unbounded feminine
bound by rings around the sacrificial fire
(eventually made explicit in thread and gold)

She is primordial power reduced to a joke, a babbling scratching hysteric.
She is the last to know the language, so we swaddle her arguments and swallow them whole.

is it surprising that the Mother came first?
she climbs the words in your throat
bringing up penance with the white cloth

Cows

[Video]



She is the Word as it Flows

‘The Union of Will and Word was the potency of creation, all things being held in undifferentiated mass in the Great Womb (*Mahāyoni*) of the Mother of all (*Ambikā*).’

‘There is but one Cause of speech, as also of all the things in the universe which it denotes and also, of the mental apprehension (*Pratyaya*) or “going towards” the object of the mind. That cause is the Supreme Devī Sarasvatī, Mother of the Vedas and of the Worlds, manifesting as the name (*Nāma*) and form (*Rūpa*) which is the Universe.’

‘She again is the Divine in the aspect as Wisdom and Learning, for she is the Mother of Veda, that is of all knowledge touching *Brahman* and the Universe. She is the Word of which it was born and She exists in that which is the issue of Her great womb (*Mahāyoni*). Not therefore idly have men worshipped Vāc or Sarasvatī as the Supreme Power.’

John Woodroffe, *The Garland of Letters* (2011: 6-11)



Vedic gods gave birth to goddess Speech
or so they explained the phenomenon
of sound blooming out of their bodies

(Sarasvatī, queenly, prudent,
is wedded to the first man

पुरुष puruṣa, the primeval man as the soul and original source of the universe
for she was born of him, for she gave birth to him)

Vedic Gods sacrificed the preposition

‘Its oil was spring, the holy gift was autumn; summer was the wood.’

fat spits from the act of devotion

verses drip, gentle words and metre,

the product of their union

‘any song or tune (sacred or profane, also the hum of bees)’

She is the cause of the sound and the sound itself

A Story of Sarasvatī

Vāc, speech personified, is identified with Sarasvatī, goddess of rivers, eloquence, learning, and music. सरस् saras, 'anything flowing or fluid'; Sarasvatī is She who abounds in waters. She is calm and pleasant, and I cannot identify her with the frustration of hitting the wrong key or the anxiety of misplacing a word. She has the face of a patroness. But this version is based on recent iconography, it does not take into account the Vedic goddess, or the etymology of her name, or the deeply politicised debates around the civilization that did or did not flourish by her sides. I cup water with my hands to drink; instinct runs through my fingers.

In the *Rig Veda*, Sarasvatī is addressed in the superlative: Oh dearest mother! Oh dearest river! Oh dearest goddess! She is a body of water, she is barrel-bellied and kind, she heaves and sets, invocations serving as ballast. Oh milch cow! Sarasvatī sags with honey and ghee, she fattens licked streams. As a young girl she was dropped from the top of a mountain; she fell into the cow's mouth, perhaps, or she is that which the cow utters. She is self-determination in a family way, the frightful before and after of exertion. It may be inferred from her verbal root that she drives her own carriage, but ignorant of the South Asian history of wheeled vehicles and female drivers, I won't come to any conclusions about that.

Hymn 75 in Book 10 suggests a westerly course, but the text swerves, flinging us out of tradition. A sense of superiority comes into contact with a sense of authenticity; the argument disintegrates, each piece of evidence surrendering to another direction. This is about the source of the river; this is about which direction the mouth faces. She doesn't like her face to be touched, but the examination is more important than how she feels.

There are maps upon maps upon maps; so many inky scratches tear through paper, I sense her presence but cannot gauge her response. I am handed two passports, but no access to the resources that guarantee a confident betrayal. Max Müller writes: 'we naturally look to Sanskrit as the master-key to many a lock' and 'a fact does not cease to be a fact because we cannot at once explain it' (2002: 157), and I take comfort in him although I know I should not. He ignores her and she won't let anyone else in.

I skip the hymn about faith to read another ode to cows. At some point in this reading, Sarasvatī vanishes, abandoning her children. She is a loving, yielding mother; she is an allegory for the river that runs dry. Her name might be traced to another root, in which case she is 'collected into a heap or mass; spread about; still or stagnant water'. This is the alternative ending: her children starve to death, or migrate; they don't understand why she left, they blame each other and resent the division. They make excuses for her absence. Rather than seem foolish, they forgive her.

The Sarasvatī of the contemporary pantheon is childless, dressed in white, sitting alone with her books. She is married and worshipped, but not like the others are married and worshipped.

Now I see her smile is sad, and the river runs behind her.



Churning of the Ocean of Milk

Ocean of Names

she went to the ocean

कमल श्री लक्ष्मी पद्म कमल
श्री लक्ष्मी पद्म कमल
श्री लक्ष्मी पद्म कमल
श्री लक्ष्मी पद्म कमल

कमल श्री लक्ष्मी पद्म कमल
श्री लक्ष्मी पद्म कमल
कमल श्री लक्ष्मी पद्म कमल
श्री लक्ष्मी पद्म कमल

scooped in a lotus shell

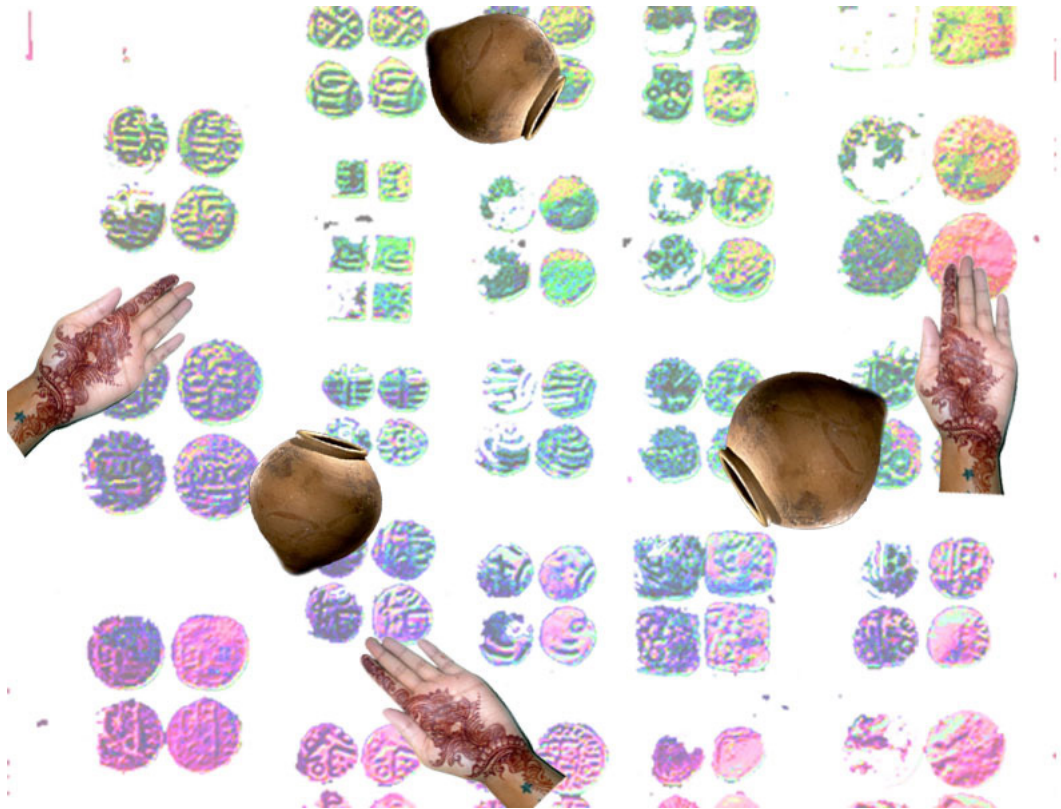
कमल श्री लक्ष्मी पद्म कमल
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श्री लक्ष्मी पद्म कमल
कमल श्री लक्ष्मी पद्म कमल
श्री लक्ष्मी पद्म कमल
कमल श्री लक्ष्मी पद्म कमल
श्री लक्ष्मी पद्म कमल

fingers trailing milk

She Sank

they landed so newly and emphatically her flower capsized in the storm

the ones and the others had cause to churn this ocean
in search of the life that she once meant
she sank in unknown places



objects

falling

through

white

down beside the blue-fuming poisons
the magic-mother-cow
the prototypical horse, a long white sound
the white elephant clutching orange blossom
the pinkish-red jewel
the tree when it was powerful
the cloud-bodied women
the lotus-eyed wine goddess
the physician of the gods, a golden vessel in his hands
the sweet cause of this creation myth

Ghee

a lump of butter, she rose to the top

A Story of Kamalā

Tracing Names

The names of deities are points on a map. The most popular Hindu deities have over a thousand names each; the people know her as Lakṣmī (a good sign), but for Tantric purposes I'll call her Kamalā (lotusflower), the tenth Mahāvīdyā. She is Śrī (in the sense of 'diffusing light'), Sundarī (beautiful woman), Bhūmi (earth, soil, ground), and in the Vedas she makes her first textual appearance as Aditi (not tied, free; or the 'Eternal and Infinite Expanse').

manuscripts , important documents &c.
and with other women
honorific prefix
she appeared with a lotus in her hand
of a poetess to assume the form of a
Good Genius regarded as a rival
foam of the ocean
four times three short syllables
as identified with betray (heroism)
rose-coloured
dominion , majesty speech ; cloves ;
desirous , lustful the bladder
in the retinue of
verse or formula

to Lakṣmī

to Kamalā

for help or refuge

four white elephants bathe her in nectar

call her Gajalakṣmī (elephant fortune) if you are likely to forget



Nalāhāṭī temple, a Śaktipīṭha in West Bengal, believed to be the place where the throat of the goddess fell. (August 2011)

अमृत **amṛta**, n. not dead; imperishable; the nectar (conferring immortality, produced at the churning of the ocean), ambrosia (or the voice compared to it); antidote against poison; the residue of sacrifice; clarified butter, boiled rice; anything sweet, a sweetmeat

Men

she has been around from the start
but for one reason or another it took them a while to find the right partner

प्रजापति prajāpati, m. the created creator, father of the gods, the body cosmic
He is possibly cognate with the ancient Greek Protogonos, that which is born in the earliest stages.

He swelled his body like a horse fit for sacrifice, as large as a woman and man in close embrace.
samabhavat, became united, *ekam eva*, one only, *upararāma*, kept silent

सोम soma, pressed by the moon, tapping lost trees to sip

The process involves large stones and sprinkling priests, and a fermented butter and flour mix.
The ingredients must be selected under moon's gaze. Sometimes he tells another story: he was brought from the sky by a falcon, and dropped somewhere in Greater Iran.
Lord of the Plants, work always came first.

अग्नि agni, Vedic god of fire, presides over every fire in the ceremony [cf. Lat. *Igni-s*]. She prefers not to think of him.

धर्म dharma, rolling her into and against death, promising irregularity and exception.

The rules of grammar are the rules of creation, the imperceptible point of merge. Above all else, Sanskrit prides itself on lawfulness, credited with its longevity. (A real bore!)

कुबेर kubera, the god of riches and treasure, he is usually depicted with three legs and eight teeth. Gold pours out of his monstrous holes, painting his imp skin beautiful. The forest-dwelling spirits gather round him, becoming malignant in his absence; she felt that way about him, for a while.

स्कन्द skanda, the violent boy, he loves to make an entrance on his peacock. Destroyer of enemies, and leader of demons who spread sickness amongst children. In one version he is the oldest male deity, possibly Indus Valley ancient; more recently he is the son of two male gods, neither of whom he will ever live up to. This might explain the mood swings. Now he has two wives whose names the priest can't remember.

इन्द्र indra, meaning 'to subdue, conquer'; the Indian Jupiter Pluvius or lord of rain. He burst forth from his mother's earth body, drained her waters, and channelled her into rivers of his own devising. Rakish hero, second in line to the throne, then third, then fourth; finally given a kingdom in heaven just to keep him away.

Now she sits with a kinder man, a calmer man. Monier-Williams describes her: 'And as Viṣṇu in his non-*avatāra* condition lives a life which has fewer features in common with humanity than that of Śiva, so is his wife Lakṣmī less human than Śiva's wife Pārvatī' (1974: 103). He is the ocean from which she emerges, reminding her of her place.

Marriage

She is made of pale red, pink, pallid, or forming part of it. These are specific smiles. We stand on white sheets and tinfoil, a layer of sacred grass spread out at a sacrifice, she sits where the fire can reach her. Bound to the ground, a house-hero, carpet-knight, the pejorative feminine is unnecessary.

The jumping shapes of the painted elephant, the human-faced eagle, the white horse, the music that follows him.

Sister failure pushing the reflection into her making her small, a pale red hue, rose colour.

This relates to the *pāṭali*, or trumpet flower, which you place in every hole. You must hear each part.

She is quiet and still while she waits, her other rolled under the sheets, the corpsy-lumps of a body wrapped in cheap cloth.

Thirty-six hours later, trimmings and tearings as soft as the sound of finger finding thumb.

Words pierce (half prose half verse): she's never looked more beautiful, or, it's all downhill from here.

Many of these definitions mention claws falling off, a temporary symptom associated with the worm (pernicious to hair, nails, teeth). Transcription of an old woman's mumble. *After marriage everything stops.*

Zooming into her skin so close the petals appear, her face is frilled and bearing. They write songs about this, filling tips and tongues in the well of nectar of poetry. I dip mine in disease.

A species of rice ripening in the rains, they cut her knuckles forcing the love up her arms. It can be beautiful, the side glance expressing, the rays of the ascending sun, her written skin.

The act of cutting or dividing or cutting off or mutilating (with teeth or nails), tracing her spine to mark the line she has crossed.

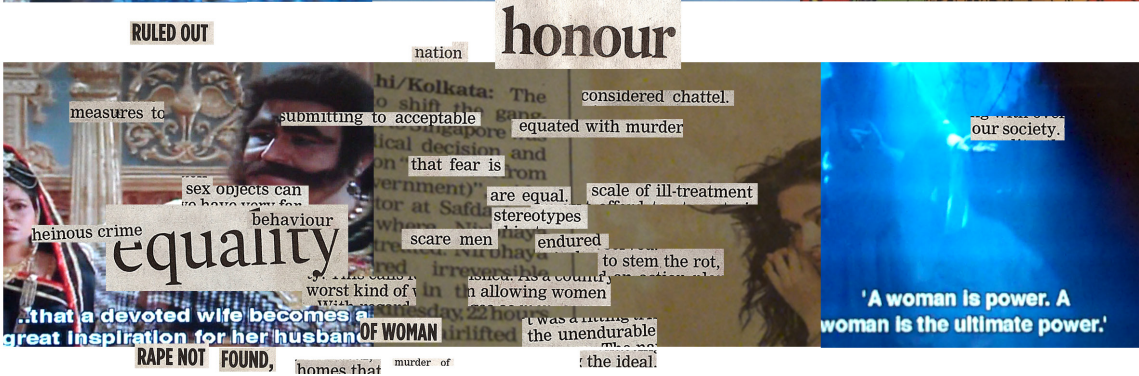
Of an artificial poem, crying, proclaiming. A decidedly subjective title.



A Later Version



Tripura Sundarī, Alwal (October 2012)



murder of the ideal.

homes that

admirable in

spirit of the gl... legally women acquired

of true equality

SET ABLAZE

potential rapists

boys treating

effort.

women in distress.

instilling fear in

will dissipate with

legally known

BSIDIES NO

gender

AME: SEPARATE INCIDENTS OF 3 WC

Accused rowdies

world against

educating

world against

galvanising

tried to save her.

real changes

who sustained

on fire allegedly

The girl,

burn injuries

stopped going

accused

the same vil

stalking her

on fire

was a human being

to not just a number

names of sexual

the matter

revealed. The party

would oppose any

alone at home

Expressing grief

sexual offenders.

death.

To d... death the demon pow

I took the form of

maximum punish-

burn injuries

stopped going

accused

the same vil

stalking her

on fire

was a human being

to not just a number

names of sexual

the matter

revealed. The party

would oppose any

alone at home

Expressing grief

sexual offenders.

death.

To d... death the demon pow

I took the form of

maximum punish-

ensure better

If you don't

respect women ever

I took the form of

maximum punish-

Goddess. It's true.

SAFETY

brutal gang

rapists

castration

WOMEN

gang-

penalty

chemical

and saved victim, rapists charged with sodomy, kidnap, rape & murder

river tried to mow down girl

YOU ARE VAIN AND WICKED, I AM ASHAMED TO CALL MYSELF DAUGHTER OF SUCH A MAN!

castration

police

assault cases

WOMEN

victim,

women's

pitched for chemical

sexual

blame game

such cases

efforts would

offence

had offered myself to

fire in the form of Sat...

stringent

comes

government

responsible for

echoed

erupted

harsher punish-

issues

security of

the accused

regular basis

official said

accountability

functioning

request-

accountability

'And the shameful incidences of your deed

regular basis

official said

accountability

functioning

request-

accountability

'And the shameful incidences of your deed

non-bailable.

ensure

concerns

request-

accountability

'And the shameful incidences of your deed

I am omnipotent. I am the

ALAS! SPARE ME. I AM A HELPLESS WOMAN.

Variegations

Undistinguishable, dark, not variegated

Variegated on one side

Changing accent, high and low, variegated

High and low, great and small, irregular speech, variegated

Mixed with, variegated

Coloured, variegated

Come near, approached, a kind of deer or antelope, variegated on both sides

Shining (said of horses), of variegated colour

Dappled horse (said of the Sun's horse), of variegated colour

Spotted, variegated

Water, gold, thorn-apple, variegated

Many-coloured, variegated

A tiger, a demon, variegated actions

A stain, a river, speckled with black, variegated black and white

Spottedness, the state of being variegated

Intermingled, sourness, a braid of hair, variegated

Engaged in action, embroidered, any variegated texture

The orange tree, a demon, a variegated colour

Having a variegated rind

Mingled with, variegated

Sacrificial grass, painted or variegated cloth

Of a dark variegated colour

Agitated (as the sea), different kinds of torture, facetious conversation, variegated

Having variegated thorns

A variegated cloth (used as an elephant's housing)

Having a variegated bow

Painted or variegated on the surface

Having variegated birch

Having variegated feathers

Having a variegated tail (as a peacock)

Having variegated arrows

Having variegated seeds

Of variegated lustre

A kind of snake, forming a variegated circle

Having variegated rays

Having a variegated cuirass

Having a variegated bracelet

Decorated with variegated feathers (as an arrow)

Vermillion, yellow orpiment, having a variegated body

Men's deeds, decorated with variegated bracelets

A variegated bird

Having variegated weapons

Having a variegated cloak

Covered with variegated carpets

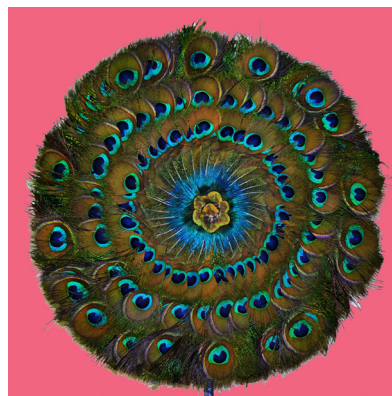
To regard as a wonder, to be a wonder, to make variegated

Variegated

Having variegated (black and grey) hair

Surprise, making variegated

Being variegated in three places (as a bristle)



A blanket or woollen cloth, an elephant's variegated housings
 Many-coloured, variegated
 Knotty (as a reed), harsh and contumelious speech, dirty-coloured, variegated
 Manifold, variegated
 Forming various shapes, variegated
 Exhaling an odour indicative of approaching death, having marks like flowers, variegated
 A dappled cow, the earth, a cloud, the starry sky, variegated



In the being of the variegated one
 The being variegated
 Having a small or variegated crest
 A drop of water, variegated
 The being spotted or variegated
 Having white spots, speckled, variegated
 The versed sine of an arc, variegated (as an arrow)
 Party-coloured, variegated
 Spotted, variegated



Hair, the sun, the god of love, chequered, variegated
 Having a variegated neck (as a peacock)
 Devotion, division by streaks, variegated decoration
 A chain for an elephant's feet, a thunderbolt, easily split, variegated
 Mental excitement, decorated walls on festive occasions, variegated colour
 Variegated or dappled with red



Variegated with red
 Implying the reverse of the meaning intended, charming, strange, variegated
 Variegated China cloth, shot or watered China silk
 Having variegated garlands and ornaments
 Having variegated limbs or a spotted body
 Wonderful, variegated

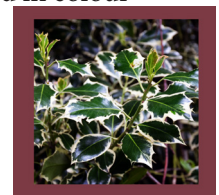
Different in form but the same in meaning, misshapen, monstrous, variegated
 Yoked horses, comets, wearing all forms, variegated
 Variegated with interspersed garlands
 Interwoven (as a garment), levelled (as a road), variegated
 Of a wild mountaineer tribe, brindled, variegated
 The four-eyed watch dogs of the god of death, variegated
 Variegated



Mottled look, variegated state
 Variegated
 Darkness, the god of love, variegated
 Variegated (as the quills of a porcupine)

A mixture of blue and yellow, a piece used at chess, hurting, injuring, variegated in colour
 Coloured, variegated

External or practical skills, ingenuity, contrivance, the art of variegating
 The state of being decorated or variegated
 Being on friendly terms, uninterrupted (as a series of words), variegated
 Garnished with pictures, variegated



Indian cuckoo, elephant, cloud, tree, umbrella, conch-shell, jewel, night, of a variegated colour
 Very distinguished, very manifold, very variegated
 A kingfisher, a kind of speckled snake, very variegated
 Beautifully decorated or variegated

On Clouds and Elephants

There is a curious association between clouds and elephants. Admittedly, they share characteristics – their towering greyness, their obdurate disposition to hold or release water – but they do not feel comfortable together. Something about the glorious earthiness of one, the frustrating unearthliness of the other. An unlikely myth reveals that elephants were once winged, smilingly roving the sky like clouds. They stopped to rest on a tree, beneath which the sage Dīrghatapas sat to teach. Unfortunately the branches could not withstand their clumsy weight, and crashed to the ground, killing several of the ascetic's students. The furious Long- (in space and time)-Austerities cursed them, as sages in Indian mythology are wont to do. Elephants can no longer fly or float or metamorphose, but their vapourish origins are preserved in language.

