Poetry and Everyday Sexism

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ABSTRACT

This thesis is a creative-critical examination of the challenges and opportunities that arise when using lyric poetry to explore experiences of everyday sexism and female desire, as well as how they intersect. Although many contemporary poets have written about more extreme forms of trauma, abuse and gender-based violence, it is only recently that poets have started to write about experiences of sexism in a direct manner, despite it being wide-spread and prevalent in society. This project addresses this gap through a portfolio of poetry which explores how experiences of everyday sexism can be represented in poetic practice, and through a critical illumination of the interplay between female desire and sexism.

Through creative-critical practice, this project explores the ways in which lyric poetry, balanced between public and private discourse, might play a part in moving beyond merely naming the problem of sexism and instead become part of a movement for individual and social change.

The thesis is a reader-directed text. It consists of fourteen sections of prose, seven groups of poems and four individual poems. Although it can be read in a linear fashion, and will make sense when approached in this way, the reader is invited to make their way through the thesis by using a series of textual signposts to follow desire paths through the text, deciding as they go along what they would like to read next.

Using bricolage methodology to draw on a range of theories including feminist, film and lyric theory, this format reflects the process of the research and is a physical embodiment of how the creative and critical texts grew out of and into conversation with each other. The female gaze and what we choose to look at and whom we address in poetry is a theme that underpins the creative and critical work.

The project utilizes performative auto-ethnography, drawing on Judith Butler's theories around address and Luce Irigaray's concept of the 'between-us' to reflect on the process and performance of the creative and critical work. This enables an exploration of how engaging with everyday sexism and female desire in lyric poetry can create a radical space for the process of individual and societal transformation.

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A selection of this thesis was published in *Agenda: Ekphrastic issue* Vol. 52 Nos 3-4 (Page 94-100) under the title 'The Female Gaze'

No 1 contains a line from Thomas Hardy's poem 'The Voice'.
No 2 references 'Archaic Torso of Apollo' by Rainer Maria Rilke, translated by Stephen Mitchel.
No 11 contains a misremembered line from the essay 'As if your life depended on it' by Adrienne Rich from *What is Found There: Notebooks on Poetry and Politics.* The actual line is 'You must write, and read, as if your life depended on it'.
No 16 contains a line from John Donne's poem 'The Sun Rising'.
No 39 contains a line from the song 'I Get Along Without You Very Well' composed by Hoagy Carmichael and performed by Chet Baker amongst others.
'We Are Coming' is inspired by *The Laugh of the Medusa* by Hélène Cixous.

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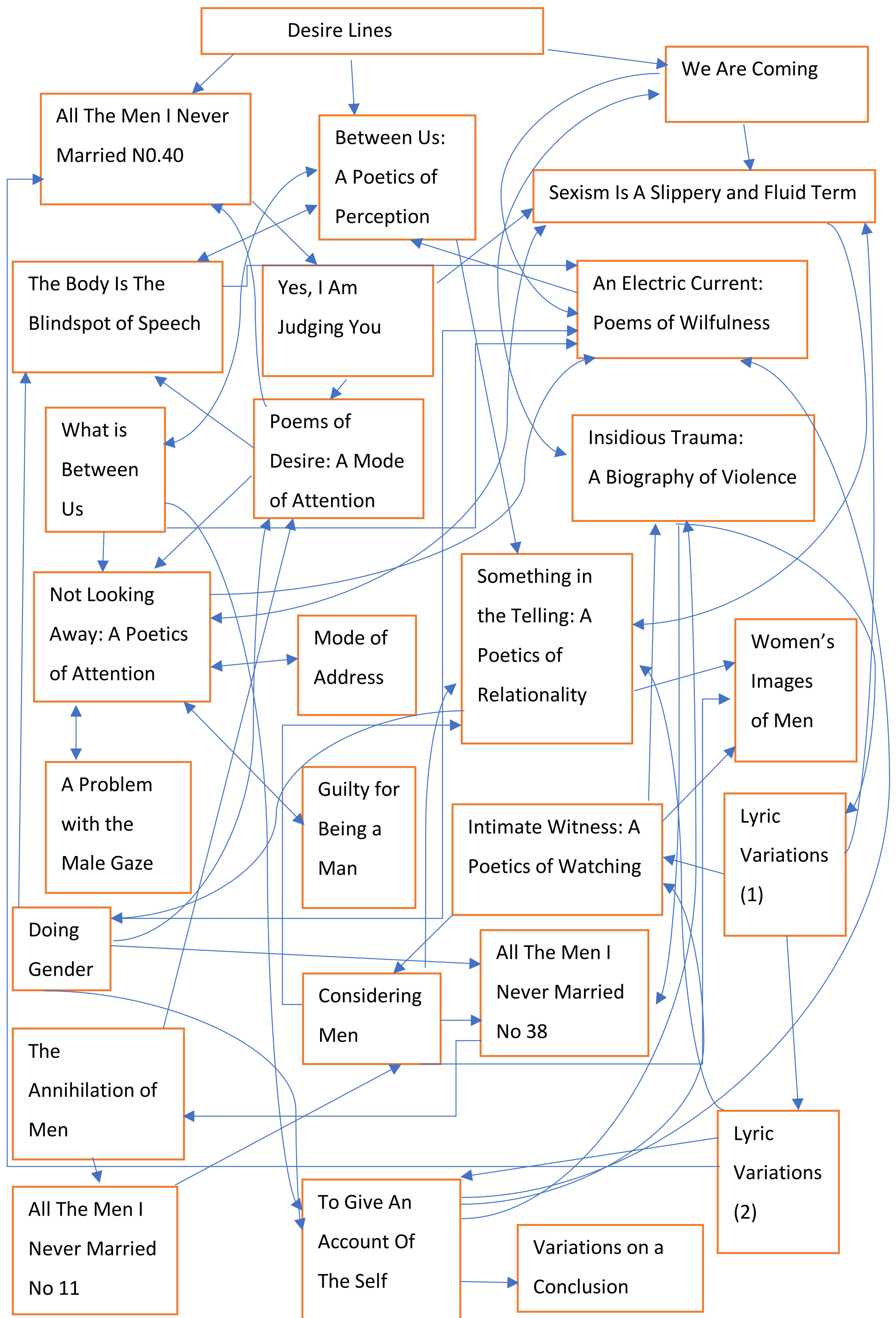
Desire Lines
We Are Coming
All The Men I Never Married N0.40
Between Us: A Poetics of Perception
Sexism Is A Slippery and Fluid Term
The Body Is The Blindspot of Speech
Yes, I Am Judging You
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DESIRE LINES: VARIATIONS ON AN INTRODUCTION

1.