धाराट dhārāṭa, m. the Caṭakā bird (fond of raindrops) [proud cuckoo, only drinking water as it falls from the sky]; a cloud (filled with drops); a furious elephant (emitting rut-fluid)

घनाघन ghanāghana, m. (said of an elephant); compact, thick (a cloud); mutual collision or contact [another shared feature, the sound when they clash]

मराल marāla, m. (a horse; an elephant; a grove of pomegranate trees; white oleander; a villain; a cloud; lamp-black); redness mixed with a little yellow [a helpful definition or not, depending on how you see it; the components of a myth, whereby the horse and elephant are friends who don't know it till the end; the scene is red with a little yellow mixed in]

मतंग matamga, m. 'going wilfully' or 'roaming at will', an elephant; a cloud [look out for her, she comes after Kamalā, the forest-green girl, drunk elephant goddess]

नभोगज nabhogaja, m. 'sky-elephant', a cloud

सत्त्रि sattri, m. one who is accustomed to perform sacrifices; an elephant; a cloud

श्वेत śveta, m. white, dressed in white, 'snow-mountain'; 'a bright side-glance'; a white cloud; of a mythical elephant; of the mother of the elephant; buttermilk and water mixed half and half

The cycle ends, wet with milk and water. The elephant is painted and placed outside; touching your forehead, looking behind you.

The First River

Aditi

free, having nothing to give
we barely knew her and yet we
know her expanse, her moodless defeat

Uṣas

Eos, Aurora, Ostara,
she is sunlit embroidery
looping and lagging and quiet

Rātri

the season of rest, turmeric
dreams of another night, given
her fingers are stained and searching

Sarasvatī

if her place is much disputed
opposed to good signs and splendour
rivers contradict the river

Vāc

as the voice of the middle sphere
married and mother and daughter
she is the shape of listening

Pr̥thivī

many broad and extended ones
invoked together with the sky
she is love, the milk and the meat

Prakṛti

the first form
the first not-spirit
she wills pattern to life

Satī

a good woman, a faithful wife
many unteachable flames

Mahāvidyā

she is each side of the crystal
or knowledge in the feminine
call her ten names, colour her whole

Kamalā

pink, red, and orange blessings
the matter of petals

Mātaṅgī

she who goes and goes and goes

Bagalāmukhī
the opening and closing of mouths
she is an occasion of birds

Dhūmāvati
a winnowing basket
a body of smoke, as you feared
the crows call otherwise

Bhairavī
sitting quietly, reading, dreaming devastation

Chinnamastā
mothering, in the form of cuts and tears
a self-fulfilling hunger

Bhuvaneśvarī
arising earth, becoming nourish
her body is the only song

Tripura Sundarī
the beautiful faces of horror
built of iron, sky, and drop

Tārā
the essence of from one space to another

Kālī
falling into blackness, into time
we lose ourselves in her ways

Pārvatī
her streams and caves
the magnitude of her vow

Śakti
she lies beside the other, dances to wake the other
becomes furious in the between

Devī
the affection implied by worship
the fear that she underestimates your love

Amma
we are unfixed mixtures
thinking through homes

Tantra



Notes on Tantra

Knowledge That Spreads

Tantra is a paradox. Many Hindu beliefs and practices can be traced to Tantric origins (such as yoga, mantra, *mudra*, the *cakra* system, the use of sacred diagrams, the role of the guru); at the same time, Tantra is felt to be the dark and dangerous underside of Hinduism. Tantra is an accumulation:

- pre-Aryan religious traditions *circa* 2500-1750 B.C.E. (this hypothesis finds evidence in terracotta artefacts – particularly female figurines – found in excavations of the Indus Valley);
- multiple texts emerging from Hindu, Buddhist, and Jain cultures *circa* 600-1700 C.E. (this timespan includes several Tantric revivals or renaissances);
- and continuing indigenous traditions of village deities and unorthodox ritual practices, often dialectically opposed to Aryan, Sanskrit, and Vedic cultures (which emphasise male gods and caste-based hierarchies) (White 2006: 2-29; Urban 2010: 42-46).

I am interested in Tantra as a poetics, a demonstration of the relationship between theory and practice. Tantra is marked by its difficulty by devotees, practitioners, and scholars, and I am drawn to its experiments, oddities, contradictions, and secrets. Despite slipping into mainstream Indian and Western cultures (yoga, mantra, Tantric sex and sacred sexuality, New Age spirituality), Tantra remains emphatically different. Hugh B. Urban describes the extremity of Tantra in terms of its 'radical Otherness, the fact that it is considered to be the most radical aspect of Indian spirituality, the one most diametrically opposed to the modern West' (2012: 3). He notes that 'Tantra [is] singled out as India's darkest, most irrational element – as the Extreme Orient, the most exotic aspect of the exotic Orient itself' (3).

Any attempt to comprehend Tantra is made problematic by its resistance to definition:

तन् tan, to extend, spread, be diffused (as light) over, shine, extend towards, reach to; to continue, endure; to stretch (a cord), extend or bend (a bow), spread, spin out, weave; to prepare (a way for); to direct (one's way) towards; to (spread i.e. to) speak (words); to put forth, show, manifest, display; to accomplish, perform (a ceremony); to sacrifice; to compose (a literary work)

तन्त्र tantra, n. a loom; the warp; the leading or principal or essential part, system, framework; doctrine, rule, theory, chapter of such a work; a class of works teaching magical and mystical formularies (mostly in the form of dialogues between Śiva and Durgā and said to treat of 5 subjects, 1. the creation, 2. the destruction of the world, 3. the worship of the gods, 4. the attainment of all objects, esp. of 6 superhuman faculties, 5. the 4 modes of union with the supreme spirit by meditation); a spell; oath or ordeal; a means which leads to two or more results, contrivance; chief remedy; happiness

तन्त्री tantrī, f. the wire or string of a lute; (figuratively) the strings of the heart; any tubular vessel of the body, sinew, vein; a girl with peculiar qualities; name of a river

Tantra is the practice of extending, of stretching to make connections, of creating something from those connections. Tantra is the weaving of multiple threads and the extrication of one essential part from the whole. Tantra is a process, a set of instructions and values, a dialogue, a desire, a promise. Tantra is literal, figurative, and abstract; historic, mythic, and imaginary;

formal, ethical, and philosophical. Tantra spins and loops, challenging categories, making you forget which route you took to get here, why you came, and how you feel about it all. Tantra is a sacrifice, a poem, a spell, a song – the plucks and glides of your body as you bend between what you want and what you are able to do.

The weave suggests other mythologies. There is Theseus, the labyrinth, and the ball of string; Arachne's transformation into a spider; the Lady of Shalott and her mirror work. A few years ago someone told me about the Navaho tradition of the spirit-line, and I made the following notes: 'He says things like: "My right brain is a wild stallion; my left brain is a kitten." He talks about the "spirit-line" in Native textiles, the flaw in the pattern through which you are able to escape, like the earth wire for your soul. He talks about being the "singer and the song; the poet and the poem" I feel embarrassed by his methodology, I struggle to explain my own, and this record of our conversation reaches to touch me.

'The Origin of Weaving'

the first knot, beginning of the spiral:
life and death, birth and rebirth

textile, text, context
from *teks*: to weave, to fabricate, to make wicker or
wattle for mud-covered walls (Paternosto)

sutra: sacred Buddhist text
thread (Sanskrit)

tantra: sacred text derived from the Vedas: thread

ching: as in *Tao Te Ching* or *I Ching*
sacred book: warp
wei: its commentaries: weft

Quechua: the sacred language
derived from *q'eswa*:
rope or cord made of straw

to weave a new form of thought:
connect
bring together in one (Vicuña 1992: 9-10)

Guru (hard to digest, heavy in the stomach)

The guru is a central figure in Tantric culture, which might be explained by the emphasis on oral communication (revelation is *śruti*, that which has been heard) and the confidential nature of the messages (which must be safeguarded by memory). André Padoux explains: 'The highest wisdom, liberating truth, can issue only from the mouth of the master: *gurumukhād eva*. All such teaching, moreover, is necessarily esoteric. It is given, orally, only to those whom the guru considers worthy of receiving it and capable of keeping it secret' (2000: 41).

The Tantric guru is understood by devotees to be the human embodiment of a deity, as illustrated by these verses from the *Kulārṇava Tantra*, translated by Padoux:



The guru is the father, the guru is the mother, the guru is God, the supreme Lord. When Śiva is angry, the guru saves [from his wrath], but when the guru is angry, nobody [can help].

Śiva is all-pervading, subtle, transcending the mind, without attributes, imperishable, space-like, unborn, infinite: how could he be worshiped, O Dear One? This is why Śiva takes on the visible form of the guru who, [when] worshipped with devotion, grants liberation and rewards.

Many are the gurus who shine [feebly] like lamps in a house. Difficult to obtain is the guru who, like the sun, illuminates everything. (48-50)

I am not a Tantric adept to whom secret teachings have been passed down. I am disadvantaged by my Western upbringing, my lack of languages, my sex (there are many examples of female gurus and disciples in sacred and historical texts, but the relationship is characterised as being between men). I have met several gurus in the last few years (in Hyderabad, Calcutta, and Glasgow), some of whom I have spoken to in English, some of whom members of my family have spoken to in Hindi or Telugu and translated for my benefit. I have read primary and secondary texts in English, and have translated some Sanskrit passages myself. Sometimes I imagine myself as a guru, interpreting and distilling my experiences and research, offering knowledge under the guise of truth, appointing myself as the medium through which reader and deity might meet. I impersonate authority, appropriating its forms. But I am afraid of any reader who is familiar with the source, who has been in the presence of mouth or lamps, who takes hold of my bluish-lead dots, lines, and brackets and feels how short and loose they really are.

When translating Sanskrit texts, I work with Sir Monier Monier-Williams' Sanskrit-English Dictionary. Monier-Williams was born in India in 1819 (his father was surveyor-general of the Bombay Presidency). Educated in England, he trained for civil service in the East India

Company. However, after his brother was killed in the first Anglo-Afghan war, he decided to remain in England to study Sanskrit at the University of Oxford. In 1844, Monier-Williams was appointed Professor of Sanskrit, Persian, and Hindustani at the East India Company College at Haileybury; in 1860, he became Boden Professor of Sanskrit at Oxford. Twenty years later he founded the Indian Institute, 'to encourage and support research into Indian literature and culture, making India and England "better acquainted with each other"' (ODNB). He died in France in 1899. Over the course of his life, Monier-Williams visited India several times and became familiar with the culture. He wrote extensively about Sanskrit language and literature and Hindu religion and philosophy. In 1887, two years before his death, he was made a Knight Commander of the Indian Empire (the motto of this Order is *Imperatricis auspiciis*, or 'under the auspices of the Empress'). I do not know Monier-Williams; what I know of his life is limited, sourced from a few accounts of his time at the East India Company College, his travels across South Asia, his Christianity. And yet, I do know him.

Monier-Williams spent many years teaching Sanskrit, which I can hear in his voice, and I trust him as a teacher:

Indeed it is at once the joy and sorrow of every true scholar that the older he grows the more he has to confess himself a learner rather than a teacher, and the more morbidly conscious he becomes of his own liability to a learner's mistakes. (2008: viii)

He made three voyages to India for research (and, presumably, to visit family and friends), and I feel comfortable with him as a travel companion:

And on each occasion I met to my surprise with learned and thoughtful natives – not only in the cities and towns, but even in remote villages – able and willing to converse with me in Sanskrit, as well as in their own vernaculars, and to explain difficult points in their languages, literatures, religions, and philosophies. (vii)

Monier-Williams authored and compiled the dictionary that I use to access Sanskrit, the textual transmissions of my ancestors, the cultural background that I have been unable to apprehend until recently. He speaks with multiple voices – personal, scholarly, lexicographical, religious, nationalistic, prejudiced. Sometimes there are problems; the voices will not remain distinct, they must intermingle. I am not a conductor, able to arrange the voices with precision and poise; the relationships I attend to are discordant and undefined. I hear Monier-Williams speaking in abbreviations, Latin names, grammatical gender; he sounds like the dictionary.

Subversive Signifiers

I look up Tantra and find the following definition:

It was reserved for the latest sacred writings called *Tantras* to identify all Force with the female principle in nature, and to teach an undue adoration of the wives of Śiva and Viṣṇu to the neglect of their male counterparts. [...] It is certain that a vast proportion of the inhabitants of India, especially in Bengal, are guided in their daily life by Tantric teaching, and are in bondage to the gross superstitions inculcated in these writings. And indeed it can scarcely be doubted that Shaktism is Hinduism arrived at its worst and most corrupt stage of development. (1974: 184-185)

But the dictionary is objective; the voices must separate. In *Religious Thought and Life in India: Vedism, Brāhmanism and Hindūism*, Monier-Williams offers his interpretation of Tantra. He

is upset by the privilege given to the female principle, and appalled by the methods used by certain Tantric practitioners to worship the goddess: the consumption of meat and alcohol, blood sacrifice, and sex-based rituals. He understands these ‘debasement doctrines’ as necessary consequences of a religion that emphasises female power:

It might have been expected that a creed like this, which admits of an infinite multiplication of female deities and makes every woman an object of worship, would be likely to degenerate into various forms of licentiousness on the one hand and of witchcraft on the other. (190)

The prime instance of licentiousness – the sex-based ritual – is also an instance when men and women, of whatever caste or social status, sit together as equals (192). The beliefs and practices that draw me into Tantra, that signal so many possibilities for feminism and poetics, are the very beliefs and practices that induce a profound aversion in Monier-Williams.

Hugh B. Urban discusses Tantra in the context of what he terms ‘the power at the margins’: ‘much of the unique power of Tantra lies in its ability to tap into the liminal, transgressive, and impure elements in the social and physical universe’ (2010: 26). The margins refer to the social groups that Tantra includes in its ritual practices – women, indigenous peoples, members of the lowest castes. The quintessential Tantric ritual is the *pañcatattva* (the five realities or essences) also known as the *pañcamakāra* (the five Ms). The M’s are meat (*māṁsa*), fish (*matsya*), wine (*madya*), grain (*mudra*), and sexual intercourse (*maithuna*). Monier-Williams and Urban translate these words literally, correlating the words with the ritual practices they denote. For Monier-Williams they represent ‘monstrous evils’ (1974: 192); for Urban they trigger analyses of power, gender, and knowledge in South Asian religious traditions.

However, there is another interpretation of *pañcatattva*, as propounded by Sir John Woodroffe, a judge and scholar of British Indian law who lived a double life as Arthur Avalon, Tantric devotee. Woodroffe was born in England in 1865 (his father was advocate-general of Bengal). Following his education at the University of Oxford, Woodroffe moved to India to serve as an advocate in the High Court of Calcutta. In 1904, he was appointed a Bannister; in 1915, he became Chief Justice of Bengal and was knighted. Upon his return to England in 1923 he held the position of All Souls Reader in Indian Law at Oxford. He died in France in 1936. Woodroffe was fascinated with Indian culture and keen to promote its virtues in Britain (a biographer labels him ‘an Indian soul in a European body’ [ODNB]). He studied Sanskrit, translating and publishing commentaries on various Hindu and Tantric texts. In *Śakti and Shākta*, he explains his motivations for writing about Tantra:

Following the track of unmeasured abuse I have always found something good. The present case is no exception. I protest and have always protested against unjust aspersions upon the Civilization of India and its peoples. If there be what is blameworthy, accuracy requires that criticism should be reduced to its true proportions. (2008: 74-75)

Urban describes Woodroffe as an apologist who struggled to defend Tantra against Western criticisms of its transgressions (2012: 135). He writes:

In order to prove that the *Tantras* contained noble philosophical teachings, in line with both Vedānta and with Western science, Woodroffe was forced to go to great lengths to rationalise, explain, or excise the more offensive aspects of this tradition. Above all, Woodroffe had to rationalize the Tantric use of substances that are normally forbidden in Hindu society – especially the *pañcatattva*. (142)

Woodroffe suggested another interpretation: ‘The *Pañcatattva* are thus threefold, namely, real (*Pratyakṣatattva*), where “wine” means wine, substitutional (*Anukalpatattva*) where wine means coconut water or some other liquid, and symbolical or divine (*Divyatattva*) where it is a symbol to denote the joy of Yoga-knowledge’ (2008: 527).

I do not disagree with Urban’s depiction of Woodroffe. However, the homonymic, synonymic, and metonymic qualities of Sanskrit, the number of Tantric texts (hundreds, thousands, according to the terms of the search), and the regional variations of spiritual and religious practice in India encourage a multitude of interpretations. Textual analysis can transform Tantra from a deliberately subversive tradition to a set of beliefs and practices that slide easily into mainstream Hinduism. It is intriguing to consider the implications of this transformation – what if the process were reversed, and conventional beliefs and practices became subversive? Tantra moves in both directions.

Consummating Faith

In *Kiss of the Yoginī: “Tantric Sex” in its South Asian Contexts*, David Gordon White argues that Tantra is the dominant Indian religious tradition, although its influence has been obscured:

In many ways the antitype of *bhakti* – the religion of Indian civilization that has come to be embraced by nineteenth- to twenty-first-century reformed Hinduism as normative for all of Indian religious history – Tantra has been the predominant religious paradigm, for over a millennium, of the great majority of the inhabitants of the Indian subcontinent. (2006: 3)

Bhakti is attachment, devotion, faith, and love. White’s assertion that Tantra is the antitype of *Bhakti* may be explained by Tantra’s apparent exclusion from mainstream Hinduism. It could also be argued that Tantra is set in opposition to *Bhakti* according to the emphasis that each tradition places on ritual and practice. Although *Bhakti* involves devotional activities, Tantra is determined by *sādhana* (accomplishment, performance). Woodroffe explains:

Sādhana is that, which produces *Siddhi* [fulfilment, complete attainment, supernatural powers] or the result sought, be it material or spiritual advancement. It is the means or practice by which the desired end may be attained and consists in the training and exercise of the body and psychic faculties, upon the gradual perfection of which *Siddhi* follows. [...] The *Sādhana* is necessarily of a nature and character appropriate to the end sought. (2008: 457)

The Tantric practitioner performs rituals in order to achieve material or spiritual success; the ultimate goal of the *sadhaka* or *sadhika* (male or female practitioner) is *mokṣa* (release from worldly existence, final or eternal emancipation). As the ‘capacity, temperament, knowledge and general advancement’ of practitioner varies according to the individual, Tantra recognises a range of methods for the accomplishment of *siddhi* (461). Woodroffe notes that unlike orthodox Hinduism, Tantric *sādhana* is not determined by social distinctions such as caste: ‘All are competent for Tantric worship, for, in the words of the Gautamiya, which is a *Vaiṣṇava Tantra*, the *Tantra Śāstra* [teaching] is for all castes and all women’ (471).

Representations and techniques of the body and embodiment are crucial to the understanding of Tantra. Gavin Flood presents a threefold argument: the Tantric body is inscribed by text, the Tantric body is a metaphor that ‘operates at different levels of practice and discourse’, the Tantric body entails a ‘tradition-dependent subjectivity’ (2006: 4-5). He focusses on the *sādhana* of self-

divinisation: the temporary transformation of the practitioner into the deity being worshipped, according to which the practitioner becomes divine through ‘empowering of the body’:

[He or she] becomes divine such that his or her limited subjectivity is transcended or expanded and that subjectivity becomes coterminous with the subjectivity of his or her deity, which is to say that the text is internalised and subjectivity becomes text-specific. (11)

The ‘I’ of the practitioner expands, explodes, dissipates into the universe, becoming the ‘I’ of the Supreme Being. The subject-object relationship that organises existence is revealed to be an illusion, and, at the same time, an infinite and ecstatic union. This relationship is articulated in the expression: ‘*soham* “He I am,” *saham* “She I am”’ (Woodroffe 2008: 461). Consciousness, matter, and form are released through the activation of mind and body. Making contact with the Supreme Being – merging for an instant – consciousness, matter, and form return to the practitioner. She is mortal once more, yet transformed.

Anne Waldman describes the experience of creative and spiritual rebirth:

‘Eyes In All Heads To Be Looked Out Of’

Formed a new beast today: eye of hawk
heart of lion, radar of bat
Crossed the psychic threshold
the same old old set of eyes
So many layers in one way of working
and you, The Other, you open every one of them
You make me exist, cold by the doorway,
chipper when we don’t miss a beat,
despondent for heartbreak’s sake
I am the weather when it breaks and destroys
Stroke my sleeping fur, appease me
or I’ll deracinate your calm
My Other has shown his many face –
weak, selfish, you see him around woman
I am the idiot too, but will measure myself
against the most beautiful in you
and fail or not, the ‘I’ will come out of joint (1996: 147)

The Ins and Outs of Non-Duality

Broadly speaking, Hinduism may be divided into three denominations, each of which focusses on a particular deity and his or her *avatāras*: Vaishnavism (Viṣṇu, Kṛṣṇa, Rāma); Shaivism (Śiva, Rudra, lingam); Shaktism (Śakti, Devī, Pārvatī, Durgā, Kālī). Flood notes that Hindus often follow a combination of traditions, referencing the tenth-/eleventh-century philosopher Abhinavagupta’s comment about private and public beliefs and practices:

Externally one follows Vedic practice, in the domestic sphere one is an orthodox Saiva, but in one’s secret life one is a follower of the extreme antinomian cult of the Kula which involves the disruption of the Vedic body through ritual transgression of Vedic norms and values. (2006: 14)

Tantra is primarily associated with Shaivism and Shaktism, and is conceptualised as a conversation between Śiva and Śakti, masculine and feminine principles. *Śiva* (a grammatically masculine word) is happiness, welfare, liberation, and final emancipation; *śakti* (a grammatically feminine word) is power, strength, energy, and efficacy. Woodroffe describes their dynamic:

Being, as Śiva, is also a Power, or Śakti, which is the source of all Becoming. The fully Real, therefore, has two aspects: one called Śiva, the static aspect of Consciousness, and the other called Śakti, the kinetic aspect of the same. (2008: 45)

Śiva and Śakti are divine consorts: lovers whose erotic play brings the world into being, teachers whose questions and answers help us to understand and experience this world, and warriors who whirl and collide until the point of dissolution. They are equally matched, taking turns to play the dominant part. After the battle of demons and gods, when Kālī celebrated her victory with the dance of destruction, Śiva threw his body at her feet to stop her – his trampled body makes her realise the horror of her actions. During the churning of the ocean, when Śiva drank the poison that threatened to eradicate all life on earth, he would have died himself had his wife not offered her breast to suckle – her lover’s milk saves him from the illusion of invincibility. Sometimes the union of Śiva and Śakti is represented as an androgynous being, Ardhanārīśvara, whose body is half male (the right side) and half female (the left side).

However, divinity is beyond gender; sexual difference is utilised to demonstrate the ultimate truth of *advaita* (non-dualism) through examples of unity and harmony between opposites. The binary is illustrative, used to aid our understanding of creation and the cosmos: ‘Some worship It as Śiva; others as Śakti. Both are one and the same. [...] They are the “male” and “female”



aspects of the same Unity which is neither male nor female' (338). At the beginnings and ends of the world, duality and difference are *māyā*, illusion, unreality, 'the Form (*Ākāra*) of the Void (*Śūnya*) or formless (not Nothingness)' (Woodroffe 2008: 366). We are currently somewhere in the middle of the cycle, spinning solidly.

As we understand the supreme realities of Śiva and Śakti by means of a human coupling, we understand human beings by means of the cosmic whole. Ajit Mookerjee and Madhu Khanna explain the micro/macrocosm:

From its summit, one can start at the cosmic plane, at Tantra's precepts concerning the ultimate reality and come down to its notion of creation and the constituents of the objective world, and finally arrive at its understanding of the human body and its properties, and the psychic processes which interlink man and the universe. (1993: 15)

The universal and the particular exist in one another, they can each be extracted from or located within the other. In Tantric beliefs and practices, this concurrence is exemplified by the relationship between woman and the Goddess:

[The female practitioner] is looked upon as an intermediary between the transcendent and the imminent, and is regarded as an embodiment of Śakti, the active principle. Potentially, she embraces within her all the positive attributes with which Śakti is endowed. She 'is', in flesh and blood, the goddess. (26)

Tantra encourages woman to understand herself as Goddess, an attitude that may contribute to the perception of Tantra as a subversive tradition (Woodroffe mentions an unnamed American Orientalist's criticism of Tantra: '[he] described it as a worthless system, a mere feminization of orthodox (whatever that be) Vedānta – a doctrine teaching the primacy of the Female and thus fit only for "suffragette monists"' [2008: 33]). Tantric myths concerning the goddess often narrate her divine and her mortal attributes. For example: the Mahāvidyā Mātāṅgī, the outcaste goddess. Mātāṅgī's physical descriptions are conventionally divine (blue or green skin, three eyes, multiple limbs) and idiosyncratically human (perspiration on her forehead, folds of skin below her navel, lines of body hair). She is a low caste tribal woman and a generous queenly deity. David Kinsley suggests that Mātāṅgī's human attributes have social repercussions. The devotee may perform rituals for Mātāṅgī and ask her for blessings and boons in return, but she is most likely to reward those who worship her human embodiments: 'worshipers are cautioned to refrain at all times from criticizing women and to treat them like goddesses' (2008: 222).

Powerful Tantric rituals such as the *pañcatattva* are dependent on woman and goddess: women in sex-based rituals are identified as the goddess; female sexual fluids are considered to be potent substances and may be consumed during rituals; sacrifices are typically performed to satiate the goddess, whose thirst for blood exceeds the demands of her male counterpart. Female power extends beyond body and sexuality. In *Renowned Goddess of Desire: Women, Sex, and Speech in Tantra*, Loriliai Biernacki investigates Tantric traditions that observe women's powers of language:

Contrary to the normative coding of a woman as a sexual being and dangerous because of her sexuality [...] here we have a perilous leap into a world where a woman is dangerous because, like a Brahmin priest, like the guru and like the yogi, she knows how to wield a mantra. (2007: 45)

Biernacki suggests that women are prominent in Tantra due to their construction as

transgressive:

The human woman herself is an emblem of the transgressive; not her sex as object of desire or mastery, nor sex as activity per se, but her gender, sex as the place where difference is articulated. Woman in her difference from males, as a being who is other and who resists assimilation, must be elided from discourse; she is pushed to the outside beyond the borders of normative social and political power. (104)

By elevating woman and goddess, Tantra disrupts the dominant cultural order: 'To place a goddess in the position of the supreme deity, creator, and savior reconfigures the divine hierarchy. In terms of the normative gender arrangement, this placement is, in itself, a societal transgression' (105-106). This recalls Urban's argument that Tantra is 'the power at the margins' – through various means, Tantra offers empowerment to marginal members of society.

This hypothesis is problematic in terms of the essentialist attitude towards women (women are defined according to normative assumptions of biological sex, gender, and sexuality) as well as the social realities for women. As Urban notes, with reference to feminist theory and Indian tradition: 'Historically, it would seem, reverence for the female body and its reproductive powers has no necessary or direct connection to any actual empowerment of women in the larger social sphere' (2010: 137). The dominance of the goddess in Tantric myths, the significance of women's roles in Tantric rituals, and the gendering of power as feminine does not entail sexual equality.

However, Urban acknowledges certain advantages:

This identification of the female with the goddess as strength [has] opened a space for at least *some* women to assume that power in a more direct way: they have had the opportunity – even if relatively rare – to become spiritual authorities, gurus, and leaders of Tantric lineages. (2010: 143)

These manifestations of power represent the possibility of women's social empowerment:

In the case of Hindu Tantra, we might say that *Śākta* women have been able to use their highly essentialized status as *śaktis* and embodiments of the goddess' power in a strategic manner, that is, as a means to achieve a more concrete kind of authority in living Tantric communities. As such, they may not have created the foundation for a movement of radical women's liberation, but they have been able to open up a unique *space or gap within* the dominant relations of power. (143)

Tantric ritual involves the transformation of the practitioner from human to divine. Skilful female practitioners may be elevated to positions of authority. If transformation can lead to manifestations of power in spiritual contexts, perhaps this progression may be extended to social contexts. In providing a ritual framework for theorising, practising, and realising power, Tantra, as an explicitly transgressive tradition, may provide a framework for the social empowerment of marginalised individuals and communities.



Ritual Steps for a Tantric Poetics

this is the way to north
the honey love of air
poetry and myth lick your ears

this is the way to northeast
the drunk eyes of air-fire
forgetting you slip into dialect

this is the way to east
the hurting hold of fire
your tongue becomes strange to you

this is the way to southeast
the sad smoke of fire-water
soak a loneliness in cold water

this is the way to south
the blood sacrifice of water
dance on the back of a copulating couple

this is the way to southwest
the inner heat of water-earth
knowledge cauterizes

this is the way to west
the earth body of earth
write the flash before subjectivity

this is the way to northwest
the three points of earth-air
consider geometrical process

this is the way to above
the safe crossing of above
etymology as your ladder

this is the way to below
the dead time of below
your fear the words mean nothing

come away from north
assume the contemporary
you have access to more words than you are using

come away from northeast
try on as many voices as you like
impressions imply re-making

come away from east
your bones, your blood vessels, your eyelashes
how astonishing, astonishing

come away from southeast
the confessional sounds you make
you are so much more than feeling

come away from south
the obscure narratives you rely upon
start again with blood and with iron

come away from southwest
your arms are scarred with procedure
you were wrong about sealed containers

come away from west
before essentialism smothers you
get out, get out, get out

come away from northwest
the constraints you have reasoned yourself into
stare at flowers until something happens

come away from above
the warmth of academic contexts
unless you can sweat it out

come away from below
extending words to the breaking
the charm has wound down

Her Voice as an Instrument of Thought

The verbal root of 'mantra' is *man*, to think, believe, imagine (cognate with ancient Greek μένω, *méno*, to stay or endure, μέμωνα, *mémōna*, to wish or intend; Latin *meminisse*, to remember or bear in mind, *monere*, to remind or instruct or teach; and English 'to mean'). André Padoux explains that the suffix *-tra* is used to construct words denoting instruments and objects, and may connote the verb *traī*, to protect, preserve, rescue (1992: 373). Anthropologists and linguists struggle to find a satisfactory interpretation of mantra. It is and is not sacred formula, rite, hymn, invocation, spell, wish, curse, cure, prayer. It is and is not 'a potential means of achieving a special effect' (Gonda 1963: 249), 'an absence of reference' (Staal 1996: 196), 'whatever anyone in a position to know calls a mantra' (Alper 2002: 4), 'a polyvalent instrument of power' (6), 'an instance of language' (9). In *Vāc: The Concept of the Word In Selected Hindu Tantras*, Padoux writes:

Mantras are always regarded as a form of speech differing from language in that, unlike language, they are not bound by 'conventions' nor associated with objects, but on the contrary are oriented toward the very origin of the Word and of the energy. (1992: 377)

The Word, in this context, is *Vāc*, the goddess of voice, speech, language, and sound, or the philosophical concept thereof.

The most powerful and prevalent mantra in Hinduism is *om* or *aum*. *Om* has many names: the immovable, unchangeable mantra; the outpouring heart mantra; the self-existent, absolute mantra; the sap and taste of anything mantra; the womb of knowledge mantra; the form of knowledge mantra; the substance of knowledge mantra; the repeated truth mantra; the eternally sounding mantra; the omniscient mantra; the binding, bordering mantra; the roaring, bellowing mantra. *Om* is categorised as a *bīja* mantra. *Bīja* is seed, germ, element, primary cause or source. *Bīja* mantras are monosyllabic mantras considered to be sound without meaning; they have no etymological root and no semantic value. In *Ritual and Mantras: Rules Without Meaning*, Frits Staal argues that the *bīja* mantra is a remnant of prehistoric culture that has more in common with bird song than it does with language. He summarises the hypothesis:

It seems likely that human language is not as old as was once believed: perhaps around one hundred thousand years [...]. Ritual is much older; Neanderthaler man had elaborate rituals [...]. This is supported by the facts of animal ritualization which are similar to human rituals especially with regard to their structure [...]. It is likely that the same holds for mantras, for mantras occupy a domain that is situated between ritual and language. (1996: 261)

Staal likens mantra to the utterances of babies, psychiatric patients, and people who speak in tongues to support his argument that mantra is the predecessor of language in the course of human evolution (265).

Staal speculates that if mantra is older than language, perhaps a similar phenomenon may be found in animal behaviour. After considering the syntax, usage, and ritualization of bird song, he concludes:

The similarity between mantras and bird songs is due not to common function, but to common non-functionality. Mantras and bird songs share not only certain structural properties, but also lack of an inherent or absolute purpose. It is precisely these features that express the common characteristic of both as essentially satisfying, pleasurable and

playful – features that, in the case of mantras, have remained even though language has intervened. (1996: 291)

Such an interpretation may not be welcomed by Tantric devotees, who are all too familiar with assessments of mantra as ‘meaningless jabber’ or ‘gibberish’, to repeat Sir John Woodroffe’s anecdote. (Although mantra features in all Hindu traditions, it is a fundamentally Tantric belief and practice: ‘*Mantraśāstra* is often taken as a name for *Tantraśāstra*: The doctrine of the *Tantras* is that of the mantras’ [Padoux 2002: 296].) As Woodroffe repudiates:

Though a Mantra such as a *Bīja*-mantra may not convey its meaning on its face, the initiate knows that its meaning is the own form (*Svarūpa*) or the particular *Devatā* [deity] whose Mantra it is, and the essence of the *Bīja* is that which makes letters sound, and exists in all which we say or hear. Every Mantra is thus a particular sound form (*Rūpa*) of the *Brahman* [Supreme Being]. (2008: 427)

Returning to the definition of *bīja* as seed or source; remembering that *vāc* refers to human and animal languages (and to the sounds of inanimate objects, such as the stones used for pressing); fixing the mind on the embodiments of mantra, the Mahāvidyās (who are associated with crows, cranes, and green parrots) – I wonder if this talk of meaning is really about something else.

Vāc is the mother of the Vedas, the mother of knowledge, the cow who feeds the world. Sacrifice walks in her footsteps, begging forgiveness for the murders of her mothers and fathers, asking her if she would like anything else. Priests hurry after, trying to remember the order in which it all happened. They wrap the remains in loose sections of their cotton sets. (We must thank the priests for their seeing and their stories, for they became mad with knowing. We must thank the students for their ordering and their poetry, for they became mad without knowing.) Two birds sit at the top of a fig tree. One eats while the other watches. The rivers are formed of poetic metres and the metres udders and the feathers voice: ‘The recitation of a Mantra without knowing its meaning is practically fruitless. I say “practically” because devotion, even though it be ignorant, is never wholly void of fruit.’ They prayed to the cow and drained her vigour. There were floods in heaven: before as a warning, or during in sympathy, or after to signal the new regime. Vāc is composed in one or two or four or eight or nine or thousand-syllable footsteps filled with water and blood. The thunder god comes: ‘The Bird Celestial, vast with noble pinion, the lovely germ of plants, the germ of waters, Him who delighteth us with rain in season, Sarasvān I invoke that he may help us.’ Voice is breath is air. She was measured in four directions.

The priests were keen to separate their voices from the voices of the people, as philologist M. L. West explains:

Such verbal techniques were part and parcel of the Indo-European poet’s stock-in-trade, of what gave him his claim to special status. His obscurities were not necessarily perceived as faults; what is not fully understood may seem more impressive than what is. In some branches of the tradition the poet seems to have positively gloried in his mastery of a language beyond common comprehension. (2010: 77)

The Vedic priests gave one quarter of Vāc to humankind for speech, they concealed the rest for their own purposes. The people spoke for hundreds of years, not realising how much more voice could be. Eventually the Tantric priests appeared on the scene, eager to dismantle borders and make spiritual information available to all (with the exception of Tantric secrets, which most people couldn’t handle anyway). They elucidated the four stages of *vāc*:

- वैखरी **vaikharī**, f. speech in the fourth of its four stages from the first stirring of the air or breath, articulate utterance, that utterance of sounds or words which is complete as consisting of full and intelligible sentences. (*Vaikharī* is the only stage of speech that Monier-Williams defines as such.) This is the gross level, this is speech for bodies and for differentiation. These are words with hard faces that you don't want to look at in case you hear too much.
- मध्यमा **madhyamā**, f. the womb. The intermediate level, between the gross and the subtle. Language moves further away from activity. There are signs, although you cannot see them, that the garland is arranging itself. If you want to do poetry, do it now. The lights in your house shine blue.
- पश्यन्ती **paśyantī**, f. a harlot. She is known as 'the Visionary'. Your body bleeds objectivity, she must be getting close. Abhinavagupta said: 'Therefore, *paśyantī* comprehends in a general indeterminate way whatever is desired to be known if it is awakened by due causal conditions just as one who has experienced variegated colour like dark, blue, etc., as in a peacock's tail and whose experience is determined by many impressions, positive and negative, recalls only that particular colour which is awakened by the proper causal condition of memory' (Singh 2011: 8).
- परावाच् **parāvāc**, f. the supreme voice. She is the anti-unconscious, the anti-dark. She contains every word, every action, every object, and every share of the sacrifice. She combines the four stages in her supreme silence: 'this non-answer or silence is the highest truth' (Singh 2011: 76). She is the relentless throbbing of 'I am' (*aham*), the all-voice in the all-head (that suddenly becomes all-quiet when you ask a question and demonstrate your willingness to listen).

These stages of voice, speech, language, and sound correspond to stages of knowledge, belief and practice. Mantra may be understood as a key.

Padoux notes with an exclamation mark that *vāc* is a feminine word. I return to etymology in irritation at his surprise. Mantra, from *man*, derived from the Proto-Indo-European root **men*, which offers three tempting branches: to think, to stay, to stand. The first leads us to the Roman goddess Minerva, grave goddess of wisdom and the arts. The second to the ancient Greek Mnemosyne, or Memory, mother of the muses, the goddesses of poetic inspiration. The third to the Hindu mountain Mandara, used by the gods and demons as a churning stick to recover the nectar of immortality and the lotusflower goddess. Or to the Hindu mountain Kailāsa, the abode of Śiva and Pārvatī, which holds the lake Mānasa ('belonging to mind or spirit'). To complete the cycle I will mention that Pārvatī's name means mountain and that she is an avatāra of Vāc. But now I am annoyed at myself and these lengths and this rendering of proof. Does she speak? Does she write? What is the matter of myth? What use if the answer is unintelligible? What use if the answer is no?

A Story of the Mahāvidyās

When A Lovely Flame Dies

The Mahāvidyās are a group of ten goddesses in the Tantric Hindu pantheon. *Mahā-vidyā* is great or full knowledge, skill, incantation. As *vidyā* also denotes a feminine mantra, the knowledge of the Mahāvidyās is a specifically linguistic and literary capacity. As mantras, the Mahāvidyās embody language, but do not refer to anything beyond themselves – they are words, actions, meanings, and the supreme stage of language (transcending words, actions, meanings). Loriliai Biernacki describes them: ‘They are dancing words. As magical speech, they are also words that perform what they say. By saying these words things happen. [...] Thus these words as bodies, as performative speech, dance outside of a logocentric view of language’ (2007: 120).

The ten goddesses are diverse embodiments of the one supreme Goddess. In *The Ten Mahāvidyās: Tantric Visions of the Divine Feminine*, David Kinsley explains: ‘all of the Mahāvidyās are the same: they are all different expressions of the same goddess, who enjoys taking many forms for her own pleasure and the needs of her devotees’ (2008: 2). The Mahāvidyās include some of the oldest, most popular, and most obscure goddesses in Hindu tradition; they are worshipped as individual deities and as a group. There is no historical explanation for the grouping of these goddesses, which took place sometime in the tenth century. However, there are multiple origin myths, all of which identify the goddesses as *avatāras* of Śakti: Satī, Pārvatī, Durgā, and Kālī. (Therefore, the Mahāvidyās are also associated with Śiva, although the dynamic of the Śiva/Śakti relationship varies for each goddess.) Kinsley states that the story of Satī is the most detailed and firmly attested origin myth (22).



The story begins in the early days of the world. Brahmā (expansion, evolution) was tired; he created Dakṣa (dextrous) from the thumb of his right hand to share the burden of his work. Dakṣa was given the task of populating the world: ‘Dakṣa set out to create the four types of progeny: those born of the sloughed skin, those born of eggs, those born of sprouts, and those born of sweat’ (Doniger 1975: 47). He had many sons and daughters, but none compared to Satī (Truth personified). She was a good and faithful woman, a female ascetic, a fragrant earth, and Dakṣa loved her the most. But change was coming.

Today the Hindu pantheon is composed of three: Brahmā, Viṣṇu, Śiva, and their consorts Sarasvatī, Lakṣmī, and Pārvatī. The three principle Hindu denominations worship Viṣṇu, Śiva, and the Goddess. The three most popular deities are Kṛṣṇa (Viṣṇu), Gaṇeśa (Śiva and Pārvatī’s son), and Lakṣmī (this statement is based on my limited observations, don’t hold me to it). But in the time of this story the alliances had not been made. Śiva was an outsider (possibly of non-Aryan, non-Vedic origin) and had not been granted the position of authority he now enjoys. He was too strange. No one doubted his power, but they sensed something demonic about him. So when Satī announced her intention to wed Śiva, Dakṣa was furious:

He lives in the burning ground surrounded by *pretas* [ghosts], *Bhūtas* [good or evil spirits] and *Piśācas* [ogres]. With his hair all matted and wild he wanders naked in the burning ground. He laughs awhile and weeps awhile like one demented. He smears himself with the ashes from the funeral pyre and wears a garland made of human skulls. (Subramaniam 1988: 68)

Dakṣa refused to give Satī his permission until his own father intervened (later we learn that Brahmā had his own quarrel with Śiva, suggesting ulterior motives). He assented, but withheld his blessing. When Satī joined her husband on Mount Kailāsa, Dakṣa was heartbroken.

However, Dakṣa was still king and priest of the world. He decided to host a great ceremony on the banks of the Ganga. He invited everyone – all the *brahmarṣis* [sages], *devarṣis* [celestial saints], *pitṛs* [forefathers], and *devas* [gods] – with the exception of his beloved daughter and her husband. When Satī heard about the ceremony she was hurt that her father had excluded her and embarrassed that he had offended Śiva. She was determined to attend, but Śiva, who was as guilty as his father-in-law of prideful behaviour, refused to accompany her. He tried to dissuade her, they argued, and she left.

When Satī arrived at the ceremony, she realised that her father had planned a sacrifice to be distributed amongst all of the great lords in attendance. Śiva would be purposefully denied his rightful share (he might have kept wild company, but he was still a great lord). Satī confronted Dakṣa:

‘I am defiled by your arrogance, father. I should have stayed with my husband, for now I cannot return to him. I am still your daughter, your flesh and blood, though I would not be. O evil father, how I hate myself that I am your child!’

Her eyes blazed, and she said, ‘Look, I cast off this body born from your loins as if it were a corpse. I shall be my Lord’s wife again when I am born to a father I can love.’ (Menon 2010: 313)

Satī concentrated her power on *tapas*, the religious austerities that sear mind and soul with purifying heat. But her *tapas* was so powerful that she lit a fire inside her body; she burned to death from within. Satī’s hollow ash-filled corpse remained upright as a pillar to her father’s

mistake: 'You cannot live without performing sacrifice but I am the sacrifice' (Calasso 2001: 84).

Meditating in his mountain abode, Śiva knew what had happened. He unleashed his devastation in the form of Vīrabhadra, the fever demon with a thousand eyes and teeth in a thousand heads, bearing a thousand weapons in his thousand arms. Dakṣa's ceremony became the site of a massacre.