If choices are threaded through the body of a text if the text is not a body
but a landscape if the text is a landscape there must be paths
if there is one path there is always another if text is a landscape
with paths running through then reading is a form of travel
if reading is a form of travel readers must be travellers
some of them will know where they are going some will be lost

if text is a landscape if reading is a form of travel if readers are travellers
then the text is a journey in itself if the text is a journey and a landscape
if all landscapes have paths if each path is a choice a desire
if this text has its own desires there are bodies within it yours and mine
we may find ourselves meeting somewhere inside

2.

This thesis is a creative-critical exploration of sexism and female desire through poetic practice. Whilst poets in the UK such as Helen Ivory, Pascale Petit and Moniza Alvi have examined experiences of more extreme forms of gender-based violence and trauma over the course of a whole poetry collection, collection-length explorations of the impact of everyday sexism are lacking. This project aims to start this conversation with a collection of poetry 'All The Men I Never Married' which will be threaded through this thesis.

These poems are both explorations of sexism and of female desire. So much of sexism takes place in the same space as conversations around female desire, whether this is in attempts to control it or pretend it doesn't exist or to shame women for having it or admitting to it. I did not realise at the start of the research that writing men (plural) was an uncovering of female desire, an admitting to female desire, that this was risky business, that this uncovering meant a new and different performance of sexism, that it meant sexism could speak with a different voice.

The female desire I became interested in articulating is one characterised by distance and absence, by lack and yearning, a female desire found in the space between two people, as exemplified by Luce Irigaray's work, by the insistence of the gaze but also its restlessness, its moving on, a female desire found in the space between two people, a female desire that is not loyal, a female desire that sits back on its haunches and observes, that steps back behind language when sexism enters the room.

3.

This text can be read in a linear fashion, from beginning to end. However, there are other routes, other paths through, which can be chosen from the options given at the end of each section of text or group of poems. These options are paths through the thinking and writing that has informed this thesis, embodying and demonstrating how the creative and critical outputs grew and were stimulated by each other. By making these choices, the reader creates their own path, which cannot be followed or known by another.

This invitation to read in a non-linear fashion has its roots in the bricolage methodology that I followed in my research practice. Bricolage is a 'complex, dense, reflexive, collage-like creation that represents the researcher's images, understandings and interpretations of the world or phenomena under analysis'(Denzin, 1994:16).

Bricolage as a methodology allowed me to use disparate paradigms such as feminist theory, lyric theory, film theory and close reading to illuminate my own thinking and 'connect the parts to the whole, stressing the meaningful relationships that operate in the situations and social worlds studied' (Weinstein and Weinstein, 1991). Thinking of myself as a *bricoleur,* I began to move between the multiple identities of researcher, critic, poet and performer and draw upon these identities as an embodied part of my research (Schwandt, 2007:25).

After writing a poem and performing it, I then reflected on, and wrote about the reaction of an audience member to a direct address in the poem, which led me to research mode of address in lyric poetry, which led me to Judith Butler and what happens when we address another, when we give an account of ourselves, which led me to thinking about desire, but also trauma. Except this description of the research process is not accurate at

all, because these things did not lead to each other in a linear fashion, but instead spread out at the same time, encompassing and touching and brushing up against each other.

Bricolage is both a methodology and a made thing – as Denzin points out, it is a 'collage-like creation' that should represent the researcher's 'understandings and interpretations of the world' (Denzin, 1994:6). I realised that a traditionally structured thesis, separated into a 'creative' section and a 'critical' section with chapters would not fit with my growing understanding of the complexity of writing lyric poetry about sexism and female desire. A traditionally structured thesis would not reflect my developing consciousness and awareness of the complexity of living in a society where sexism is both dynamic and embedded. It also would not be a true record of both the pleasures and challenges of a creative-critical PhD.

The format I have chosen for my research is a representation of the interconnectedness between my creative and critical practice and aims to be a reflection of the conversation between the two disciplines of academia and poetry. This thesis is a physical embodiment of the multiple ways of relating that exists between the different sections that make up the text, a bricolage thesis with multiple routes, a thesis that is reader-directed.

4.

My inspiration in creating a reader-directed thesis was the *Fighting Fantasy* adventure series of role-playing gamebooks which were huge favourites of my childhood. These books made the reader a protagonist in the story and gave them agency and control to make decisions about how they made their way through the text, giving an element of control over the narrative.

The *Fighting Fantasy* gamebooks had specific rules and a complex system which used dice and a game sheet to establish key factors such as the 'Strength', 'Skill' and 'Luck' of the reader/player. These scores had an effect on how they made their way through the text and how easily they completed their adventure.

These books manage to bend genre so they exist both as narrative and game. The textual element is a satisfying and coherent narrative but the existence of rules and a right and

wrong way of progressing through the text situate them just as firmly in the gaming genre.

Instead of a gamesheet, I have incorporated three different starting points depending on whether the reader identifies as a man, woman or neither. This technique draws attention from the beginning to the fact that the act of reading is an interpretation, and one that we take part in whilst being situated in our experience of gender (as well as class, race, sexuality etc).

Whereas there was a real risk of the protagonist 'dying' when reading a *Fighting Fantasy* gamebook and having to start again, the reader of this thesis can make their way through safely with nothing more alarming happening than being looped around to re-read a particular text for the second or even third time.