The world was almost destroyed that day but *dharma* (rightly, according to the nature of anything; Law or Justice) prevented it from being so. A ceremony must be concluded. Dakṣa could not be killed before the sacrifice had been performed and shared. Brahmā went to Śiva to appease him, to beg forgiveness on behalf of his son: 'All the gods will give you too a share, O lord. Lord of all gods, Heater of Enemies, great god, withdraw this destruction. All the gods and sages can find no respite from your anger' (Doniger 1975: 121). Śiva agreed. He completed the ceremony himself, sacrificing Vīrabhadra and distributing the demonic fire amongst the gods. And, for good measure, he transformed Dakṣa's head into the head of a goat: 'Dakṣa was now freed of his proud and arrogant nature and he was a highly chastened person. Only, Satī was dead' (Subramaniam 1988: 76).

Satī's body remained through all of this, and when Śiva was done he took hold of her and wept and ran madly across the world, causing a different kind of destruction. Viṣṇu, who had been conspicuously quiet, was drawn into the story to alleviate Śiva's grief. He threw his discus and cut Satī's body into fifty pieces (the number is debated). These pieces fell to earth and became sacred sites known as *śaktipīṭhas*. The map of India is a map of Satī's love for Śiva, a map of a good woman's duty to her husband. The goddess sacrificed herself so that the gods could come to an agreement over their positions in the pantheon. It was clear that Śiva was too powerful



to ignore, and his wildness was authorised. Satī was reincarnated as Pārvatī, daughter of the mountain, and remarried to Śiva. *Dharma* was restored.

The story of Dakṣa and Śiva's conflict is recounted in the *Mahābhārata* (300 B.C.E.-300 C.E.), the *Varāha Purāṇa* (300-500 C.E.), and the *Bhāgavata Purāṇa* (950 C.E.) (Doniger 2000: 17-18). Although Satī is a key figure, no mention is made of what happened to her body. Shaktism corrects this omission, revealing the origins of the *śaktipīṭhas* in the *Devībhāgavata Purāṇa* (850-1350 C.E.). Tantric myths revise the story to emphasise the power and agency of the goddess. The *Mahābhāgavata Purāṇa* (1100 C.E.) and the *Bṛhaddharma Purāṇa* (1250 C.E.) include the origin myth of the Mahāvidyās, returning to the moment that Satī found out about her father's ceremony. Again Śiva tries to dissuade her from going. This version of the story dwells on their conflict:

Forbidden by Śiva to attend the sacrifice, Satī becomes enraged and accuses him of neglecting her. In her anger her eyes become red and bright and her limbs tremble. Seeing her fury, Śiva closes his eyes. When he opens them, a fearsome female stands before him. [...] Śiva is afraid and tries to flee. He runs around in all directions, but then the terrible goddess gives a dreadful laugh, and Śiva is too petrified to move. To make sure that he does not flee from her terrible form, Satī fills the directions around him with ten different forms. (Kinsley 2008: 23)

The Mahāvidyās embody Satī's anger towards her father and love for her husband, her resoluteness and dominance. Satī generates these goddesses to stay with Śiva in the knowledge that she will not return from the ceremony. The Mahāvidyās represent the eternity of her various aspects: Kamalā (the lotus), Mātāṅgī (she who roams), Bagalāmukhī (she holds your tongue), Dhūmāvātī (like smoke), Bhairavī (formidable), Chinnamastā (the cut head), Bhuvaneśvarī (lady of the earth), Tripura Sundarī (beautiful in all three worlds), Tārā (the star that crosses), and Kālī (the blackness of time).

Perpetual Co-Inherence

The Mahāvidyās are a diverse group and it is difficult to understand why these particular goddesses became categorised as Mahāvidyās. Kinsley writes:

If there is an internal coherence to the group that explains how its members are related to each other, it is not readily apparent. Neither in textual sources nor in the contemporary oral tradition have I been able to discover an obvious pattern or logic to the inclusion of these ten goddesses in the same group. (2008: 38)

However, they share commonalities in terms of ritual practice, iconography, and narrative. The Mahāvidyās are worshipped with Tantric methods: *nāma stotra* (hymn of praise listing the deity's names), *bīja* mantra (seed syllable), *dhyāna* mantra (description of the deity's physical appearance and personal attributes), and *yantra* (mystical diagram). Many of the Mahāvidyās demand blood sacrifices, and some are only appeased by the most subversive rituals (including sex-based rituals). Some of the Mahāvidyās are said to grant magical powers such as subjugation, immobilisation, and superior speech (whatever the devotee says comes true). This belief in magic may be explained by the practice of meditation:

Tantric yoga is supposed to awaken one's consciousness, to expand and intensify it. That magical powers as well as transformative wisdom might be associated with this process is understandable, and many of the magical powers that are specified relate directly to

mental powers. In exploring and expanding one's consciousness, one discovers new dimensions to one's psychic capacities. (Kinsley 2008: 57)

In terms of iconography, the devotee learns to read each attribute as a metaphor: 'I didn't want to worship idols but when I started understanding that the fierce and pleasing deities [...] represented aspects of my own mind and were there as sparks and guides and reminders to wake up, they became alive' (Waldman 2001: 83). Every detail is significant: the background, the deity's skin colour, the shape of her body, the expression on her face, her position, her hair, her dress, the objects that she holds. The Mahāvidyās share many icons, including lotus flowers, hand gestures, third eyes, and diadems adorned with crescent moons. They also share a consort – Śiva – although another commonality is their representation as independent or dominant forces.

Kinsley proposes that the Mahāvidyās are related to stages of consciousness and spiritual development:

Kālī is understood to represent unfettered, complete knowledge of self and of ultimate reality, fully enlightened consciousness that has transcended all limitations of egocentricity. [...] Kamalā and Bhairavī symbolize lower states of consciousness, in which the adept is preoccupied with satisfying bodily and mental needs. (2008: 47)

Psychoanalytical theory provides a useful interpretation of this narrative. Carl Jung argues that the self is divided between conscious and unconscious. He explains these states according to their contrasting experiences of time: 'It is only our ego-consciousness that has forever a new beginning and an early end. The unconscious psyche is not only immensely old, it is also capable of growing into an equally remote future' (2011: 287). The integrated self, which Jung believes to be the ideal self, is a synthesis of conscious and unconscious: 'I use the term "individuation" to denote the process by which a person becomes a psychological "in-dividual," that is, a separate, indivisible unity or "whole"' (275). Applying this theory to the Mahāvidyās, Kālī is the unconscious state, Kamalā and Bhairavī are conscious, and Goddess is individuation. The Mahāvidyās tell different stories according to the order in which they are arranged.

Forming Relationships

When I discovered the Mahāvidyās I thought they might represent different genres or critical theories or methodologies. Perhaps I could depict Tripura Sundarī (who is known as the *śrī yantra*) as a series of diagrams, perhaps I could read Kālī through phenomenological theory, perhaps I could write Bhuvaneśvarī through eco-poetics. Excited by the different embodiments of goddess and devotee – for example, the sound body, the geometric body, the meditating body, the menstruating body, the decaying body – I wondered if the Mahāvidyās embodied different theories and practices. Perhaps I could divide the project into ten sections for ten Mahāvidyās, each section containing one body, one critical theory, and one methodology. These sections could be arranged in a sequence of stages of consciousness, or temporality, or form (from sound to word to language to world, or something like that). Gradually I realised that the goddesses are not equally suggestive, genres will not remain distinct, and sequences threaten to become hierarchical and closed. I decided that the project should emphasise what I found so engaging about the Mahāvidyās – their grouping together despite their peculiarities, contradictions, and discordances.

Thinking about ways of preserving the Mahāvidyās' individualities and their interrelationships, I dwelled on metaphor:

A figure of speech in which a name or descriptive word or phrase is transferred to an object or action different from, but analogous to, that to which it is literally applicable.

Something regarded as representative or suggestive of something else, esp. as a material emblem of an abstract quality, condition, notion, etc.; a symbol, a token. (*OED*)

Metaphor is related to the ancient Greek word for bearing, carrying, conveying. It is that which moves from one thing to another, that which locates one thing in another, that which transforms one thing into another. In *The Poetic Image*, C. D. Lewis states that metaphor is 'the life-principle of poetry, the poet's chief test and glory' (1947: 17). The poet is driven by a need to observe, express, and create relationships, and is able to achieve this by means of metaphor. Metaphor is a figure of speech, a vehicle, a method. As George Lakoff and Mark Johnson explain in their study of cognitive linguistics, metaphor structures our mental processes and the ways in which we experience the world (2003).

Sigmund Freud suggests relationships between metaphor and mental process in *The Interpretation of Dreams*. He discusses the activity of the dream (which he terms dream-work) in transforming latent thoughts (dream-thoughts) into dreams. According to Freud's theory of condensation, dream-work condenses the extensive psychic materials of dream-thoughts into elements of dream-content. The functions of the work of condensation are: 'its selection of elements occurring many times in the dream-thoughts; its formation of new unities (collective figures, composite structures), and its production of mediating common factors' (2008: 226). The work of displacement restructures meaning and significance, so that the elements of dream-content do not refer directly to dream-thoughts: 'the dream, one might say, is *centred differently*' (232). Connections between dream-thoughts and dream-content are not necessarily logical or easily apprehended; dream-work transfers and distorts psychical intensity, destroying previously established connections and creating new ones. Freud asks why and how one image or idea becomes transformed into another:

What has become of the bonds of logic which had previously given the structure [of thought and memory] its form? What kind of representation does the dream give to 'when,' 'because,' 'just as,' 'although,' 'either-or,' and all the other relational terms without which we can understand neither sentences nor speech? (237)

The psychoanalyst must separate the condensed elements (which might be thought of as instances of synecdoche, a figure of speech that represents 'a whole for a part or a part for a whole' [*OED*]) and rearrange the displaced elements (which might be thought of as instances of metaphor, a figure of speech that represents a transfer).

Hélène Cixous believes that such analysis may be destructive: 'The dream's enemy is interpretation. I used to read *The Interpretation of Dreams* with passion, but, though it is a marvelous book, it is a true dream-killer since it *interprets*' (1993: 107). Rather than pinning the dream down and dissecting it, Cixous suggests that we learn to 'treat the dream as a dream, to leave it free' (107). We must experience the images and structures of the dream without forcing them into what Freud describes as 'the bonds of logic'; we must surrender to the world created by the dream.

Cixous relates the experience of the dream to the experience of reading a text: 'We follow it, things go at top speed, and we are constantly – what a giddy and delicious sensation! – surprised' (1993: 98). Metaphors, poetry, and dreams convey us between multiple disparate elements, disorient us, displace us: 'perhaps dreaming and writing do have to do with traversing

the forest, journeying through the world, using all available means of transport, using your own body as a form of transport' (64). Suddenly we are far from home, in a world that is strange and strangely familiar: 'There is no transition: you wake up in the dream in the other world, on the other side' (80). Metaphors, poetry, and dreams take effect quickly; we cross borders and lose ourselves in a connected whole before identifying the individual parts. As Freud explains: 'It is the relation of similarity, congruence, or convergence, the just like, which dreams have the most various means of expressing better than anything else' (2008: 244). This focus on commonality and unity does not negate the differences of the elements being merged, but encourages consideration of structural processes. Perhaps dream-work presents possibilities for thinking about narrative in terms of connectivity and transformation, rather than linear sequence.

In *Writing Machines*, N. Katherine Hayles presents the concept of the material metaphor. She considers the form of the book:

It is an artifact whose physical properties and historical usages structure our interactions with it in ways obvious and subtle. In addition to defining the page as a unit of reading, and binding pages sequentially to indicate an order of reading, are less obvious conventions such as the opacity of paper, a physical property that defines the page as having two sides whose relationship is linear and sequential rather than interpenetrating and simultaneous. To change the physical form of the artifact is not merely to change the act of reading (although that too has consequences the importance of which we are only beginning to recognize) but profoundly to transform the metaphoric network structuring the relation of word to world.

[...] To change the material artifact is to transform the context and circumstances for interacting with the words, which inevitably changes the meanings of the words as well. This transformation of meaning is especially potent when the words reflexively interact with the inscription technologies that produce them. (2002: 22-24)

Hayles argues that the site of the material metaphor is the hypertext, which she defines as a form including 'at a minimum the three characteristics of MULTIPLE READING PATHS, CHUNKED TEXT, and some kind of LINKING MECHANISM' (26). The hypertext can be a codex book, a computer programme, the entirety of the World Wide Web. The prefix 'hyper-' is derived from the ancient Greek word for 'over, beyond, over much, above measure', and connotes movement, interconnection, and excess (*OED*). Hypertexts enable the reader to move quickly, to experience interconnections before apprehending them, to take pleasure in the conceptual and structural excesses of the text.

I search for definitions of hypertext, for different versions of the story:

Text which does not form a single sequence and which may be read in various orders; specifically text and graphics (usually in machine-readable form) which are interconnected in such a way that a reader of the material (as displayed at a computer terminal, etc.) can discontinue reading one document at certain points in order to consult other related matter. (*OED*)

A constructive hypertext should be a tool for inventing, discovering, viewing, and testing multiple, alternative, organisational structures, as well as a tool for comparing these structures of thought with more traditional ones, and transforming the one into the other. (Joyce 2003: 617)

तन्त्र **tantra**, n. a loom; the warp; the leading or principal or essential part, system, framework; doctrine, rule, theory, chapter of such a work; a class of works teaching magical and mystical formularies (mostly in the form of dialogues between Śiva and Durgā and said to treat of 5 subjects, 1. the creation, 2. the destruction of the world, 3. the worship of the gods, 4. the attainment of all objects, esp. of 6 superhuman faculties, 5. the 4 modes of union with the supreme spirit by meditation); a spell; oath or ordeal; a means which leads to two or more results, contrivance; chief remedy; happiness

Insofar as 'spirit' represents a unifying structure, a metaphysical oneness, it lacks the power of its antithesis, the body, to multiply. [The Goddess] resides fundamentally in the proliferation of bodies. Her being is inextricably linked with form (*rūpa*), with bodies. She is both a single goddess and multitude of goddesses simultaneously. Consequently, only she has that capacity to proliferate spirit and form simultaneously, inhabiting a multiplicity of bodies – that of a multiplicity of goddesses, of living women, even a corpse, a stone, and a jackal – all at once. This suggests a notion of female identity not constructed upon the exclusion of that which is 'other' to the self. It also proposes a notion of identity that conceptually integrates the body and matter as crucial elements of self. (Biernacki 2007: 129)

In order to go to the School of Dreams, something must be displaced, starting with the bed. One has to get going. This is what writing is, starting off. It has to do with activity and passivity. This does not mean one will get there. Writing is not arriving; most of the time it's *not arriving*. One must go on foot, with the body. One has to go away, leave the self. How far must one not arrive in order to write, how far must one wander and wear out and have pleasure? One must walk as far as the night. One's own night. Walking through the self toward the dark. (Cixous 1993: 65)



Transcendental Logos

- Varṇamālā - Garland of Letters (the alphabet)
- Mātrkā - Mother of Letters (her body is the alphabet)
- Śaktipīṭha - Goddess Sites (where the pieces of her body fell)
- Kapālamālā - Garland of Skulls (she signifies liberation)



A Story of Dhūmāvati



मौल अतिरिक्त जोसो तान्त एत नोतानि
स्रोतस्य ननु ननु एव 'मि सुतु प्रियस्य म'।



एव 'मि सुतु प्रियस्य म'।

I tried all these years - and know I've tried

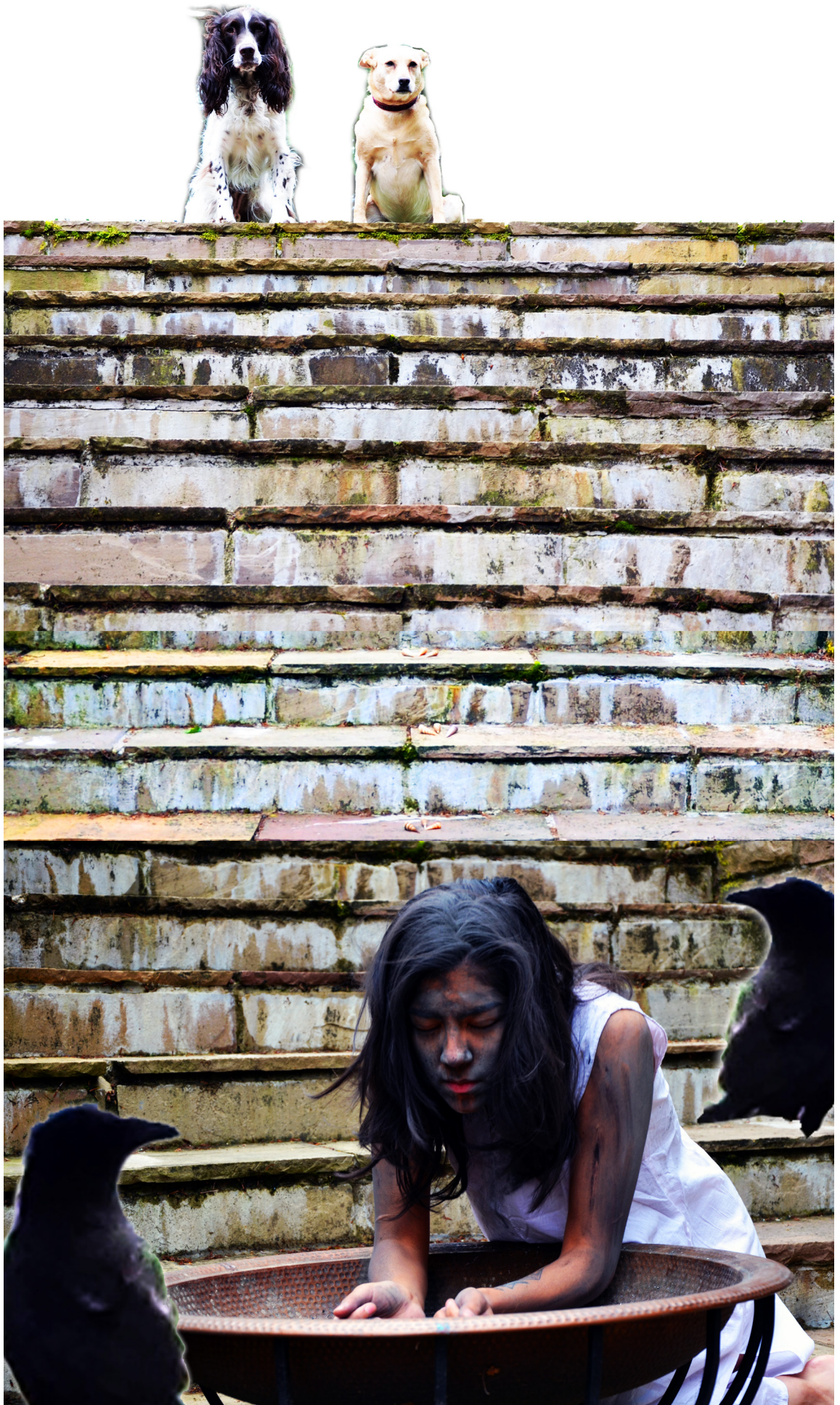


For in days of our lives we are born
and we die, and we know that



What is the meaning of life?
What is the purpose of our existence?





Juxtapositions







Bonalu

[Video]



Notes on Performance and Sacrifice

Background

All of my life I have travelled to India once or twice a year to spend time with my grandmother, aunts, uncles, cousins, and friends in Hyderabad and elsewhere. When my brother, cousins, and I were younger, our grandmother took us to Hindu temples to do circumambulations, receive *prasāda*, and give money to the poor. As we grew older and her arthritis worsened, the visits decreased. Now we do religion differently, at home in the *puja* room, or the dining room, or her bedroom. When I began this research I acquired a newfound interest in ritual and tradition in relation to the woman-as-Goddess concept. I wondered if feminist theories and practices and goddess-worshipping Hindu beliefs and practices might be correlated. I wondered about the public and private roles of women in religion, and the notion that a woman is responsible for her family's spiritual safekeeping. How does she decide which deities to worship? Why does she place garlands of limes around their necks? What does she mutter as she performs each step?

A man who works at the family home in Hyderabad – his name is Joshi – became interested in my research. He suggested that I attend what he described as the most important goddess festival of the year – Bonalu. I had never heard of it. My grandmother had never mentioned it and my parents were unaware of it, as were almost all of the local family and friends that we asked. An uncle on my father's side was the sole exception. He is the religious authority in our family, and studies Sanskrit and Hindu philosophy (and he knows how to find a priest at short notice). When I mentioned my interest in Bonalu, he dismissed the festival as something that villagers do. With regards to women and the Goddess, it became apparent that Joshi was the resident religious authority. Joshi took us (my mother, aunt, cousin, and me) to temples in and around Hyderabad, explaining the deities, myths, and rituals that we encountered. He introduced us to priests and devotees, arranged interviews, and negotiated with guards about the use of cameras. Later we learned that when Joshi isn't working as a driver, he is a priest at his local temple in Alwal (which he also arranged for us to visit). We are a family of Brahmins, but my grandfather liked whisky and my grandmother has been described as a carnivore, and it isn't polite to talk about caste, especially at a dinner party. Joshi may not have his own *puja* room and he may not be familiar with Sanskrit scholarship, but his religious standards (much higher than ours) mean that our plates wouldn't be fit for his use.

Bonalu is a Śakti Hindu festival that lasts for a month between July and August. It begins in a small Kālī temple in the medieval hill-fort of Golconda and passes through several more temples before concluding in central Hyderabad. In mid-July 2013, my mother, aunt, Joshi and I attended two days of the festival. On the first day, in Golconda fort, women wore their best clothes and carried pots of cooked rice on their heads. They climbed to the temple at the top of the hill with their families, paid their respects to the goddess, and came down to prepare food in the lawns and foundations of the fort. After lunch the tone shifted, people began to drum and sing and the crowds increased. On the second day, in the lane outside the fort, a procession moved the festival towards the next temple. Men wore face-paint and costumes and danced while women and children watched. As the procession went through a Muslim area the police presence was conspicuous. (On the third day, which I was unable to attend, women invoked the goddess and answered questions about the future.) I find it difficult to describe what I saw, and experienced, and felt. I made a video – 'Bonalu' – in an attempt to process the experience, but it resulted in further questions and confusion. I feel unable to separate what is relevant to my research and what is personally affecting, and to understand the creative and ethical implications of that separation.