Many *Fighting Fantasy* books encouraged the reader to make a map to ensure they did not get lost. Some were impossible to finish without drawing a detailed map. Getting lost, getting frustrated and having to start again was part of the process, part of the fun of these books.

However, as this is an academic thesis, a map has been included at the beginning of this manuscript (Page 5). The map is intended as a visual aid to the reader to show all of the possible paths through and all of the connections between the sections. Instead of a gamesheet which the *Fighting Fantasy* books employed, a 'Readers' Checklist' (Page 157) has been included at the end of the manuscript so that a reader can ensure they have read each section. This will enable readers to return to a specific section without having to start again from the beginning.

There are no rules and no right or wrong way of moving through this thesis, so it is not a game in the same sense that the *Fighting Fantasy* gamebooks are. I have not incorporated any use of dice or chance element in directing the reader's movement through the text. However, the reader is invited to make choices to ensure they progress through the text, and these choices can take them in different directions, which is a feature they have in common with the *Fighting Fantasy* series.

The *Fighting Fantasy* gamebooks use the pronoun 'you' throughout the text. This unusual mode of address is necessary to directly address the reader and ask them to select a path through the text. It also allows the reader to identify as a character within the book. The choices at the end of each section of text in the *Fighting Fantasy* gamebooks are also directly addressed to the reader. They use a repetitive sentence structure – they always start with the words 'If you'. For example, in *Trial of Champions* one set of choices is 'If you wish to pick up the silver box, turn to 224. If you would rather climb down the ladder and carry on walking up the tunnel, turn to 361'(Livingstone, 1986).

I have tried, as much as possible, to replicate this repetitive sentence structure, whilst incorporating playfulness through direct address and questions to the reader in the choices, or signposts as I think of them, at the end of each section of text. These signposts not only ask the reader what they want to read next, but some ask them to make this decision based on their reaction or feeling about what they have just read, or based upon their own previous life experience. In this way, I hope to provoke, encourage and challenge the reader to confront their own connectedness or distance from the text that they have read.

Experimentation with mode of address is also demonstrated within many of the poems, as a way of establishing intimacy or distance, but also as a method of moving the reader between positions of spectator, witness, observer, victim or persecutor. Examples of poems that embody a direct address to the reader include 'All The Men I Never Married No.40' (Page 20) and 'All the Men I Never Married No.32' (Page 28). The use of direct address invites the reader to consider their own complicity in the experience described.

Each grouping of poems is prefaced by a title, or what I think of as a doorway, which indicates to the reader the lens through which to read these poems. For example, one group of poems is called 'An Electric Current: Poems of Wilfulness'. This title invites the reader to read wilfulness into these poems, or to read them for wilfulness. However, some of these poems could just as easily move into a different grouping. These doorway titles are there to encourage the reader to both move with and push back against the way the poems have been categorised.

In the thesis, the poems are numbered, but the reader will notice that the numbers are not in order. These numbers relate to the order that the poems will be in when they are published as a poetry collection and map out another way of reading, and a contents list (Page 158) to facilitate this can also be found at the end of the thesis.

There is a path that can be taken to read only poetry, or only prose, which will create a different reading experience than if the reader passes from one to the other. It is impossible for me to predict what effect the different reading routes will have on a reader – the only way of knowing this is give each one a go.

5.

At the beginning of this process I thought that the readers of this thesis would create their own desire path, or desire line through the text. Defined by Robert McFarlane in his 'Word of the day' on Twitter as 'paths & tracks made over time by the wishes & feet of walkers, especially those paths that run contrary to design or planning' (Bramley, 2018) these paths of desire would generate new meanings, new interpretations, a new text. Now I realise that the paths of desire are my own, traces of my thinking, my reading. My desire paths weave the creative and the critical together, and then pull them apart. They invite the reader to think about how they move through a textual landscape, and why they move in the way they do.

The easiest path is to read in a linear fashion, from beginning to end. This is the path of least resistance. If a reader chooses to follow a desire path, to move back and forward through these pages, through this text, then they become implicated in the text, through their choice of what to read next, or what not to read. When the reader follows my desire paths, creating their own desire path in turn, they may produce something the writer cannot control. The text becomes what Roland Barthes calls a 'text of bliss' – a text that:

> imposes a state of loss, the text that discomforts (perhaps to the point of boredom), unsettles the reader's historical, cultural, psychological assumptions, the consistency of his tastes, values, memories, brings to a crisis his relation with language
>
> (Barthes, 1975:14)

6.

Instead of a desire path, call it a sightline, a line of sight. If it is true that '[W]e only see what we look at. To look is an act of choice' (Berger, 1972:16) then by making choice implicit in the text, readers are forced to confront and question what they choose to look at or not to look at. This shift away from authorial control will allow a collaboration to develop between the reader and the text, where the reader actively constructs the texts and narratives rather than passively consuming them.

John Berger argued that '[t]he meaning of an image is changed according to what one sees immediately beside it or what comes immediately after it' (Berger, 1972:29). This thesis argues that this is also an accurate way of understanding how texts communicate, particularly poetry, where the placing and ordering of poems can be extremely important in the way readers interpret and understand the wider narrative of a collection. The ordering of poems can give a different narrative arc or trajectory to a collection.

The desire paths through this text, these sightlines will not give it a different trajectory, or a different arc. This text will not finish in triumph if the reader picks one path, or in despair if they look the other way. Instead, think of it as an unfolding, where each sightline, each desire path gives the reader a different view on the one that came before and the one that is to come. Think of it as a circling back round.

7.

In the poem 'Monument' by Elizabeth Bishop, the reader is asked to look again and again at the monument, described in painstaking detail. Bishop asks us:

> Now can you see the monument? It is of wood
> built somewhat like a box. No. Built
> like several boxes in descending sizes
> one above the other…
>
> (Bishop, 1983:23)

The first time I read this poem, I felt as if I was walking round and round the monument, seeing it from every angle, without really seeing it at all. If this thesis could transform into a single poem, it would be this one. Imagine this text as a monument. Imagine sexism as a monument. Imagine female desire as a monument. Now climb inside, crawl underneath,

sit on top and look at the landscape which surrounds them both, the paths that lead to them, the sightlines, follow the lines of sight. Imagine this text as a poem.

8.

If there is no correct way through a text, but only multiple configurations of how that text can be read and experienced, this is a challenge both to the idea of the reader as a passive consumer, and the writer as the importer of knowledge. A text which contains choices within it moves towards an idea of the reader and writer being implicitly connected and bound up with each other and makes this explicit.

Discussing the work of Judith Butler, Sarah Salih argues that:

> 'In this sense, "to live" as Butler defines it, is to live a life politically – in other words, to recognise one's relation to others, one's relation to power, and one's responsibility to strive for a collective, more inclusive future.'
>
> (Salih, 2004:12)

How can the act of reading embody these values? Can texts encourage the reader to think about power – not just through the content they explore, but through the form this content takes? Can the structure of a text encourage a reader to think about and recognise their relation to power as well as their relation to others? If texts embody and enact choice (and with any choice, power is inherent) can this bring both reader and writer closer to what it means to live a political life?

Sarah Salih points out that Butler's commitment to the 'withholding of reassuring answers' in her work is not difficulty for the sake of difficulty or obscurity, but a 'political mode that is designed to produce a sense of alienation and discomfort in the reader so that newness may enter and alter a defamiliarized world' (Salih, 2004:4). In an interview with Gary A.Olson and Lynn Worham in 2000 in which Butler discussed the move in academic writing towards what she called 'radical accessibility', she argued for 'an analysis of the kinds of occlusions or concealments that take place when we take ordinary language to be a true indicator of reality as it is and as it must be' (Butler, 2000:327).

Although I am sympathetic to Butler's viewpoint, and agree with it to a certain extent, I do not see 'radical accessibility' as a bad thing, if the word accessibility is opened up and

questioned. There are many different ways of making a text accessible, and not all of them have to be about simplifying language or meaning.

In its interweaving of the creative and the critical, this text changes the traditional form of a thesis and the traditional way of reading a thesis into one that is centred around active experience rather than passively consuming. It makes its own experimentations with producing a sense of alienation and discomfort, with bringing newness into the world and defamiliarizing what is known. One of the reasons I chose to write in this format is in my own starting point. The language of both academia and poetry are alien ones to my family. As well as being the first in my family to go to university, I am also the first to make a living as a freelance writer and poet. The freedom to pass between poetry and prose, to shift from academic reading to poetic reading if one or the other gets too much feels like radical accessibility, and it is something I welcome and embrace.

The inherent nature of poetry is to put under examination language, grammar and meaning and to withhold answers. This thesis hopes to be radically accessible and alienating, discomforting and recognizable, new and repetitive, all at the same time.

9.

For something to be defamiliarized, it needs first to be familiar. It first needs to be known. I am relying on your understanding of how a text is read (from beginning to end). I am relying on your understanding of how a PhD thesis is usually structured (with chapters) before I can begin to defamiliarize you with these things.

10.

The term 'defamiliarization' was first coined by Viktor Shklovksy in 1917. Using Tolstoy as an example, he outlined different strategies used in literature to defamiliarize the reader. These included describing an event as if it is happening for the first time, avoiding the accepted names for something and naming the corresponding parts of other objects instead, changing the form of an object or action without changing its nature, speaking from an unexpected point of view and lastly to see things and describe them as removed from their normal context.(Shklovsky, 1917).

Shklovsky and other Russian Formalists believed that literature and texts could be used to defamiliarize experience and 'dislocate our habitual perceptions of the real world so as to make it the object of a renewed attentiveness' (Bennett, 2003:17-22). Daniel P.Gunn points out that 'To produce an effect of defamiliarization, then, an artist must consciously violate the accepted ways of making meanings – whatever they are' (Gunn, 1984:30).

One way of violating the accepted ways of making meanings is the use of desire paths and choices threaded throughout this text, the absence of chapter headings and the encouragement to the reader to progress through the text in a non-linear fashion. All of these things change the form of an object (this thesis) without changing its nature.

Another way of utilizing the technique of defamiliarization is to group the poems under headings such as 'Poems of Desire: A Mode of Attention' or 'Insidious Trauma: A Biography of Violence'. Although best-selling poetry anthologies such as Bloodaxe's *Staying Alive* trilogy group poems under thematic sections, it is frowned upon for a poet in a single-authored collection to 'tell' the reader what a poem is about, so grouping the poems in this way felt risky.

By naming groups of poems, my aim is to create a doorway into the poems but also to call into question whether the name, or title is accurate and to invite the reader to think about whether some poems would be better placed elsewhere. The reader will be confronted with the impossibility of saying what a poem is actually about, and the thought that a poem could be about different things, at different times, on different days. They will be encouraged to think about the effect of moving these poems between groupings, between categories. The titles of these groupings will function like coloured panes of glass that a reader can use to examine these poems, or different doorways into the poems, but I also hope that the reader is encouraged to put the poems behind a different pane of glass or a different door to make their own categories.

I return to John Berger again. I think about what we choose to look at. I think about looking, and choice, and paying attention. I think about noticing things, which can also be a way of dislocating perceptions, how these titles are a way of drawing the reader's notice to something – the desire in the poems, the violence in the poems. I think about

how when we draw attention to something, its opposite also comes into view, waiting for us to notice it as well.

11.

Sara Ahmed points out that ‘noticing becomes a form of political labour’ (Ahmed, 2017:32). When I began to think about sexism, I noticed it more and more. When I began to think about sexism, I remembered more and more of it happening to me and around me. The noticing of sexism began to defamiliarize the world because it was not the world I thought it was. It became a defamiliarized world because I realised that sexism is a structure, a pattern, a series.

It became a defamiliarized world because ‘[t]he past is magnified when it is no longer shrunk. We make things bigger just by refusing to make things smaller’ (Ahmed, 2017:40). I place sexism in a poem. It does not make it smaller.