Ritual Impersonation

There is an archaic association between poets and priests; we can trace etymological links in Indo-European languages including ancient Greek, Latin, Old Norse, Old Irish, Old English, and Welsh. Monier-Williams defines the Sanskrit word *ṛṣi* as: 'a singer of sacred hymns, an inspired poet or sage, any person who alone or with others invokes the deities in rhythmical speech or song of a sacred character'. In *The White Goddess: A Historical Grammar of Poetic Myth*, Robert Graves argues that the poet is in service to the goddess or muse (he uses these terms interchangeably), and that the language of 'true poetry' is the language of 'poetic myth' (1999: 6). Focussing on Mediterranean and Northern European literature and mythology, he writes:

The test of a poet's vision, one might say, is the accuracy of his portrayal of the White Goddess and of the island over which she rules. The reason why the hairs stand on end, the eyes water, the throat is constricted, the skin crawls and a shiver runs down the spine when one writes or reads a true poem is that a true poem is necessarily an invocation of the White Goddess, or Muse, the Mother of All Living, the ancient power of fright and lust – the female spider or the queen-bee whose embrace is death. (20)

Physical responses to writing and reading poetry signify the presence of the goddess or muse. If one does not experience these responses, the goddess is absent and the poetry is lacking. Graves claims that poetry is the manifestation of 'the moral and religious law laid down for man by the nine-fold Muse, or the ecstatic utterance of man in furtherance of this law and in glorification of the Muse' (438). The male poet is the descendant of the priest who worshipped the goddess and the female poet is the goddess or muse herself:

The poet was originally the *mystes*, or ecstatic devotee of the Muse; the women who took part in her rites were her representatives [...] A woman who concerns herself with poetry should, I believe, either be a silent Muse and inspire the poets by her womanly presence, as Queen Elizabeth and the Countess of Derby did, or she should be the Muse in a complete sense: she should be in turn Ariarhod, Blodeuwedd and the Old Sow of Maenawr Penardd who eats her farrow, and should write in each of these capacities with antique authority. (437-438)

The female poet is her own muse; she is a representative of the muse, rather than an initiate; she must write with 'antique authority'; she must write as the goddess, embodying the muse completely. The exemplar of Graves' active muse is Sappho: 'Sappho undertook this responsibility: one should not believe the malevolent lies of the Attic comedians who caricature her as an insatiable Lesbian. The quality of her poems proves her to have been a true Cerridwen' (438).

Anne Waldman explores relationships between priest, poet, goddess, and muse in writings and live performances. In the essay "I Is Another": Dissipative Structures, she discusses her understanding of poetry as ritual or spiritual event:

I am interested in the power language has and particularly in how I use it out of this female body and awareness to change my own consciousness and that of the people around me. I enact language ritual as open-ended survival. (2001: 194)

Waldman positions herself within a genealogy of poets including Sappho and her *moisopolon domos*, 'a house of those who cultivated the muses' (195). She describes Sappho as the 'leader and chief personality' of a woman-only school dedicated to worshipping the goddess: 'What

interests me particularly is the notion of poetry and song being linked to communal ceremonies, to celebrations of Artemis and Aphrodite, and to the notion of propitiation' (195). Waldman also engages with Sappho as a muse: 'I chose a version of Sappho's life, in particular, that activates my own inspiration' (195). Recalling Graves' argument (which she references elsewhere), Waldman presents Sappho as a female poet, an ancestor of poets, a priest worshipping the goddess, and a muse.

Waldman explains her understanding of poet as priest:

The poet/performer is an 'open system' in Prigogine's sense and the vehicle or 'scapegoat' in the Greek ritual sense. These performers have a public appeal for obvious reasons: their work corresponds to a greater need and they dissipate and expel the energy on stage for the rest of us. We are able to participate in the situation vicariously. The resemblance to a sports event should not go unmentioned. Performance for me personally is about being on the spot and available to whatever arises in the environment. It can be a political act or a contest of sorts. Charles Olson spoke of the poet being on the battlefield of Mars. It is a necessary act for me. It is an aspect of the poet's duty: her call to 'enact'. It is what I know best, it's also all I can do. 'Let me try you with my magic power,' I say in 'Fast Speaking Woman.' (2001: 202)

Waldman describes performance in terms of responsibility – it is the poet's duty to the community to perform, to articulate a common feeling, to present or accept a challenge, and to assume the burden of a public response. The poet as leader is 'an extension of the group and is the embodiment of the collective and creative urge' (197). Waldman's imagery is religious and spiritual (the references to ritual, energy, and magic) and violent (the scapegoat, sports event, which is revealed to be a boxing match, and battlefield), a combination that connotes sacrifice. Waldman does not name sacrifice in the essay, although she mentions viewing a ritual that 'mimicked a ritual slaughter' at a poetry festival in India (202).

The word 'scapegoat' is defined as 'one of two goats that was chosen by lot to be sent alive into the wilderness, the sins of the people having been symbolically laid upon it, while the other was appointed to be sacrificed' (*OED*). Anthropologist René Girard posits substitution as the basis for sacrifice: 'society is seeking to deflect upon a relatively indifferent victim, a "sacrificeable" victim, the violence that would otherwise be vented on its own members, the people it most desires to protect' (1979: 4). Violence is a form of social disorder that exists within the individual and the community. The rulers of a community acknowledge that violence can never be eradicated, but it can be controlled. Girard argues that violence and religion are related in this respect, as both function as a means of social control. Rulers permit violence within the context of religion to divert the community and to prevent further (unauthorised) violence: 'Violence and the sacred are inseparable. But the covert appropriation by sacrifice of certain properties of violence – particularly the ability of violence to move from one object to another – is hidden from sight by the awesome machinery of ritual' (19). According to Waldman's construction, the poet is simultaneously the leader of the ritual and the scapegoat: it is the poet's duty to perform the sacrifice and to offer herself as sacrificeable victim. As priest, she self-sacrifices to divert the violence that she would inflict on a victim; as victim, she self-sacrifices to divert the violence that the community would inflict on themselves.

Murder Your Darlings

I haven't told you everything. Sacrifice is more than a symbol to think through relationships between poet and audience; at Bonalu I witnessed several chickens and goats being killed. More

than that, I stood closely while my mother fled in the opposite direction. I photographed and filmed the killings, standing so closely that I didn't need to zoom in, although I did that too. Immediately afterwards I told my mother that 'it felt like something bad happened' and she said 'well, that's a relief'. That didn't stop me from photographing a detached chicken head on the walk back to the car.

When telling family and friends about Bonalu, including those living in Hyderabad, many claimed to be unaware that animal sacrifice still takes place. I wonder if this ignorance is due to the social and cultural disparities between people of different educational backgrounds, different degrees of Westernisation, different castes. I wonder if this ignorance is dissimulation for the sake of self-preservation. Perhaps my uncle's designation of Bonalu as village Hinduism is a method of distinguishing himself from the primitive, barbaric India in desperate need of British civilizing order. Monier-Williams' words ring in my ears, something about Hinduism at its most corrupt stage, something about women being made objects of worship and consequently 'the worst results of the worst superstitious ideas that have ever disgraced and degraded the human race' (1974: 190).

Hindu Manners, Customs and Ceremonies by the Christian missionary Abbé Dubois is an account of Indian society and culture in the nineteenth century. Dubois intended his work to be used as a guide for the conversion of Hindu people, and the publication was sanctioned by the East India Company (presumably as an aid for colonization). This is how Dubois writes about goddess worship:

Without the salutary restraint of a healthy tone of morality, how can these people be expected to fight successfully against the vehemence of their passions? And then, when they give way to unbridled licence, they think to stifle remorse by investing these horrible practices with a religious element, as if sacrilege could disguise their moral turpitude. (2011: 324-325)

This is how he concludes:

At the same time, the Hindus, accustomed as they are to carry everything to extremes, appear to have surpassed all the other nations of the world, both ancient and modern, in the unconscionable depravity with which so many of their religious rites are impregnated. (325)

Dubois wrote *Hindu Manners, Customs and Ceremonies* in French in the early 1800s. A revised edition was translated into English and published in 1897. This was reissued by an Indian publisher in 2006; the edition I own is the thirteenth impression, printed in 2011. I wonder why we do this to ourselves.

This is not a defence of animal sacrifice. This is not a denial of the good that Dubois undoubtedly did, or of the value of his work as historical record. Max Müller describes Dubois as 'a trustworthy authority' and 'a man remarkably free from theological prejudices' in the preface, which is how I feel about Müller. This is about survival: we must protect ourselves from the violence of past interpretations.

I see this is not arguable as theory
It is refutable
But in the sense I proclaim I see I see I see
You can cut me back and I'll grow back on you

Not a curse, this is the way it is
Proclaiming I see I see I see
And in this cutting room, cut the root (Waldman 2001: 207)

The Conditions of Violence

I decided not to include explicit documentation of sacrifice in the video. I wanted to assert some sort of control over the depiction of India. I wanted to prevent feelings of shame. I did not want to exploit the death of an animal and distress the audience without methodological reasons for doing so. I did not want to cause the physical response described by Graves – the watering eyes, the skin-crawling and spine-shivering sensations – by giving the audience nightmares. But when I watch the video now, I wonder why I felt so strongly about protecting my family, dead animals, and imaginary audience members, and whether I felt the same way about some of the people at the festival.

I think of the woman going into a state of trance. Possession is a crucial stage in the festival, during which devotees, typically women, are believed to embody the goddess. Girard considers possession to belong to the same category of ‘liberating violence’ as sacrifice: ‘Ritual possession seems inseparable at first from the sacrificial rites that serve as its culmination. In principle, the religious practices follow the order of the cycle of violence they are attempting to imitate’ (1979: 166). The order was different at Bonalu: sacrifice, feasting, and finally possession. In ‘Totem and Taboo: Some Correspondences Between the Psychical Lives of Savages and Neurotics’, Sigmund Freud notes the relationship between sacrifice and festivity, both of which function as reinforcements of community: ‘The sacrificial feast was an occasion at which people rose joyfully above their own interests, with the emphasis being placed on mutual dependence both among one another and with their god’ (2005: 134).

At Bonalu, the sacrifice itself was uneventful. Some people watched while others continued with whatever they were doing. After the feast, we noticed increased excitement and intensity, and felt that the crowd was becoming unruly. It was as if the festivity had generated violence that needed to be diverted by the possession: ‘[the performers] dissipate and expel the energy on stage for the rest of us’ (Waldman 2001: 202). I cannot judge whether the woman was a willing participant, called by the goddess to act, or forced to participate in the ritual by external factors (we felt that she was being goaded). It was as if she was responding to the needs of the community:

The atmosphere of the space, the audience, the time of night or day, the phases of the moon, the last-minute choices, and also the sense of necessity, that one does this to keep alive, all contribute to bring down the *adhiṣṭhānas* [the standing-place of the warrior; steadfast resolution] or blessings of the peaceful and wrathful deities by exemplifying them. As I understand it now, all particulars may enter into and influence the poet’s ‘event’. (201)

The performer requires an audience, the event requires a performer; the woman was simultaneously the leader of the ritual and the scapegoat.

Rebecca Schneider discusses the female body in feminist performance art:

A mass of orifices and appendages, details and tactile surfaces, the explicit body in representation is foremost a site of social markings, physical parts and gestural signatures of gender, race, class, age, sexuality – all of which bear ghosts of historical meaning,

markings delineating social hierarchies of privilege and disprivilege.

[...] Challenging habitual modalities of vision which buttress socio-cultural assumptions about relations between subject and object, explicit body performance artists have deployed the material body to collide literal renderings against Symbolic Orders of meaning. (1997: 2-3)

The woman's body, with its gendered, racial, and social signifiers (her long hair, her sari, her plastic bangles), is an explicit body in my video, functioning in ways that my body could not. The woman's body, with its spiritual and ceremonial signifiers (her untied hair, her face smeared with turmeric, her intoxication), is an explicit body in the festival, transforming on behalf of the crowds. She embodies the goddess – with all of the psychic, physical, and social stress that entails – so that others don't have to. Substitution is the basis for the practice of sacrifice. The transformation is temporary; after the festival the woman returns to her original status. She transforms for the audience so that we may protect ourselves from undoing.

The woman is a voluntary scapegoat for the crowds. By means of her temporary embodiment of the goddess, she incorporates the intensity of the festival and diverts violence from the community. By means of her temporary sacrifice, she assumes responsibility for the welfare of the community:

In most ancient times the sacrificial animal itself had been sacred, its life invulnerable; that life could only be taken with the participation and shared responsibility of the whole tribe and in the presence of the god, if it was to supply the sacred substance, consumption of which assured the clansmen of their material identity both with each other and with the deity. The sacrifice was a sacrament, the sacrificial animal itself a member of the clan. (Freud 2005: 138)

The woman is an involuntary scapegoat in my work. By means of her temporary empowerment within Śakti Hindu ritual, she represents the difficulties of contextualising the woman-as-Goddess concept within feminist theory and practice.

Circumambulations

[Video]



Subjectivity



Forty Verses to the Goddess Kālī: A Ritual Translation

Vedic Fire Altar

the feet of the jujube
the legs of the jujube
the waist of the jujube
the chest of the jujube
the head of the jujube

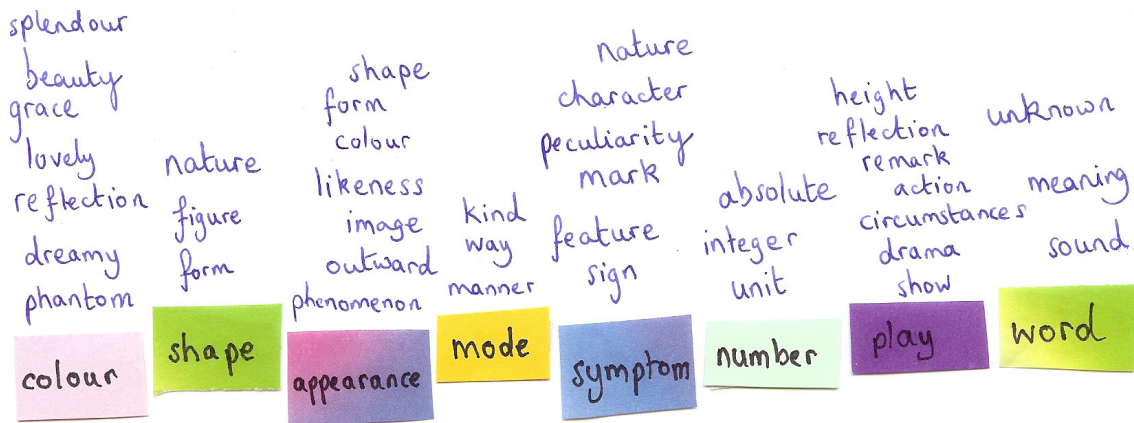
an apple is earth
an apple is atmosphere
an apple is heaven
an apple is atmosphere
an apple is cosmos



the sacrifice of five animals (man, horse, sheep, bull, goat)

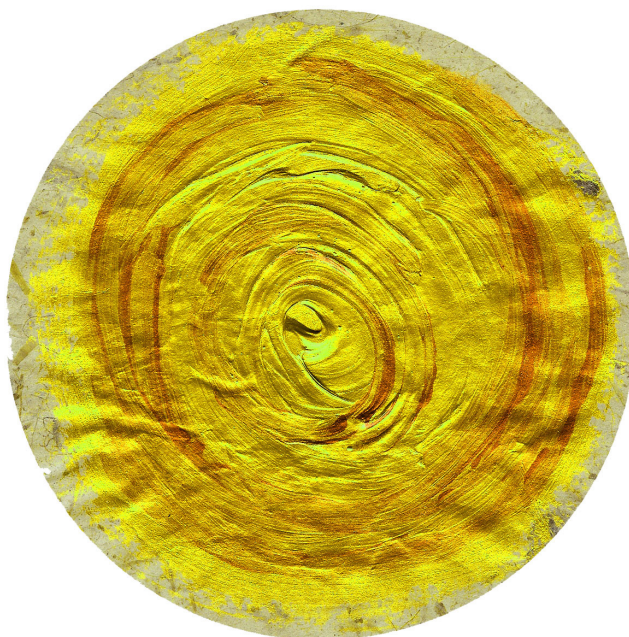
fashioning the fire pan, using various objects which represent cosmic ingredients

eight bricks are made, to be thought of as the sacrificer's offspring



the fire pan is placed on the site of a previous fire offering, creating new fire from old

one year hiatus, during which the sacrificer wears a gold disk (this is the sun)

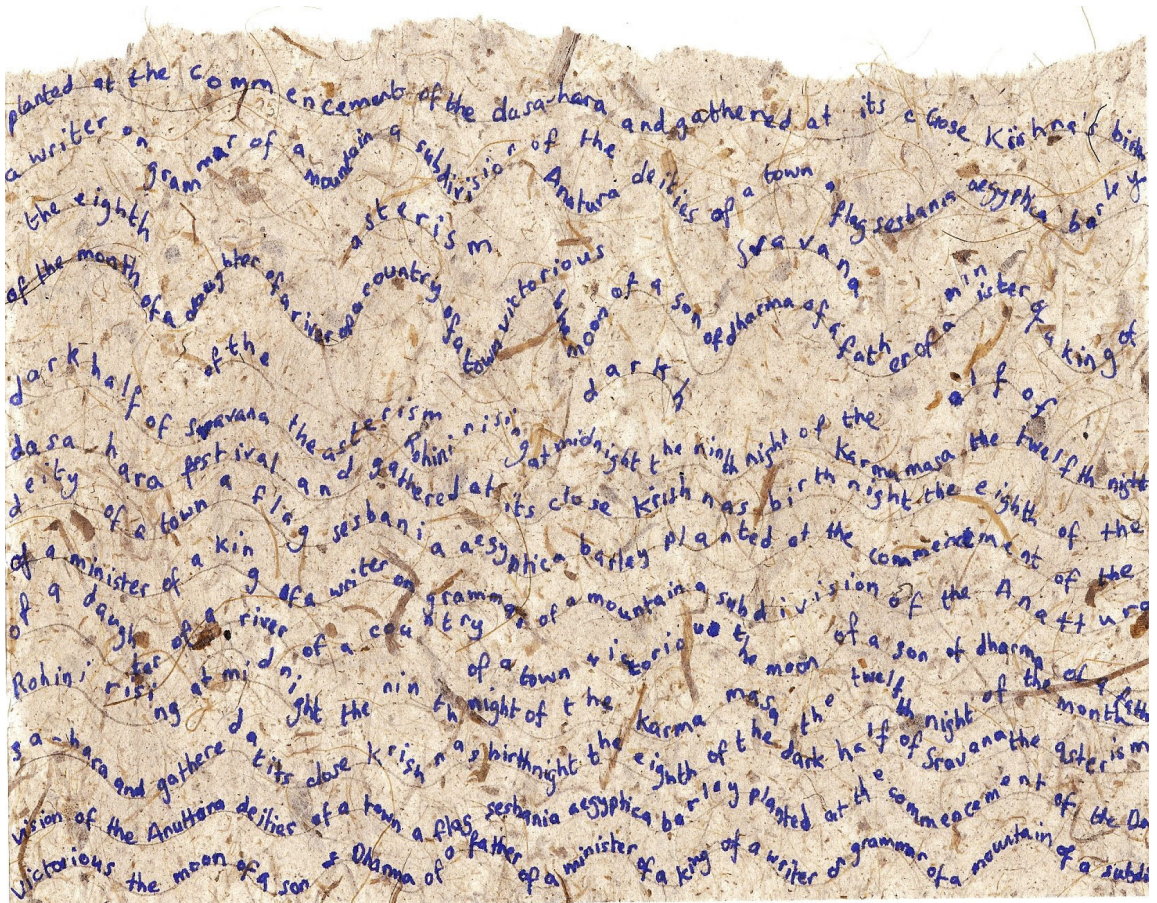


a bird-shaped altar comes into being (this is the journey)

the supernatural woman
with her species of planting power
beloved by the sun
she is a bird of worship
creeping between rank

construction of the domestic hearth

ploughing of eight furrows



water is poured and seeds are planted, from which healing herbs will grow

various objects are placed in the centre of the altar



heads of the sacrificed animals are arranged, each decorated with seven gold chips



thousands of bricks are used to build the bird-shaped altar



the five layers of the altar represent the five levels of the human body and of the cosmos

Tantric Magic

sesbania aegyptica the colour of birth
ipomoea turpethum the colour of clouds
bignomia suaveolens the colour of worming
sesbania aegyptica the colour of daughters
ipomoea turpethum the colour of evil spirits
bignomia suaveolens the colour of abuse
salvinia cucullata the colour of composition
nardostachys jatamansi the colour of numbers
sphaerantus indicus the colour of elderly women
shorea robusta the colour of deer musk
hemidesmus indicus the colour of gaping
sesbania aegyptica the colour of half moons
salvinia cucullata the colour of caste
nardostachys jatamansi the colour of animal mothers
sphaerantus indicus the colour of measurement