Ahmed points out that ‘[w]e need structure to give evidence of structure’ (Ahmed, 2017:30). I can create a micro-structure of a poem to give evidence. I can use the scaffolding of line breaks and words lined up like bricks in a wall. But I can also use the macro structure of a poetry collection to give evidence, which is more like a body than a building. A body of work. A structure to give evidence of structure.

12.

In my first collection *The Art of Falling* (Moore, 2015) I wrote a sequence of poems which examined domestic violence. Sara Ahmed wrote that ‘[w]e all have different biographies of violence’ (Ahmed, 2017:23). I am interested in what a biography of violence would look like. How one biography of violence can hide another. Behind the experience of domestic violence, behind this biography, lies another biography of violence, which led me to that place. When Ahmed writes ‘[w]hat do we do when these kinds of things happen? Who do we become?’ (Ahmed, 2017:23) I have never known the answer. I would also ask who do we become by choosing to look, or not to look? Who do we become when we speak, or stay silent, or write about the moments we stayed silent?

13.

Feminist Standpoint Epistemology began in the 1960s/1970s, developing at the same time as consciousness-raising. As a methodology and research practice, it has allowed me to use my concrete experiences as a base from which to build knowledge (Brooks, 2007:56). At the same time, it is important to recognise that this base of knowledge is built on a foundation of my own experience of being white, working-class and university educated. Whilst this concrete experience can and will be used to draw wider conclusions about society and the place of women as an oppressed group, it is important to note that it is impossible to represent all women's experiences with my own. Each women's experience of sexism and female desire is shaped by and influenced by their race, class, sexuality, education and disability amongst other multiple variables. This research can only hope to shine one light onto this complex and multifaceted experience.

14.

Whilst I knew at the start of this project that I would draw on autoethnographic methodology to create a 'self-narrative that critiques the situatedness of self with others in social contexts' (Spry, 2001:710) I did not foresee or understand that performative autoethnography would play such a central role in my research. In the performing of my poetry around sexism and female desire, I realised that I needed to approach each performance with a commitment to be challenged, changed, embraced and interrogated in the performance process (Conquergood, 1985). This happened during the performance, and afterwards when engaging with audiences and readers. I realised that performative autoethnography of lyrical poetry was a dynamic exchange and could lead to transformation and change for all parties involved.

D.Soyini Madison writes that performance 'illuminates like good theory. It orders the world and lets the world loose' (Madison, 1999:109). I began to realise that I could not predict or determine what would happen when I performed poems about sexism and female desire – that often sexism was conjured into the room, or more accurately, was uncovered. I realised that I'd started to welcome this release - that I wanted to 'let the world loose'.

Spry writes that a 'primary goal of effective autoethnography in print and performance' is one of transformation in the researcher and reader/audience (Spry, 2001:712). Using lyric

poetry as autoethnographic scholarship and performances of lyric poems as performative autoethnography became an integral and essential part of my practice, allowing me to reflect and create new work from the discourse and reactions that arose in both myself as a researcher/creative writer and performer and from the reader/audience.

If you identify as a woman, turn to 'All The Men I Never Married No.40' on Page 20
If you identify as a man, turn to 'We Are Coming' on Page 19
If your identity is not covered by these descriptions, turn to 'Between-Us: A Poetics Of Perception' on Page 48

WE ARE COMING

We are coming under cover of darkness,
with our strawberry marks, our familiars,
our third nipples, our ill-mannered bodies,
our childhoods spent hobbled like horses

where we were told to keep our legs closed,
where we sat in the light of a window and posed
and waited for the makers of the world
to tell us again how a woman is made.

We are arriving from the narrow places,
from the spaces we were given, with our curses
and our spells and our solitude, with our potions
we swallow to shrink us small as insects

or stretch us into giants, for yes, there are giants
amongst us, we must warn you. There will be riots,
we're carrying all that we know about silence
as we return from the forests and towers,

unmaking ourselves, stepping from the pages
of books, from the eye of the camera, from the cages
we built for each other, the frames of paintings,
from every place we were lost and afraid in.

We stand at the base of our own spines
and watch tree turn to bone and climb
each vertebra to crawl back into our minds,
we've been out of our minds all this time,

our bodies saying no, we were not born for this,
dragging the snare and the wire behind us.

If you are unsure whether sexism exists turn to 'Sexism Is A Slippery And Fluid Term' on Page 54
If you would like to read about wilfulness, turn to 'An Electric Current: Poems Of Wilfulness' on Page 101
If you would like to read a biography of violence, turn to 'Insidious Trauma: A Biography Of Violence' on Page 73

NO.40

There was the boy who I met in the park
who tasted of humbugs
and wore a mustard-yellow jumper

and the kickboxer with beautiful long brown hair
that he tied with a band at the nape of his neck

and the one who had a constant ear infection
so I sat always on his left
and the guy who worked in an office
and could only afford to fill up his car
with two pounds worth of petrol

and the trumpet player I loved
from the moment I saw him
dancing to the Rolling Stones

and the guy who smoked weed
and got more and more paranoid
whose fingers flickered and danced
when he talked

and the one whose eyes were two pieces
of winter sky

and a music producer
long-legged and full of opinions

and more trumpet players
one who was too short and not him
and one who was too thin and not him

are you judging me yet, are you surprised?

Let me tell you of the ones I never kissed
or who never kissed me

the trombonist I went drinking with
how we lay twice a week in each other's beds
like two unlit candles

we were not for each other and in this we were wise
we were only moving through the world together for a time

there was a double bassist who stood behind me

and angled the body of his bass into mine
and shadowed my hands on its neck

and all I could feel
was heat from his skin
          and the lightest breath
                    and even this might have been imagined

I want to say to them now
          though all we are to each other is ghosts
once you were all that I thought of

when I whisper your names
it isn't a curse or a spell or a blessing
          I'm not mourning your passing or calling you here

this is something harder
like walking alone
in the dusk and the leaves

          this is the naming of trees
                    this is a series of flames
                              this is watching you all disappear.

If you are feeling judgemental, turn to Page 22
If you would like to read more poems of desire, turn to Page 87

YES, I AM JUDGING YOU

It's November, and mist has swallowed the grounds of the hotel. From my place at the window, it looks as if the drive leads away to nothing. It's the type of mist that leaves drops of water clinging to your hair and clothes, the type of grey November day that blurs the boundary between sea and sky.

I am here as an after-dinner speaker for the Grange-Over-Sands luncheon club. Their booked speaker cancelled with only a day's notice, so instead of a talk about knife crime in Manchester, the unsuspecting luncheon club members will instead receive a poetry reading.

I begin with the poem 'All The Men I Never Married No.40' (Page 20) and when I reach the line 'are you surprised, are you judging me yet', an elderly woman shouts out 'Yes!'. People around me laugh. I laugh, and my laughter takes me by surprise, because it is a performance of laughter. There is something funny and not funny about this moment.

This poem relates the sexual history of a speaker and puts it on public display. It runs the risk of over-simplifying the men included within it through the summing up of their characters with one or two sentences. The white space of the poem, which translates to pauses in a performance leave room for judgement, for interruption. The poem deliberately walks a tightrope between objectification and the true seeing of the other.

John Berger's insistence that '[t]o look is an act of choice' (1972:9) runs through my mind every time I perform this poem. I am choosing in this poem to look at men, to be the wielder of the gaze, to make men the gazed upon, which feels risky, which feels dangerous. To look, and not to look away. To look at one man, then another, then another. To watch 'them all disappear'. Which they do, in that in the poem they are not spoken of again, but also they do not, because once spoken of, they are conjured into existence.

Vicki Bertram argues that women poets, in any performance of their work, have to

‘confront the implications of being a female on public display, with the connotations of sexual objectification, in a context that traditionally disregards the body’ (Bertram, 2003:65). The context that Bertram refers to is the poetry reading – that hallowed space where poets perform, or declaim or read and audience members sit and listen. The question in ‘All The Men I Never Married No.40’ is a radical act – destabilizing the authority of the poet by its use of direct address and its invitation for dialogue and response. The question also destabilises the audience because it moves away from the conventional idea of a traditional poetry reading, where the audience is expected to sit and receive ‘wisdom and perception distilled by the skill of the wordsmith’ (Bertram, 2003:40) into a place where interaction is both expected and invited.

This question marks the moment the poem turns from addressing an unseen or unspecified listener or reader to a specified one. It moves the poem from a general and unspecified time to a specific moment of the here and now. The poem, and by extension the speaker of the poem, and by extension the poet ‘sees’ the audience and their response, catching them out in a moment of possible judgement. If the poem is a confession, then maybe the audience are asked to confess something as well.

In the poem, judgement is a foregone conclusion, by the use of the tiny three letter word ‘yet’ at the end of the line. The implication is that if you aren’t being judgemental now, you will be eventually. The ‘you’ that is carrying out the judgement could be male or female, and the use of the word ‘yet’ betrays the speaker, who is also judging herself.
In ‘Age, Race, Class, and Sex’ Audre Lorde draws on philosopher Paolo Freire to insist that ‘the focus of revolutionary change is never merely the oppressive situations we seek to escape, but that piece of the oppressor which is planted deep within each of us and which knows only the oppressor’s tactics, the oppressor’s relationships’ (Lorde and Ddc, 1984:123). The oppressor inside the self is betrayed in this poem, in the body of the question, and the white space that surrounds the text.

That ‘yes’ shouted out by the woman whose face I would not recognise on the street, but whose voice and accent I would know anywhere, could also be called a heckle. It could be called a joke. It could also be called sexism. It could be called harm or harmful. It could be

called nothing. *It was nothing.* It could be called judgemental. At the time I burst out laughing. It was funny. Part of me is still laughing, slightly hysterically.

In *Excitable Speech,* Judith Butler argues that when a speaker utters a racist slur, it is harmful because of the history of that slur, because they are making a 'linguistic community with a history of speakers' (Butler, 1997:52). She writes that in the speaking of a racial slur, one 'chimes in with a chorus of racists' and it is only 'because we know its force from its prior instances do we know it to be so offensive now' (Butler, 1997:80). This idea that the utterance of an insult connects the speaker and the addressed to a historical community of racists is a powerful one and can be translated across to other types of insults such as sexism, ableism and homophobia. In subsequent performances of this poem, I leave a beat of silence, of emptiness, in case another 'yes' is called out from the audience, or even a 'no'. That moment of judgement, that affirmative 'yes' is painful not because the addressee has judged, but because they have joined a historical community of people who have judged women for having sexual desire.

Fast forward to another event, another time. I am giving a seminar at a university. I read the poem and tell the story of the 'yes'. A woman asks me what happens if someone shouts 'no'. At first I do not know the answer. And then I do, because if someone shouted no, my own expectation of being judged reveals itself for what it is, which is my own sexism, which is 'that piece of the oppressor which is planted deep', which I carry with me, which I am writing out of me, which I am both uncovering and covering with language, over and over again.

In *Talking Back* bell hooks discusses her own desire for approval. She says

> When I first began to talk publicly about my work, I would be disappointed when audiences were provoked and challenged but seemed to disapprove. Not only was my desire for approval naïve (I have since come to understand that it is silly to think that one can challenge and also have approval) it was dangerous precisely because such a longing can undermine radical commitment, compelling a change in voice so as to gain regard.
>
> (hooks, 1989:16)

This desire for approval, and fear when met with disapproval has been something that I have wrestled with throughout my poetic practice, and in particular in the performing and publication of these poems.

This was an important piece of writing for me to read in my journey as a writer and feminist. To be able to sit with discomfort – both my discomfort and the discomfort of the audience – was difficult to learn and carry out. To understand that discomfort can lead to possible change for both myself and the audience. To realise that discomfort can lead to what bell hooks calls 'critical consciousness' (hooks, 1989:108), which is not just naming and raising awareness of a personal experience of sexism, but 'critical understanding of the concrete material that lays the groundwork for that personal experience…and what must be done to transform it' (hooks, 1989:108).