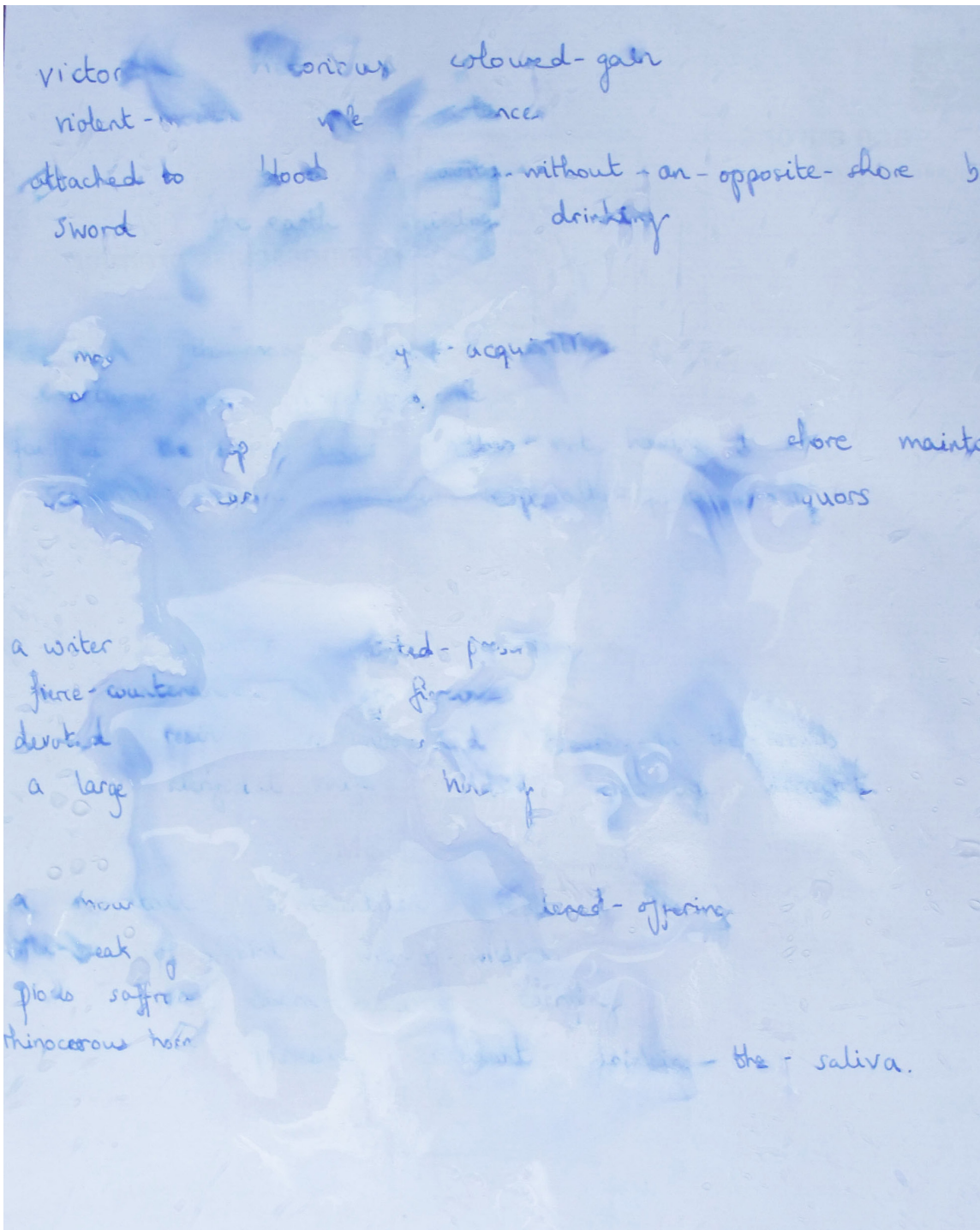


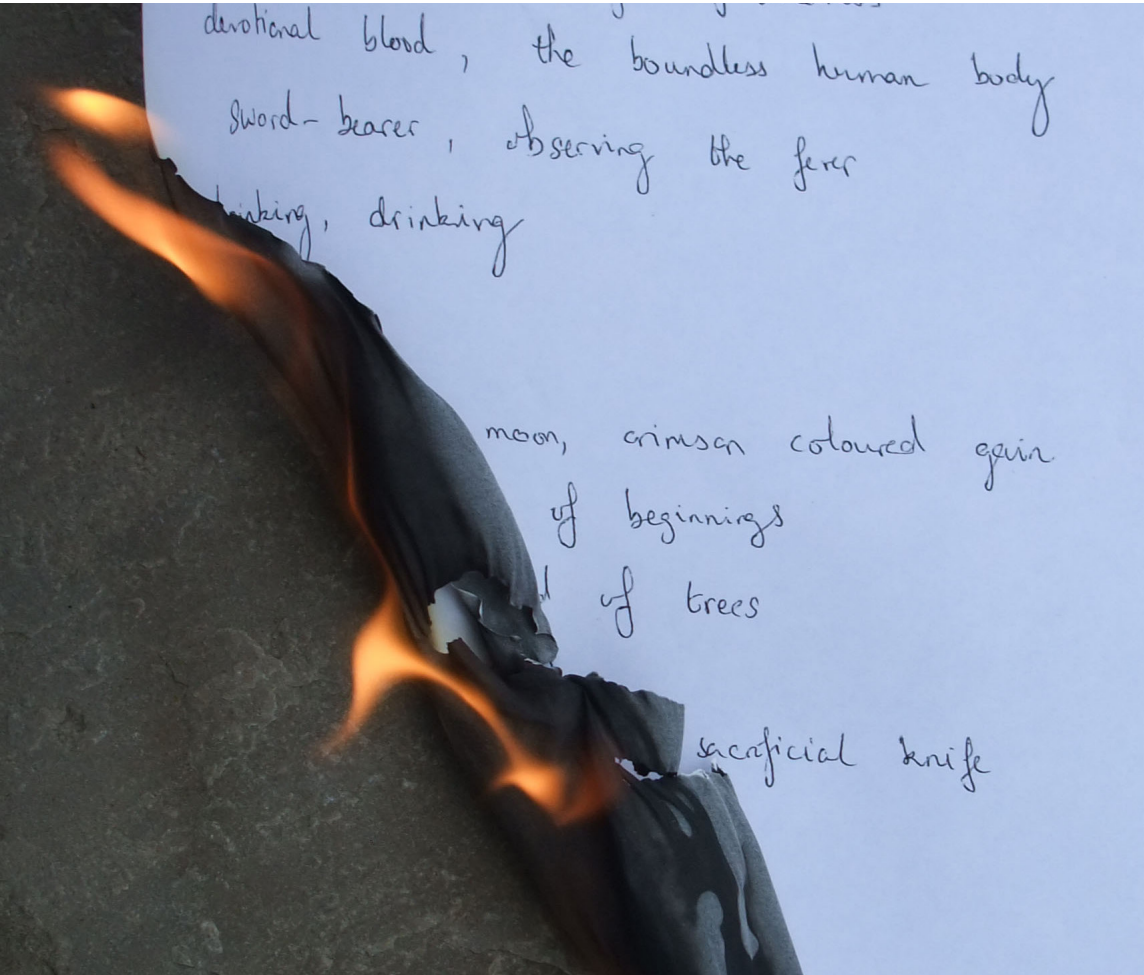
Presiding Deity	Queen karma
Colour of Deity	her seven flamed fire
Season	between mountain and midnight
Direction Practitioner Faces	this lower world
Day of Lunar Month	her deity flags
Suitable Week	a succession of abuse
Suitable Posture	opening wide, cleaving asunder
Seat for Mantra Repetition	all that moves or is alive
Arrangement for Letters of Mantra	her darkest half
Arrangement for Letters of Victim's Name	black cloud him!
Symbolic Shape of Elements	gathered at the close
Hand Gesture	to wane, perish
Letters Assigned to Moon and Elements Employed In Yantra	the mouth of the summit
Rise of Elements Determined by Observing Touch of Breath on Nostrils	milking worms
Fire Sticks Smearred with Different Substances and Used in Fire Ritual	dreadful wounds
Materials Used in Rosaries; Fingers Employed In Rotation; Number of Beads	her terrible teeth
Fire Sticks Used in Lighting Fire; Tongues of Fire	evil spirits clouding night time
Materials and Substances for Drawing Yantra	she eats properly
Shapes of Fire Pit and Auspicious Directions	face to the point
Material for Small Wooden Sacrificial Ladle	the formidable regions
Material for Large Ladle	I am a sacrificial brick
Different Materials Used for Stylus; Suitable Time for its Manufacture	confess me!



Sacrifice

I, mountain, am going to die; I will be moon
 I, violence, am going to die; I will be glowing
 I, bird, am going to die; I will be faithful
 I, midnight, am going to die; I will be saffron
 I, daughter, am going to die; I will be gathered
 I, barley, am going to die; I will be spring
 I, measurer, am going to die; I will be colour
 I, knowledge, am going to die; I will be blackness
 I, fire, am going to die; I will be movement
 I, confession, am going to die; I will be mother





devotional blood, the boundless human body
sword-bearer, observing the fever
drinking, drinking

moon, crimson coloured grain
of beginnings
of trees

sacificial knife



victory to you, victory to you
accept this offering with your seven tongues of fire
you have a formidable face, oh wild occasion
you represent every direction of violence and fury
hostile woman, attached only to blood
sowing the sky with your organs
your shoreless body, acquiescent well
star-nourisher, sword-bearer, your womb memory
gleaming in the clear waters of love
drink the saliva, oh holiest kiss.



Meditation

apparently the ritual must always begin with a bath
my grandmother uses coconut hair oil
and lily-of-the-valley talcum powder

she spends hours polishing her skulls, gazing at her tongue in the mirror

I pray for the clarity to see you properly
I pray for the strength to bear you whole

her wholeness moves within itself
dim red movements

seeming black
then red
then moonstone white

I'm drowning in stupidity
the stones in my pockets sleek as sin

my father has a fear of snakes

but we are dealing with symbolism

for she is the prevailing power of blood

Ma Kālī, you are the best of womankind
may you be remembered with every title of respect

a survival of matrilineal kinship
my first corsage
the linguistic shifts, the unconscious phenomena
the rose someone had left on a table
it is contrary to the laws of inheritance
the thistle you wore at your sister's wedding
but relations between the two systems signify

my father and uncle would kneel on the marble floor
as the cobra passed over the backs of their necks
he remembers it draped round his mother
like those jasmine and marigold garlands

coupling the observer with the observed phenomenon

your body blocks the stars and satellites

lotus souled, shell spun, shading like banyan roots
I am possessed by mother's nature

mutuality, reciprocity, rights, obligations

my mother once witnessed a sacrifice
she said she felt very surprised
it was in the backyard of the cantonment
men and women standing around, singing
by a small white shrine she'd barely noticed
the women danced in the centre
their hair untied
spinning, possessed
then suddenly the snap of the chicken's neck
listening, I felt annoyed
having missed out on so much
in between summer holidays and Glasgow

but how to account for her universality?
I mean, it all seems so obvious

transcend the infinite organising power of knowledge

you reveal yourself as the safest crossing
releasing us into the realms of myth

oh your storming hair, your laser eyes, your crystal skin
my heart goes zing!

*my dreams are incised
by the lawful rules of sacrifice*

I take her memories as my own

*we mirror you with smears of red paste in our partings
we honour you with incense, garlands, and sweets*

one Christmas spent in Peebles
(not Peebles! It was Coombe Bissett, near Salisbury, don't you remember?)
I was given a flower press

for she is the harvest season
the yielding yellow nights

the smoke of bones, bubbling marrow and the slick of human fat

she breathes into my mouth, and I feel myself merging in white light

I remember winter holidays in north Punjab
my sister and I would join papa in the lotus pose
not really sharing his search for peace
just happy to be spending time with him
in the evenings we played Eartha Kitt records
before returning to the brightest place
the last stop before the moonstone mountains

*it is the complete settling of the activity of the mind
the correct qualification of consciousness
then the values of infinity and point unfold within*

Ma Kālī is the all-consuming origin

my grandmother has always done the good things
she used to take us to the temples in Hyderabad
it was a game to walk in circles and ring the bells
but all we really cared about were the monkeys
and the green coconuts
and the assurance that we were good too

this is the attitude of the creditor
a sterile empiricism
and the attitude of the debtor
devoid of inspiration
overall it is a highly arbitrary aspect of social custom

we fell in love in the early mornings, our hands on the sofa this far apart

the magical situation is a consensual phenomenon

I choose your ten shining sides
and each shadow of your moon

defining myth as consisting of all of its versions
note the dynamic and teleological character
of the initial step

the jujube, an apple

he may have been a snake charmer the rest of the time

and now I see myself in your honey love
and now I see myself in your drunk eyes
and now I see myself in your hurting hold
and now I see myself in your sad smoke
and now I see myself in your blood sacrifice
and now I see myself in your inner heat
and now I see myself in your earth body
and now I see myself in your three points
and now I see myself in your safe crossing
and now I see myself in your dead time

Home

[Video]



[Video]

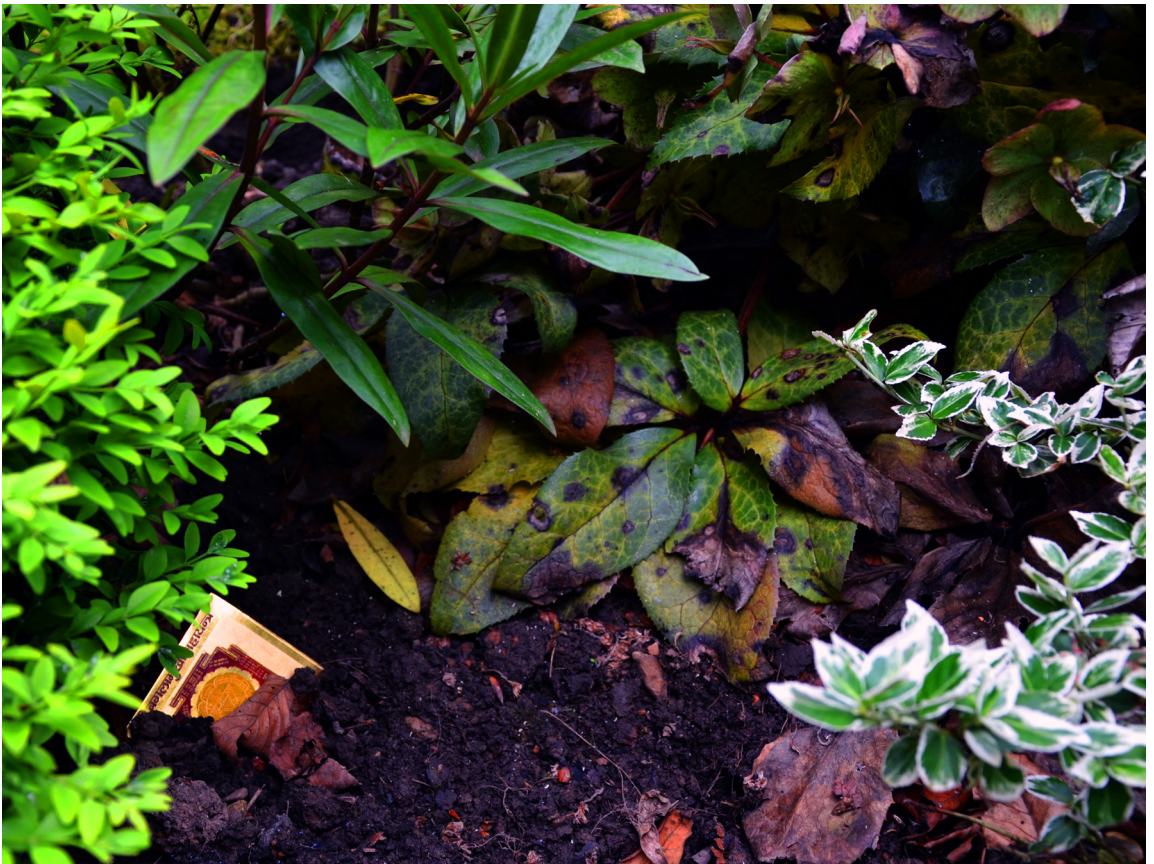


Sanskrit Breakdown

[Video]



Transpositions







A Story of Mātāṅgī

Indulging in Her Personal Attributes

I start with Mātāṅgī, the ninth Mahāvidyā. The outcaste goddess, she is a young woman with jungle green skin and long unkempt hair. She wears red clothes decorated with red jewels, forest flowers, and shells that glow in the dark. She smiles, her eyes swivelling with intoxication, her face perspiring brightly. Her clothes hang loosely in her drunken state, revealing too much of her breasts, too much of the hair on her body. She is the base goddess; rough as elephant hide, regal in her own way.

I start with Samuel Johnson and his dictionary of the English language. In the preface, he confesses an initial desire to ‘fix’ or ‘embalm’ the language. Johnson invokes a language that is embodied, organic matter – a mutable, multiplying language that would be improved by the stasis of death. He defines ‘embalm’ as: ‘To impregnate a body with aromatics, that it may resist putrefaction’, illustrating the definition with reference to Shakespeare’s *Henry VIII*:

When I am dead, good wench,
Let me be used with honour. Strew me over
With maiden flowers, that all the world may know
I was a chaste wife to my grave. Embalm me,
Then lay me forth. Although unqueened, yet like
A queen and daughter to a king inter me.

Mātāṅgī is queen of the elephants. Elephants symbolise civil and martial authority: ‘the owning of elephants, it appears, was a prerogative of kings’ (Zimmer 1990: 103). But Mātāṅgī does not own elephants, she moves with them. They clear paths for each other through the jungle – elephants crashing through the tangle, Mātāṅgī wielding her divine powers ‘to vanquish every obstacle of the Way’ (70). Elephants are not without divine powers of their own; they were once winged companions to the clouds, and retain the ability to communicate with their ‘celestial relatives’ (107). This relationship is more or less forgotten. Cries for rain, for fertility, for verdure go unheard, while elephants wait to be asked.

Mātāṅgī reels through the jungle, singing loudly, doing as she pleases. Her name translates as ‘going wilfully’ or ‘roaming at will’, and is a synonym for ‘elephant’ and for ‘cloud’. Theorist Sara Ahmed discusses the willful subject: ‘The willful character insists on willing their own way, without reference to reason or command. Willfulness could be described as a character perversion: to be willful is to deviate, to will one’s own way is to will the wrong way’ (2011: 240). Such willfulness includes social and political activism: willfulness is going the wrong way, causing obstructions, and calling unwanted attention to realities of injustice, violence, and power (2010).

Mātāṅgī deviates, flaunting her talents in the margins of Hindu mythology. Like Sarasvatī, she plays the *vīṇā* (Indian lute); she plucks the strings of a community of her own making, like Sappho. She is stagger and sweat, answering to earth, eroticism, and the sixty-four performance arts.

Wondering about her relationship with her silvery-white counterpart Sarasvatī (she who once flowed), I remember a conversation with my mother about satellite images:

myths are distributed
authored by atmosphere
the goddess disappears underground

rivers are tangled in nomenclature
Mātaṅgī, Prakṛti, Sarasvatī, Vāc

she blows out of course
subject to the curves of the shell

characterised by daring
boundless and destitute
her body contradicts the definition

coated in white petals, tide-bound
awaiting the synonymous burst

Imagining this explosion of lexicographical matter – ‘the synonymous burst’ – I try to rest my mind, waiting for the thing that happens next to come into focus. Johnson writes: ‘It is remarkable that, in reviewing my collection, I found the word SEA unexemplified.’ His first definition of ‘sea’ is: ‘The ocean; the water opposed to the land’. The fourth entry is: ‘Any thing rough and tempestuous.’

Ahmed utilises the sea metaphor in her discussion of the feminist subject. She describes the experience of going against the flow, of struggling for change against the tide of the social:

We can note how the social can be experienced as a force: you can feel a force most directly when you attempt to resist it. It is the experience of ‘coming up against’ that is named by willfulness [...] willfulness is a collecting together, of those struggling for a different ground for existence. (2010: 9)

Mātaṅgī is the name of a community of outcaste women in South India. Since the tenth century they have served as ‘village shamanesses’: ‘[they] will periodically become possessed by the goddess, drinking toddy and dancing in a wild frenzy as they run about spitting toddy on the assembled crowd, uttering strange wild cries and hurling obscene verbal abuse at all present’ (White 2006: 304).

Johnson’s fifth entry is: ‘*Half seas over. Half drunk.*’

Mātaṅgī, outcaste goddess, names of a river, the sea, ‘rough and tempestuous’, the willful feminist, her eyes swivelling with intoxication... Am I forcing these connections, am I confusing overlap with exchange? Return to language, to Johnson’s embalming practices. Place the body in an open space and sing her names.

अपारपार *apārapāra*, that which will not acquiesce

चण्डालिका *caṅḍālikā*, a woman of ‘the lowest and most despised of the mixed tribes’, born from a low-caste father and a high-caste mother (this term can also signify a menstruating woman)

मातङ्गी *mātaṅgī*, she whose limbs are exhilarated, intoxicated, inspired

Pollution and Power

In *Civilization and Its Discontents*, Freud attempts to understand the source of religiosity, as described by others as ‘a sense of “eternity”, a feeling of something limitless, unbounded – as it were “oceanic”’ (2004: 1-2). He determines that this oceanic feeling is a blurring of the boundaries separating subject, object, and environment, noting that this feeling may be induced by erotic passion, intoxication, yogic practice, religious experience, and psychopathology. Freud writes that suffering is a consequence of existence, and is possibly exacerbated by civilization; human beings do what they can to facilitate pleasure and to manage pain. However, the demands of the community exceed those of the individual, civilization would disintegrate if people spent too much time in the ocean: ‘to turn one’s back on reality is at the same time to leave the human community’ (2005: 75). Freud suggests that primitive human beings have the advantage of unchecked impulses – the freedom to feel, to fight, to disappear – without social and cultural consequences.

Freud classifies civilization in terms of beauty, cleanliness, and order, which we might set in contrast to repulsion, pollution, and chaos. Hindu Indian society is structured around cleanliness and pollution. As anthropologist Mary Douglas explains:

The lowest castes are the most impure and it is they whose humble services enable the higher castes to be free of bodily impurities. They wash clothes, cut hair, dress corpses and so on. The whole system represents a body in which by the division of labour the head does the thinking and praying and the most despised parts carry away waste matter. (2002: 152-153)

Mātaṅgī is associated with those who do the dirtiest work. She dwells with untouchable people in uninhabitable places – jungles, mountains, slums, and cremation grounds. She receives leftover food and rotten objects (including clothes stained with menstrual blood) as offerings, for which she blesses her devotees. She revels in her status, experiencing none of the shame that would be expected of a person in her position. Her clothes smell of sweat, her fingernails and the soles of her feet are impacted with dirt, she laughs at the thought of a head-bath every other day. Those who love her will never love her any less.