I have created my own strategies for coping with disapproval or defensiveness, and perhaps the hardest of these to learn has been the strategy of continuing to speak out, of not placating, of not retreating to the familiar territory of silence or humour.

R.A. Ferguson argues that Audre Lorde used poetry as a way of instigating an 'intimate scrutiny needed for personal and social transformation', and that in fact, poetry was the 'lynch pin' between the personal and the social (Ferguson, 2013:296). These connections between the personal and the social are still at the heart of both feminism and poetry. The permeable border between the two seems like the perfect place for both the poet and poetry to inhabit, in the same way that the border between creative-critical practice has enabled me to combine the naming of experience with 'critical understanding of the concrete material that lays the groundwork for that personal experience' (hooks, 1989:108). This striving towards understanding is another strategy I have deployed to cope with disapproval, defensiveness or aggression.

bell hooks argued that feminist consciousness-raising sessions were only the first stage in the process of radical transformation and that the next stage would have been the 'confrontation between women and men, the sharing of this new and radical speech: women speaking to men in a liberated voice' (hooks, 1989:129). Poetry can move past the

naming of experience to speak in a liberated voice, not just naming and giving voice to experience, but building what bell hooks calls 'critical consciousness that teaches about structures of domination and how they function' (hooks, 1989:108).

Each time I perform this poem in public, each time I summon men into being with language, naming without naming, wielding the gaze and not looking away, each time I 'watch them all disappear', each time I honour the white space of the poem with silence, each time I wait for a yes, or a no, I am resisting the 'potential oppressor within' (hooks, 1989:21). I am also giving her a voice. I am also bringing her into the light.

If you would like to read 'Poems Of Desire: A Mode Of Attention' turn to Page 87
If you would like to read about the shiftiness of sexism, turn to 'Sexism Is A Slippery And Fluid Term' on Page 54

NOT LOOKING AWAY: A POETICS OF ATTENTION

9.

Although we've only just met, he's already telling me
that no, my suitcase isn't heavy at all, as he lifts it
with one hand into the boot.

He's not even reached the end of the road
and he's already telling me I have a crazy soul,
that he can tell how crazy I am.

He asks me do I know what he means, and I smile
and pretend that I don't. He says all the women
he knows who are artists or poets or musicians are crazy.

Crazy, crazy, crazy he says and I wish I'd told him
I was an accountant instead but on he goes,
taking his eyes off the road

to tell me all women who are artists are crazy in bed,
do I know what he means, they want to try
crazy things in the bedroom.

If he stops the car I could open the door and run
or pull out my phone and pretend someone is calling
or ask him politely what's wrong.

I could laugh at the next thing he says while the voice
in my head whispers that somehow I've led him on,
that I was asking for it.

I remember a train journey, everyone crammed in
and a stranger's penis pressed against my leg,
convincing myself

I was imagining it, or he couldn't help it,
where else in the place could he put it?
When we pull up at the airport

my arm flings open the door before I give it permission,
my left leg finds the pavement before I can think.
Still I turn back to give him a tip

and he's laughing, saying *relax, just relax,* and I know
that he knows I'm afraid, that I've been afraid all my life,
but it's not this that makes me ashamed.

If you think you have a problem with the male gaze, turn to Page 33
Otherwise, keep reading.

32.

Imagine you’re me, you’re fifteen, the summer of ’95,
and you’re following your sister onto the log flume,
where you’ll sit between the legs of a stranger.
At the bottom of the drop when you’ve screamed
and been splashed by the water, when you’re about
to stand up, clamber out, the man behind
reaches forward, and with the back of his knuckle
brushes a drop of water from your thigh.

To be touched like that, for the first time.
And you are not innocent, you’re fifteen,
something in you likes that you were chosen,
it feels like power, though you were only
the one who was touched, who was acted upon.
To realise that someone can touch you
without asking, without speaking, without knowing
your name. Without anybody seeing.

You pretend that nothing has happened,
you turn it to nothing, you learn that nothing
is necessary armour you must carry with you,
it was nothing, you must have imagined it.
To be touched – and your parents waiting at the exit
and smiling as you come out of the dark
and the moment being hardly worth telling.
What am I saying? You’re fifteen and he is a man.

Imagine being him on that rare day of summer,
the bulge of car keys makes it difficult to sit
so he gives them to a bored attendant
who chucks them in a box marked PROPERTY.
A girl balanced in the boat with hair to her waist
and he’s close enough to smell the cream
lifting in waves from her skin, her legs stretched out,
and why should he tell himself no, hold himself back?

He reaches forward, brushes your thigh with a knuckle
then gets up to go, rocking the boat as he leaves.
You don’t remember his face or his clothes,
just the drop of water, perfectly formed on your thigh,
before it’s lifted up and away by his finger.
You remember this lesson your whole life,
that sliver/shiver of time, that moment in the sun.
What am I saying? Nothing. Nothing happened.

If you are wondering who I am talking to, turn to ‘Mode Of Address, Or Who Are You Talking To?’ on Page 39
Otherwise, keep reading.

8.

your dad handing out shots
bright green
liquid sloshing
over the rim
onto my wrist
steam on the kitchen windows
and the living room
full of bodies
sitting in a circle
your mother nowhere
get em down
you Zulu warrior
get em down
you Zulu chief chief chief
follows me
the singing
the dull thump of a bass
the staircase bending
and swaying
faraway bathroom
my hand on the bannister
to keep myself here
inside my body
inside this house
there's darkness to my left
there you are on a bed
in the dark
rolling a joint
hey babe you said
I liked that word on your lips
your friend
at the open window
letting smoke
slip out into the night
it was good
to sit down
next to you
first I was there
now I'm here
on the bed
on my back
a naked woman
blu-tacked and glossy
stares down at me from above
and the weight of you

on top of me
and at first it's funny
as I try to get up
your knees on my wrists
your hands on my shoulders
that panic in my belly
I'll remember it as long as I live

your friend coming towards me
his hand
on my breast
the laughing both of you laughing

my knee in your groin
how you topple
like a small tree

and I'm up and out of the room
and into the night

and the dark asks why
were you there in the dark
and the wind asks what
were you doing upstairs
and the moon asks why
were you wearing that skirt
but my body
my body asks nothing
just whispers
see
I did not let you down I did not
let you down I did not let you down

Do you feel guilty for being a man? Turn to Page 45
If not, keep reading.