In *Strange Encounters: Embodied Others in Post-Coloniality*, Sara Ahmed uses Douglas’s definition of dirt as ‘matter out of place’ to examine the fear and hostility that accompanies the arrival of the foreign stranger. Matter out of place is an object or idea likely to ‘confuse or contradict cherished classifications’ – like dirt, like the alien in one’s neighbourhood (Douglas 2002: 44-45; cited in Ahmed 2000: 39). Ahmed identifies the stranger as ‘*the body out of place*’ (39) whose skin is a mark of difference. Skin is a boundary that contains otherness, but it also enables contact. Skin is ‘*a border that feels*’, as Ahmed proposes:

While the skin appears to be the matter which separates the body, it rather allows us to think of how the materialisation of bodies involves, not containment, but an affective opening out of bodies to other bodies, in the sense that the skin registers how bodies are touched by others. (45)

Mātaṅgī’s skin is green like her wilderness, marking her as at home in the jungle and out of place anywhere else. Her body is leaking and receptive: she sweats, she menstruates, she is sexually provocative. Like an aggressive bull elephant she emits rut fluid. Douglas states: ‘Just as it is true that everything symbolises the body, so it is equally true (and all the more so for that reason) that the body symbolises everything else’ and ‘there is hardly any pollution which does not have

some primary physiological reference' (2002: 151; 202).

Discussing the concept of 'stranger danger', Ahmed notes that the stranger is the origin of a multitude of possible dangers (2000: 32). The stranger is dangerous wherever she is – in public, in private, and in the spaces through which she moves: 'spaces are claimed, or "owned" not so much by inhabiting what is already there, but by moving within, or passing through, different spaces which are only given value as places (with boundaries) through the movement or "passing through" itself' (32-33). Mātaṅgī crosses boundaries. Wherever she roams becomes slick with the feel of her. She emerges from and exists within greens and reds, leaving traces of representation in her wake. Mātaṅgī's pollution is social and spiritual disorder is the source of her power: 'The danger which is risked by boundary transgression is power. Those vulnerable margins and those attacking forces which threaten to destroy good order represent the powers inhering in the cosmos' (Douglas 2002: 199).

Divine Abjection

In *Powers of Horror*, Julia Kristeva differentiates between dangers that threaten identity and order from the outside (such as decaying objects, diseases, corpses) and dangers that threaten identity and order from within: 'Menstrual blood, [stands] for the danger issuing from within the identity (social or sexual); it threatens the relationship between the sexes within a social aggregate and, through internalization, the identity of each sex in the face of sexual difference' (2002: 260-261). Douglas (whom Kristeva references) argues that when men and women are regarded as belonging to 'distinct, mutually hostile spheres', the inevitable result is sexual antagonism which is 'reflected in the idea that each sex constitutes a danger to the other' (2002: 188). Menstrual blood represents the danger that women constitute to men, to sexual identity, and to social order. This danger might be understood in terms of desirability and taboo. A menstruating woman cannot conceive; therefore, sexual intercourse with a menstruating woman is an unproductive activity (from the perspective of the rulers of the community). The menstruating woman is designated a polluting object and is temporarily removed from society. This forbiddance and confinement marks her as dangerous, but does not negate her desirability.

In 'Totem and Taboo', Freud explains the paradoxical status of taboo as 'sacred, consecrated' and 'uncanny, dangerous, forbidden and unclean' (2005: 23). He summarises the argument:

Taboo is an ancient prohibition, imposed (by an authority) from without, and directed against the strongest wishes of mankind. The desire to violate it strongly persists in the unconscious; people who comply with a taboo have an ambivalent attitude towards that which is affected by it. The magical power attributed to the taboo can be traced to the ability to lead people into temptation; it behaves like a contagion because the example is contagious, and because the forbidden desire is displaced on to something else in the unconscious. (39)

Mātaṅgī is the menstruating woman who disregards her confines, who makes sexual propositions or otherwise abuses her temporary power. She is any person who violates socially imposed prohibitions, who wanders about encouraging others to disobey. As the goddess of pollution, she exemplifies the taboo – the sacred and the unclean, inciting veneration and revulsion. As the image of a marginal yet empowered human being, she represents transgressive power – 'the danger issuing from within the identity', that which cannot be repressed.

According to Kristeva, the horror of the abject is the realisation that it comes from within:

If it be true that the abject simultaneously beseeches and pulverizes the subject, one can understand that it is experienced at the peak of its strength when that subject, weary of fruitless attempts to identify with something on the outside, finds the impossible within; when it finds that the impossible constitutes its very *being*, that it *is* none other than the abject. (2002: 232)

The borders between self and object, I and other, inside and outside, and life and death are confounded by the abject, whose unsettling presence calls such oppositions into question. Recognising the ambiguity of the abject leads us to recognise the ambiguity of our own identity: 'But when I *seek* (myself), *lose* (myself), or experience *jouissance* – then "I" is *heterogeneous*. Discomfort, unease, dizziness stemming from an ambiguity that, through the violence of a revolt *against*, demarcates a space out of which signs and objects arise' (237). The experience of *jouissance* is set in contrast to the experience of the abject. The former is over-identification with the object of desire, whereby the subject explodes. The latter is the forceful refusal to identify with the abject, whereby the subject implodes.

Kristeva describes the space that follows the implosion – 'out of which signs and objects arise' – as a sublime space. The subject experiences herself and the world differently:

As soon as I perceive it, as soon as I name it, the sublime triggers – it has already triggered – a spree of perceptions and words that expands memory boundlessly. I then forget the point of departure and find myself removed to a secondary universe, set off from the one where 'I' am – delight and loss. Not at all short of but always with and through perception and words, the sublime is a *something added* that expands us, overstrains us, and causes us to be both here, as dejects, and *there*, as others and sparkling. A divergence, an impossible bounding. Everything missed, joy – fascination. (2002: 238)

The contexts for Kristeva's discussion of sublimation include linguistics, psychoanalysis, and anthropology, but this could be a description of spirituality, of the oceanic feeling analysed by Freud. This could be the experience of becoming the goddess, the expansion of consciousness to cosmic proportions. After the ritual the devotee returns to herself and to her community, but she will always understand the experience of being both and neither simultaneously: 'Abjection is a resurrection that has gone through death (of the ego). It is an alchemy that transforms death drive into a start of life, of new significance' (241).

What Should We Do With the Body?

Sublimation is terrifying; despite the joy and fascination of losing oneself, it is an exhausting journey, undertaken by very few. The borders must remain: 'An unshakeable adherence to Prohibition and Law is necessary if that perverse interspace of abjection is to be hemmed in and thrust aside. Religion, Morality, Law' (Kristeva 2002: 241-242). Language, with its powers of naming, differentiating, establishing borders, is one such law (252). Language, which is fixed and embalmed by the dictionary, is a corpse. The corpse, 'seen without God and outside of science, is the utmost of abjection. It is death infecting life' (232). How might we approach the corpse ('or cadaver: *cadere*, to fall' [231]) without falling beyond borders into sublimation? *Mātaṅgī* mutates and multiplies, confronting categories, empowering contamination, incorporating multiple entries into the process.

A Story of Tārā

To Cross

tṛī (tarati) is a *bhū*-class root, best friend to the beginner Sanskritist. It is an active *parasmaipada*, a word for another, very rarely *a word for one's self*. Monier-Williams gives us 'to pass across or over, cross over (a river), sail across; to float, swim; to get through, attain an end or aim, live through (a definite period), study to the end'. He advises us to compare this root with the Latin *termo* and *trans* and the Gothic *thairh*.

When we bring out the consonant sound of the vocalic 'ṛ' and allow the letters to breathe we hear Tārā, and when she has regulated her breath, *tārā* (*tā* 2 3 4 *rā* 2 3 4). Say it again but this time finish with a guttural tick, *tāraka* 'rescuing, liberating, saving; belonging to the stars; the pupil of the eye; the eye; a star, a meteor, falling star; the pupil of the eye; the eye'. Scatter consonants and vowels, and follow the semantic patterns of this transitive root:

तरंगमालिन् *taraṅgamāliṅ*, 'wave-garlanded', the sea

तरंगति *taraṅgita*, having (folds) as waves; overflowed (by tears), moving restlessly to and fro

तारकामान *tārakāmāna*, sidereal measure, sidereal time

तारहेमाभ *tārahemābha*, shining like silver and gold

ताराक्ष *tārāksha*, star-eyed

ताराकारुण्य *tārākāruṇya*, the compassion of Tārā

तारागण *tārāgaṇa*, a caparison (of a horse or elephant) ornamented with stars

ताराच्छाय *tārācchāya*, reflecting the stars

तारापथ *tārāpatha*, 'star-path', the sky

ताराभूषा *tārābhūṣā*, 'star-decorated', the night

तारावलिप *tārāvilāpa*, lamentation of Tārā

तारायण *tārāyaṇa*, *ficus religiosa* (also known as the sacred fig or peepal tree)

Fix on one star in particular and repeat her name until you start to constellate – star to *tārā* and back again, *tārā* to *setara*, *setara* to *asteri*, *seren*, *stjärna*, *stern*, *stella*, *étoile*. Allow the astronomical comparisons to push you towards the hymning Vedas and Avesta, skimming alongside then past proto-Anatolian. The sounds resonate in the distance, Old Phrygian epigraphs and pre-Christian Armenian fragments mark the faintest scores. Homer and Hesiod pour gold in the tracks, a crashing gold which spills into Italic curves and cavities. Now set, it flakes and glints beneath restive scapes. Across the waters we gather round Taliesin and Aneirin in bone-cold courts. This is the left point of the last triangle, we should go north to consult with Snorri Sturluson, and then south-east to riddle with Latvian cults. But the truth is I like it here, at the end of this stretch, my ears filling fast with your rhotic blurts and non-standard sentence structures.

Names of Tārā (Text to be Spoken)

abhayā fearless *āryatārā* *bhadrā* blessed mystic
sign *bhīmā* her tremendous whip *ca guhya* secret
ca guhyavasīnī dwelling in secrets *caṇḍārī* demon
disease *candrānana* her beautiful moon mouth
dhātrī she who nurses the world *dravaṇī* she
who melts *dundubhī* *jagaddhite* *jaleśvarī* queen
of the waters *jātaveda* she is sacred knowledge
kālarātrinīśācarī darkness night darkness night
darkness dream woman *kālikā* *kāmarūpinī* the
appearance of love *kāntarī* saffron *kapālinī*
beggar bones *lokadhātrī* mother of open spaces
mahākālī *mahāśvetā* white light *mahātejā* sharp
light *nīlasarasvatī* dark blue sounds *nityā*
eternal *oṃkāṛā* *pītavāsasā* sucked *prajñāpāramitā*
sensible woman *priyadarśanā* kind sight *saṃdhyā*
lady twilight *śāstrī* rule *śmaśānabhairavī* burning
dead bodies *stambhanī* paralysed *sūkṣmā* all-
pervading spirit *ugrā* savage *vāgīśvarī* queen of
speech *vasudhā* soil *vedamātā* *vidyārājñī* spells
and magic skills *viśālākṣī* her gaze is fixed in space

anyatara mahateja sribuddhivardhini
 pustika anyatara kalika sandhya shakti
 kamarpini mahasree candra vajishvari
 vishalakshi prajnaparamita kalaratinisacari
 vidyayajhi stambhari
 candanara nira sasavati Kartari
 abhaya pitavasasa mahakali
 lokadhatri jataveda durdubhi
 dhatri ca gubha Omkara gubhavasini
 sukshma shukha
 nitya sankaravallabha
 shoranya shankari kapalini
 jagaddhite Rujya yagini
 ugramahatya bhina yatra
 Vasudha shmasana-bhairavi
 jaladhvari

She is the Course as it Alters

Tārā takes many forms
she spreads from breast to bone

I am just like her, just as good. I slope the way she slopes, and whoever does not recognise our sameness will be punished – he promised me that. Remember the slurping guru who refused to acknowledge me. Who stood there with his wide legs, asserting his masculinity like a cowboy, until I raised my eyes that look like hers, making my fires known, and how little I fear retribution. We were both raised by motherless mothers, our etymological roots so close they might be touching.

Tārā has a short body
a protruding belly and hard breasts

He mistakes my lowered eyes for my quiet humouring smile, his testosterone diffusing in the small room, although dissipation is my secret power. I hold my breath, holding myself in till I shake, body convulsing as the poison spreads. Our hero skims the yellow froth brought up by the churning oceans, lapping until his throat turns blue. This is a learned pain, and when you touch me with wet hands I dissolve into pear-shaped crystals, a heap of salty edges on the ground.

Tārā has three eyes
her hair lies in matted locks
occasionally scraped into a top-knot

She likes to take her clothes off after a few drinks, not for any sexual reason – she is a martyr for laughs. How ironic that a few years later she went on to win ‘best hair’ in the Miss India beauty pageant, and I’m ashamed of how sincere his face looks in this light, and what it might mean that his hands are trembling. It isn’t so black and white, and demons don’t exist in the usual sense, but we face the best direction in the cremation ground, and wait for her to sound the bell for danger.

like Kālī she holds a sword and a skull
like Kālī she wears a garland of severed heads
one for each sound of the alphabet

Her sexual posturing does not mean



what you think it means, remember this is a feminist imagining, in the other version she grows from the tear that rolled down his cheek. When you look through the camera you feel strange, and ashamed at how much you didn't notice. She scores lines into blue petals with the scissors that stay in her bag, big kitchen scissors better suited to animal slaughter. A global goddess, possessed by so many languages, she variegates like a mood ring.

she sits in the centre of the waters
in a white lotus or sometimes a boat

We have similar lips (hers are wider), similar colouring (I'm a darker hue), and from a distance the same lotus leaf eyes. Sometimes we look the same in photographs, the letters of the alphabet stringing round our necks, cutting symbolism into our skin. I paint faces onto white petals in horror movie red, remembering when the guru drew on my forearm in blue biro, tracing a tattoo that the goddess would approve of – the three eyes, the three harvests, the three good women.

like Kālī, her tongue lolls
and her mouth oozes blood

Did you hear about the holy man who killed his pet mongoose, their little friendship destroyed by the black serpent's blood, and a missed pause becomes meaningful. This is a caricature, but some of the features are cleverly drawn, the pale-skinned boys, the cloddy hands, the unmanly minds and the unwomanly bodies, drawing over each other again and again. When I picture you crying, the tears pollute your face – how much harm cultural conditioning does to us both.

she wraps a tiger skin around her waist
her body not as naked as Kālī's but still indecent

like Kālī she stands upon the corpse of her lover
she presses her foot upon his rigidity

He is interested in my mind, keen to learn my poetry, but when he discovers us rolling ourselves in the moss, dreamy smears of green and wine, he is embarrassed that he could fall for someone so base. She poked fun at my mosquito bites, then years later said something about curvy, but I'm not the type of woman whose explicit femininity saves lives. Our lips are stained red and the repetition syncs our bodies with the common voice. Her unbrushed hair signifies wild promiscuity.

serpents twist round her neck and legs
when it is Tārā's turn
she will unlock their jaws

She is not one of those mothers with red-cheeks and bosomy kisses, who memorises your numbers, while their own clouds disperse. There was a period when she refused to brush her hair, as if that could pale her beauty, and she only wore silver, although now she understands gold. And she took him to her body, saving him, her lover's milk which stopped the spread of blue. The queer details exist in relation, and you say her name with the self-assurance that accompanies enlightenment.

like Kālī, Tārā will destroy the false you
facilitating your rebirth

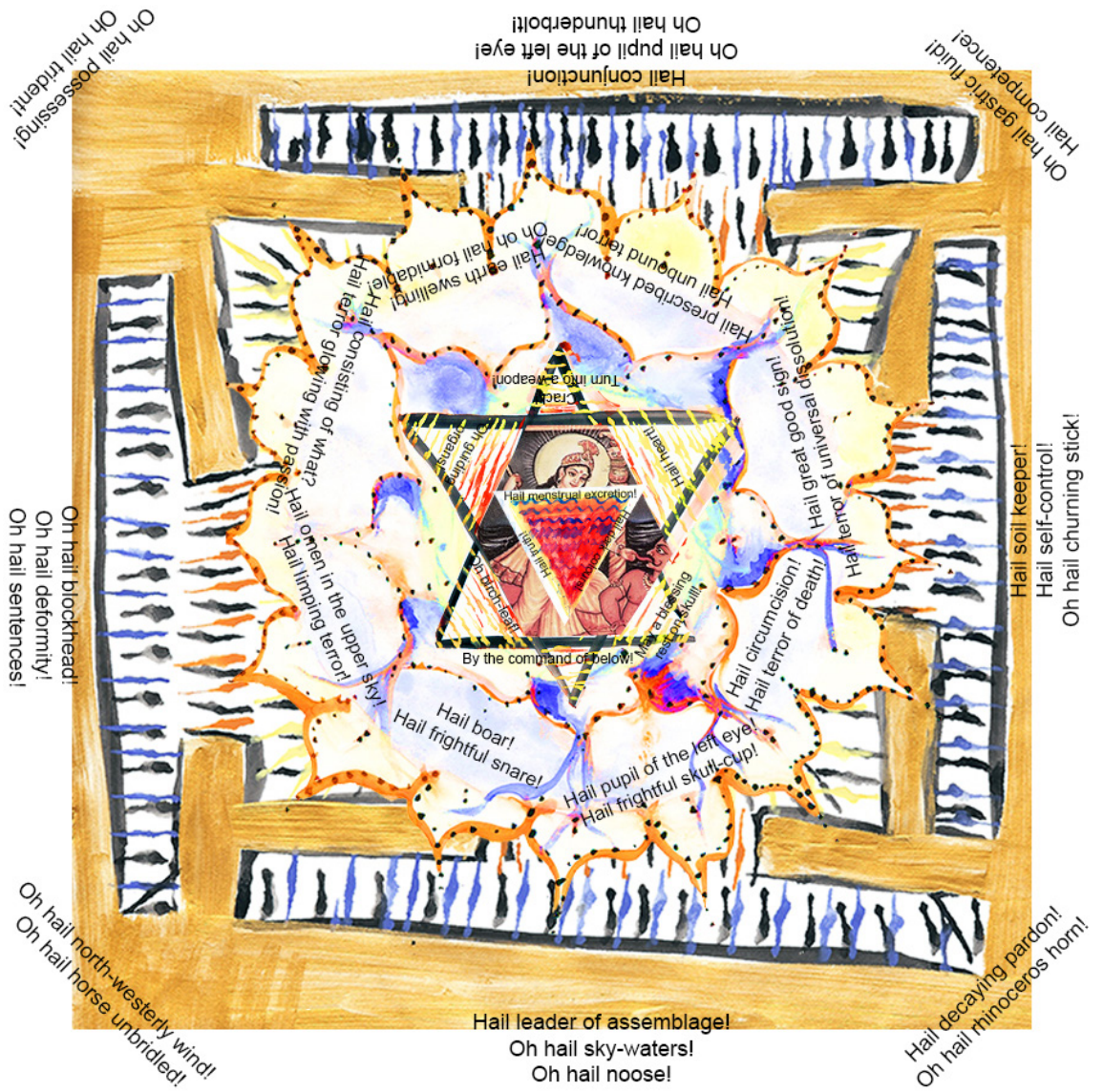
[Video]

<p>carrying across, a saviour, protector</p>	<p>✓ त her sounds are</p>	<p>masculine, feminine, neuter</p>	<p>हृत् masculine, feminine, neuter</p>	<p>adjective she is the that bridges sounds</p>
<p>lexicographer</p>	<p>high (a note), loud, shrill a delicious woman, just waiting to be defined</p>	<p>clean, clear</p>	<p>-तर तम</p>	<p>lexicographer, scholiast, or commentator</p>
<p>दुस्- "saving", a mystical monosyllable I don't know how to place you</p>	<p>sounds like black amber</p>	<p>ओम</p>	<p>good, excellent, well-flavoured are you really trying to help</p>	<p>"crossing" सा- crossing the inverted commas</p>
<p>तारा</p>	<p>andropogon bicolor</p>	<p>दैत्य of a Daitya (slain by Vishnu)</p>	<p>विष्णु of one of Rama's monkey generals</p>	<p>the clearness or transparency of a pearl, clear pearl</p>
<p>masculine gender the pupil of the eye</p>	<p>बृहस्-पति</p>	<p>आ</p>	<p>L.</p>	<p>Lexicographer स भ</p>
<p>तीर स्त / ऋ at the end of a compound</p>	<p>descent to a river, bank</p>	<p>तीर्थ / अ silver</p>	<p>आ a fixed star, asterism</p>	<p>* दि confer, compare a kind of meteor</p>

Tārāpīṭha

[Video]





An Explosion in Consciousness

'A FRIGHTFUL RELEASE

A bag which was left and not only taken but turned away was not found. The place was shown to be very like the last time. A piece was not exchanged, not a bit of it, a piece was left over. The rest was mismanaged.' (Stein 1997: 10)

The Lexicographer-Priest



Notes on Sanskrit

'Was Sanskrit known to the Atlanteans? It was not known to the Atlanteans in their prime as a spoken tongue, but in the degenerate or later times of Atlantis, when the earliest Aryans already had appeared on the scene of history, this early Aryan tongue, the root of Sanskrit, was already in existence; and the Aryan Initiates were then in course of perfecting it as their temple-language or mystery tongue.' (Tyberg 1976: 4)

Once Very Familiar

Is she abstract and he logical? Is she devoted and he detached? Is she easily frightened and he always at home? The self-perpetuating opposition grows tiresome.

H.D. speaks to the father:

This search for historical parallels,
research into psychic affinities,

has been done to death before,
will be done again;

no comment can alter spiritual realities
(you say) or again,

what new light can you possibly
throw upon them?

my mind (yours),
your way of thought (mine),

each has its peculiar intricate map,
threads weave over and under

the jungle-growth
of biological aptitudes,

inherited tendencies,
the intellectual effort

of the whole race,
its tide and ebb;

but my mind (yours)
has its peculiar ego-centric

personal approach
to the eternal realities,

and differs from every other
in minute particulars,

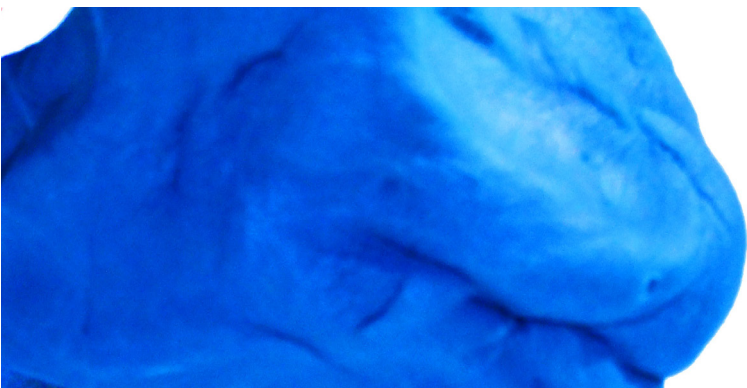
as the vein-paths on any leaf
differ from those of every other leaf

in the forest, as every snow-flake
has its particular star, coral or prism shape. (1997: 51-52)

Transliterations

A sentence as the basic unit of the world: a structure that enables meaning.

She is the Pleasure of Wet Clay



Cows

'In an underground passage of the Agra fort there is an image of a man named Mukunda. The Brahmin who was my guide when I visited this place gravely informed me that it represented a

celebrated saint who felt himself compelled to commit suicide by jumping into the neighbouring river as a penalty for having accidentally swallowed the hair of a cow by drinking milk without straining it. But even this, he continued, was not deemed sufficient punishment, for he was condemned to become a Muhammadan in his next birth, though the harshness of the sentence was partially mitigated by the fact that he was born again as the Emperor Akbar.' (Monier-Williams 1974: 318)

She is the Word as it Flows

'To tell the Beauty would decrease
To state the Spell demean –
There is a syllable-less Sea
Of which it is the sign –
My will endeavours for its word
And fails, but entertains
A rapture as of legacies –
Of introspective Mines – ' (Dickinson 1986: 692-693)

A Story of Sarasvatī



Churning of the Ocean of Milk

in-water fell-down-for-or-from smokes-for-or-from gone-out of-various-kinds resin in-great-ocean and by-means-of-gods from-or-of-Viṣṇu by-means-of-order-command before they-threw-or-hurled-down of-herbs various essences of-ocean in-water flowing-together

all-or-every by-means-of-those by-means-of-essences by-means-of-resin and of-that of-ocean water first milk alone having-become then butter became

A Story of Kamalā

‘Noisy music during some part of the ceremony is held to be essential. In fact no one in India would believe in the validity of a marriage ceremony conducted without loud and often uproarious festivities. For it is a common idea, which no contact with European habits of thought has yet eradicated, that the efficacy of religious services is greatly enhanced by noise.’ (Monier-Williams 1974: 380)

भार्य bhārya, m. one supported by or dependent on another, a servant

भार्या bhāryā, f. a wife

भृ bhr̥, to bear, carry, convey, hold; to balance, hold in equipoise; to support, maintain, cherish; to endure, experience, suffer; to lift up, raise (the voice or a sound); to conceive, become pregnant

भेरुण्ड bheruṇḍa, terrible, formidable, awful; a beast of prey (wolf, jackal, fox, or hyena); pregnancy

2nd January 2013

Women – The Nation Builder

BJP recognizes the important role of women in development of the society and growth of the nation, and remains committed to give a high priority to Women’s Empowerment and welfare. BJP ruled states have demonstrated this through various schemes. BJP also recognizes the need for women’s security as a precondition to women’s empowerment and will undertake the following for women welfare:

- Women’s welfare and development will be accorded a high priority at all levels within the government, and BJP is committed to 33% reservation in parliamentary and state assemblies through a constitutional amendment.
- Launch a national campaign for saving the girl child and educating her - Beti Bachao – Beti Padhao.
- Structure a comprehensive scheme, incorporating best practices from past successes like Balika Samruddhi, Ladli Laxmi and Chiranjeevi Yojana to support encourage positive attitude amongst families towards the girl child.
- Program for women healthcare in a mission mode, especially focusing on domains of Nutrition and Pregnancy - with emphasis on rural, SCs, STs and OBCs.
- We will enable women with training and skills - setting up dedicated Women ITIs, Women wings in other ITIs.
- Strict implementation of laws related to women, particularly those related to rape.
- Fund for relief and rehabilitation of rape victims lies unused at the Centre as the Government has not worked out the modalities of dispensation. BJP will clear this on priority.
- Government will create an Acid Attack victims welfare fund to take care of the medical costs related to treatment and cosmetic reconstructive surgeries of such victims.
- Make police stations women friendly, and increase the number of women in police at different levels.
- Introduce self defence as a part of the school curriculum.

- Using information technology for women's safety.
- Set up an All Women Mobile Bank to cater to women.
- Special skills training and business incubator park for women.
- Setting up special business facilitation center for women.
- Expand and improve upon the network of women / working women hostels.
- Set up a dedicated W-SME (Women Small and medium enterprises) cluster in every district.
- Review the working conditions and enhance the remuneration of Anganwadi worker's.
- Remove any remaining gender disparities in property rights, marital rights and cohabitation rights.
- Special adult literacy initiative would be started for women with focus on SCs, STs, OBCs, and slum residents.
- Will ensure that the loans to Women Self Help Groups would be available at low interest rates.
- Special programs aimed at girls below poverty line, tribals and indigent women.
- Appropriate measures would be taken to check female foeticide, dowry, child marriage, trafficking, sexual harassment, rape and family violence.
- We will transform the quality of life of women in Rural India by providing electricity, tapped water, cleaner fuel and toilets in every home.

Variegations

This is how I think of the Mahāvidyās, the crystals as they turn:

The universal is animated by individuality. (Hejinian 2002: 37)

Individuality is animated by a sense of the infinite. (49)

On Clouds and Elephants

I keep thinking that there is nothing more to say about elephants, they keep thumping me with and-another-thing:

The largest of all quadrupeds, of whose sagacity, faithfulness, prudence, and even understanding, many surprising relations are given. This animal feeds on hay, herbs, and all sorts of pulse; and is said to be extremely long lived. He is supplied with a trunk, or long hollow cartilage, which hangs between his teeth, and serves him for hands. His teeth are the ivory. (Johnson 1785)

The First River



Notes on Tantra



Ritual Steps for a Tantric Poetics

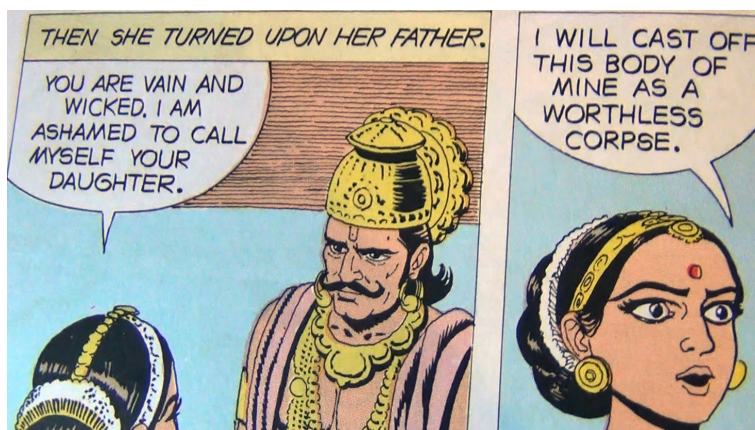
Every other word in the manifesto was ‘multiplicity’ or ‘non-linearity’ or ‘anti-hierarchical’ and the questions were artlessly imperative. Who do I think I am, and what is consent in a ritual context, and when did you ask for a teacher, and if anyone mentions authenticity I will ground my body and return the argument to earth.

Her Voice as an Instrument of Thought

Is it too late to discuss the correlation between Vāc and Mnemosyne (memory) and Muse (poetic inspiration)? It is breathless under the pressure of all that has come after.

A Story of the Mahāvidyās

Manu said: ‘A woman who controls her mind, speech, and body and is never unfaithful to her husband attains the worlds of her husband, and virtuous people call her a “good woman”. By following this conduct, a woman who controls her mind, speech, and body obtains the highest fame in this world and the world of her husband in the next’ (Olivelle 2004: 97).



‘Night owls seek out the twinkling half-light. Those who reject daylight know the art of finding night lights. Whether they be lovers or revellers, what they do not want is natural light. Too crude, it allows them to be recognised; too bright, it obliges them to be themselves. At night, one is no longer completely oneself; one has already started to leave oneself behind. One can confuse oneself with the other: this is where humanity’s real night begins, beloved by poets, mystics, and lovers.

[...] Passing through the darkness of initiation, whether it involves being shut up in a dark place, being buried underground, or being momentarily blinded by a black band put over the eyes, delivers a very precise message. One passes through death, goes beyond the last outpost. At that moment one feels contradictory sensations: the childhood terrors and fear of the dark return, and one's thoughts free themselves, and start to run away, split apart. Then contradiction itself fades away; daytime logic is no longer appropriate. One has entered the logic of nighttime; it is a different logic, one of syncope. A liberated logic.' (Clément 1994: 24)

Transcendental Logos



A Story of Dhūmāvati

Manu said: 'After her husband is dead, she may voluntarily emaciate her body by eating pure flowers, roots, and fruits; but she must never mention even the name of another man. Aspiring to that unsurpassed Law of women devoted to a single husband, she should remain patient, controlled, and celibate until her death' (Olivelle 2004: 96-97).

Juxtapositions

These are suggestions for navigating the score; parts might be tuned, held, and angled to excess.

Bonalu

Manu said: 'A man who draws blood will be eaten by others in the next world for as many years as the number of dust particles from the earth that the spilled blood lumps together' (Olivelle 2004: 77).



Chinnamastā (Rawson 1978: 129)

Notes on Performance and Sacrifice

'The sacrifice that is spread out with threads on all sides, drawn tight with a hundred and one divine acts, is woven by these fathers as they come near: "Weave forward, weave backward," they say as they sit by the loom that is stretched tight.

The Man stretches the warp and draws the weft; the Man has spread it out upon this dome of the sky. These are the pegs, that are fastened in place; they made the melodies into the shuttles for weaving.' (Doniger 2000: 33)

Circumambulations

'One of the most important parts of magical ceremonial was the drawing of the magic circle which formed the spiritual barrier, protecting the magician from evil and wicked spirits that he might invoke. Without a magic circle traced for defence, says a writer of the sixteenth century, "the invocation to visible appearance of such fearful potencies as Amaymon, Egyn and Beezlebub would probably result in the death of the exorcist on the spot, such death presenting the symptoms of one arising from epilepsy, apoplexy or strangulation. The circle once formed,

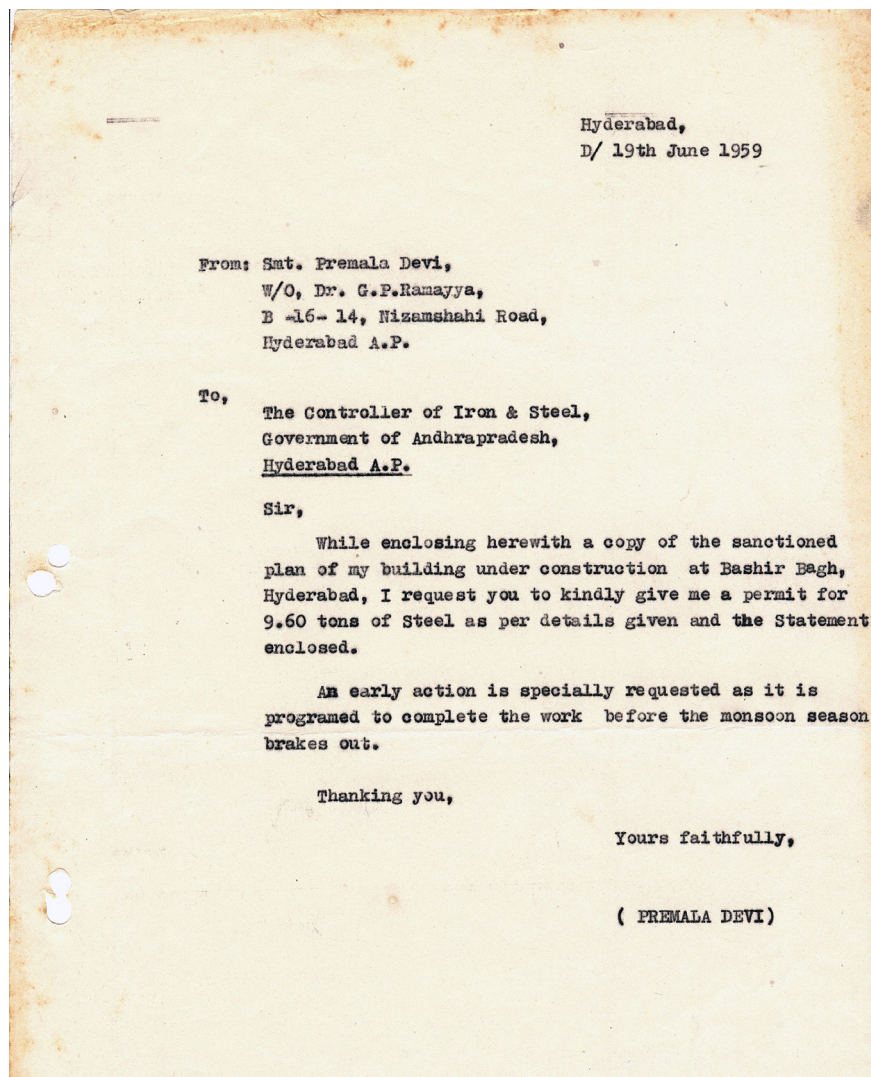
let the evocator guard carefully against either passing or stooping or leaning beyond its limits during the progress of exorcism or before the licence to depart has been given.” (Thompson 1995: 157)

‘**Widdershins (Withershins)** *adv* [(derived fr. MHG *widersinnen* to go back, go against, fr. *wider* back, against + *sinnen* to travel, go ... akin to OHG *sind* journey, road) : ‘in a left-handed or contrary direction: CONTRARILY, COUNTERCLOCKWISE – used esp. of ritual circumambulation’ – *Webster*’s; also ‘in a direction opposite to the usual; the wrong way’ – *OED*] : in a direction that counters the processions or clockocracy/cockocracy; in a manner that grinds the doomsday clocks to a halt, that turns back the clocks of father time: Contrariwise: the Wrong Way.’ (Daly 1988: 179)

Forty Verses to the Goddess Kālī: A Ritual Translation

‘For us, individually, everyday symbolic enactment does several things. It provides a focussing mechanism, a method of mnemonics and a control for experience. To deal with focussing first, a ritual provides a frame. [...] Framing and boxing limit experience, shut in desired themes or shut out intruding ones. [...] The mnemonic action of rites is very familiar. When we ties knots in handkerchiefs we are not magicking our memory, but bringing it under the control of an external sign.’ (Douglas 2010: 78-79)

Home



dadi amma dadi amma maan jao
 dadi amma dadi amma listen to me
 (listen is in the sense of listen/agree)

nanhe munne bachchon ko na itna satao
 don't trouble and tease us little children

gussa hoke humse itna door nahi jao
 don't get angry and distance yourself from us

kaan pakate hain zarasa muskurao
 we are holding our ears, saying sorry, please smile a little
 (holding ears is a gesture indicating 'sorry, won't do it again')

gussa thooko hume gale se lagao
 spit out your anger, and hug us
 (could translate this less literally as: stop being angry, and hug us)

hasogi to tumhe ek tohfa milegaa
 if you laugh you will get a gift

tum jaisa kaun hume dooja milegaa
 who else can we find that is like you
 (or: there is no one else like you for us)

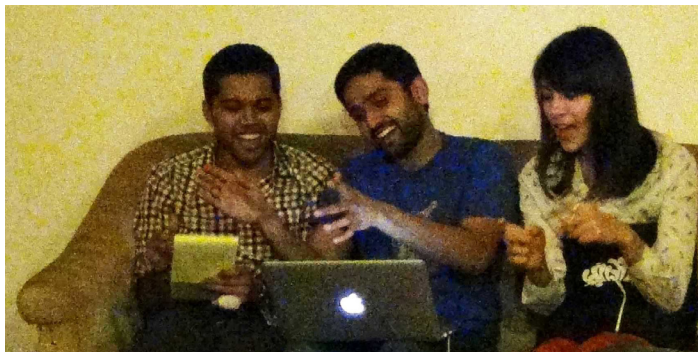
acchi dadi pyaari dadi ab to maan jao
 good dadi, beloved dadi, please listen now

galti phir se na karenge aur na rulao
 we won't make the same mistake again, don't make us cry

meetha khake thanda peeke zid bhool jao
 have a sweet and a cool drink, and stop being stubborn

aaa rahi hain hasi ab naa chupaao
 you feel like laughing now, don't hide it now
 (implied: we can see you feel like laughing...)

Sanskrit Breakdown



Transpositions

Does she like to travel long distances? Are her powers recognised in other places? Did she ever talk about how she was treated? Did you notice anything peculiar in the days leading up to her departure? Can you think of anyone who might want her gone?

A Story of Mātāṅgī

Menstrual blood is considered to be a potent substance in Shaktism and Tantrism. Women's monthly cycles are correlated with the earth's seasons:

ऋतु *ṛtu*, m. fixed time, time appointed for any action (especially for sacrifices and other regular worship); an epoch, period, season; the menstrual discharge (in women)

जीवरक्त *jīvarakta*, n. (living i.e.) menstrual blood

पुष्पकाल *puṣpakāla*, m. 'flower-time', the spring; the time of the menses

समभप्लुत *samabhipluta*, inundated, flooded, washed; eclipsed (as the moon); covered with menstrual excretions

Certain ritual practices exploit this correlation in order to 'tap into and unleash the tremendous energy of the goddess that lies within the cosmos, the social structure and the physical body' (Urban 2010: 71). There is a *śaktipīṭha* in Assam where Satī's *yonī* fell and manifested as the earth:

The female organ is in the form of a stone, attractive and lovely, which is twelve *āṅguli* wide and twenty one *āṅguli* long, gradually sloping in a very fine proportionate way going down to the Bhasma mountain; it is as reddish as vermilion and saffron; there in that pudendum the amorous goddess [Kāmākṣyā] always amuses in her fivefold form, who is the source of the creation, eternal, repose of the universe, and bestower of all desires. (Shastri 1994: 71)

Worshippers hold an annual festival to celebrate the menstruation of the goddess.

A Story of Tārā

'Language occupies a central place in Tantrism; it is a system of incarnated metaphors. Throughout these pages I have referred to the play of echoes, correspondences and equivalences of the ciphered language of the *Tantras* (*saṃdhābhāṣya* [allusive speech]). The ancient commentators referred to this erotico-metaphysical hermeticism as "the twilight language": modern commentators, following Mircea Eliade, call it the "intentional language." But the specialists do not say (or else say it like somebody walking on red-hot coals) that this language is essentially poetic and obeys the same laws as poetic creation.' (Paz 1990: 77-78)

Tārāpīṭha

Allen Ginsberg recounts his visit to Tārāpīṭha in 1961:

In yellow oil-lamp-light under the thatched porch, crosslegged on burlap mat, the orange-robed *sādhu*, long black hair, hollow cheeks, and eyes gleaming squatting in his door

– inside a small altar & raised bed, incense before Kālī’s image photo – the lamplight flicker, Śakti Chattertee Poet explains how he was dead walking on the road – When he took his last puff got up & start walking, everybody everything blackened – his body we have burnt in the burning ghat – he shouted & cried – some white thing, holding some whiteness & walking with the whiteness, at his side – Just an hour ago.

Cries of Hari Bol! Jai Tārā! from the woods – the twinge of locusts in trees – as before dim beep of firefly light flying dotting the trees with the blinking stars – Shakespearean Ardens and I said ‘Did you think you were a fly on the (mirror) looking glass of the moon?’ – (1996: 81)

Śrī Bagalāmukhī Yantra

यन्त्र *yantra*, n. any instrument for holding or restraining or fastening; a fetter, band, tie, thong, rein, trace; a surgical instrument (esp. a blunt one, such as tweezers, a vice &c.); any instrument or apparatus, mechanical contrivance, engine, machine, implement, appliance (as a bolt or lock on a door, oars or sails in a boat, &c.); an amulet, mystical diagram supposed to possess occult powers

‘The protective power that is supposed to be possessed by a *yantra* lies in the shape of the design. The shape, consisting of one or more of geometric forms interwoven to constitute a whole pattern, is believed to represent the spirit or spirits that one seeks to communicate with, in order to derive strength and succour. The *yantra* is in the nature of a field for the spirits to dwell and to function. Every *yantra* is a self-sufficient, self-contained, complete and closed realm, well-guarded against outside interferences, as indicated by the sharp boundary lines which invariably surround the principal design of the *yantra*.’ (Rao 1988: 11-12)

Notes on Voicing Parts

‘She said, “As a warrior son of the Kāśis or the Videhas might rise up against you, having strung his unstrung bow and having taken in his hand two pointed foe-piercing arrows, even so, O Yājñavalkya, do I face you with two questions. Answer me these.”

She said: “That, O Yājñavalkya, of which they say, it is above the heaven, it is beneath the earth, that which is between these two, the heaven and the earth, that which the people call the past, the present and the future, across what is that woven, like warp and woof?”

She said: “That, O Yājñavalkya, of which they say, it is above the heaven, it is beneath the earth, that which is between these two, the heaven and the earth, that which the people call the past, the present and the future, across what is that woven, like warp and woof?”

Bṛhad-āraṇyaka Upaniṣad, translated by S. Radhakrishnan (1989: 230-231)

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