10.

When I tell them about my body
    and all the things it knows
they tell me about their guilt

they flourish their guilt
    as if they are matadors
in a city where people love blood

or they wave their guilt at me
    as if it is a flag of a newly formed country
and they are proud to be its citizens

sometimes they hold their guilt in their right hand
    and fan it out
like a deck of cards in a high-stakes game

or open up their guilt as if it is a book
    in a foreign language
they cannot understand

one held the two corners of his guilt
    as if it was a bedsheet
he must spread over my body

as if my body was a chair
    in a house closed up for the winter
and when he walked away

he left his guilt behind
    I run my hands along each edge
turns out his guilt is very small

not like a sheet at all
    more like a handkerchief
I shout have you forgotten something

but he is walking away whistling
    so I put it in my pocket
carry it with me always

If you are still unsure whether sexism exists, turn to 'Sexism Is A Slippery And Fluid Term' on Page 54
If you would like to read about wilfulness, turn to 'An Electric Current: Poems Of Wilfulness' on Page 101

A PROBLEM WITH THE MALE GAZE

After a reading, a man tells me that my poem about a taxi driver (All The Men I Never Married No.9, Page 27) shows that I have a problem with 'the male gaze'. I do not really know what he means. I haven't heard of the male gaze – I say something inane. I smile. I take it as a joke, though I know whatever he means, he did not mean it as a joke.

Later, I look up the male gaze, which leads me of course to Laura Mulvey and her ground-breaking essay 'Visual Pleasure and Cinema'. She examined the male gaze in relation to film theory, pointing out that on screen, women are represented as objects of male pleasure and subjected to a 'controlling and curious gaze' (Mulvey, 1975:8).

If I had known about Mulvey, would I have been able to say 'Yes, I do have a problem with the male gaze. Don't you?'. Would I have been able to point out that the poem, in fact, is not about the male gaze anyway? If I had known about Mulvey, would my language still have failed me, as it has so many times before in moments like this?

Sara Ahmed wrote '[w]hen you expose a problem, you pose a problem' (Ahmed, 2017:37). In the interaction between myself and the audience member, the taxi driver and his behaviour are no longer scrutinized. Even my complicity in 'giving him a tip', in not verbally challenging him, even that is not scrutinized. The whole complicated messiness of sexism and power are transformed into my 'problem with the male gaze', as if having a problem with the male gaze is a problem anyway. I am accused of having a problem with the male gaze, as if this is something to be ashamed of, and I do not have enough knowledge at the time to defend myself.

It is theory that I need in moments like this, so that I can hold my nerve. A man says 'you clearly have a problem with the male gaze' and I move from subject and performer to object of the male gaze, an object which dares to have a problem with the way and manner it is looked at, except I know that the poem is not about that, not about that at all.

This idea of using theory in everyday life, or of using everyday life to generate and consolidate theory or theoretical understandings is not a new one and can be traced back to Feminist Standpoint Epistemology, which began in the 1960's and 1970's as a way of using women's lived experiences to generate knowledge about wider society. As a methodology, it is a useful way of breaking down 'boundaries between academia and activism, between theory and practice' (Brooks, 2007:77).

I begin to read about performative autoethnography after this encounter which is the beginning of my understanding that these encounters are an integral part of both my research project, and my own growth as a feminist, activist and poet. It is not just the encounters, feedback and comments from audience which become part of my research, but my own reaction to their reactions. As Sara Ahmed points out 'becoming feminist is also about generating ideas about the worlds we encounter' (Ahmed, 2017:20). Generating ideas about experiences and encounters means I can survive being addressed like this. These experiences can be wearing, but they can also generate resources and energy (Ahmed, 2017:235).

After this encounter, I start to think about the female gaze, which like the word sexism, is slippery and difficult to define. Alina Cohen argues that '[o]n its own, the term is used to mean very little, amounting to a simplistic catchall for art made by women – reductive instead of empowering' (Cohen, 2017), whilst Emily Nussbaum criticises the term's essentialism for implying that women 'can share one eye' (E. Nussbaum, 2017). If this is what the term means, then it is reductive, simplistic and essentialist. However, just as the 'male gaze' describes a way of looking, and began as a way to 'untether our minds and eyes from an aesthetic practice that supported the societal workings of patriarchy' then it follows that the female gaze is also a way of looking, and its definition should be tied to an 'aesthetic practice that supports the societal workings of universal equality' (Cohen, 2017).

Utilizing the female gaze as an aesthetic practice in my own work involves looking without looking away, but also using the gaze to look at the relationality between people, and making this the focus of the gaze, rather than making the other the object of the gaze.

The female gaze as an aesthetic practice means articulating and shaping the 'double consciousness' that I possess as a woman which is a 'heightened awareness not only of (their) own lives but of the lives of the dominant group (men) as well' (Brooks, 2007:63).

In a lecture at the 2016 Toronto International Film Festival, Jill Soloway proposed a definition of what the female gaze might be, and how women can use it. She defined it as a 'socio-political justice-demanding way of seeing', as a way of 'privileging the body and emotion' and lastly, a way of 'returning the gaze, not just in the act of looking back, but to say "I see you seeing me"' (Soloway, 2016).

How we can wield this gaze in poetry, and what it might mean to do this is a question that my creative-critical work keeps coming back to. I think about Virginia Woolf, who wrote that '[w]omen have served all these centuries as looking-glasses possessing the magic and delicious power of reflecting the figure of man at twice its natural size' (Woolf, 1928:37). How can I use the female gaze in poetry, how can I look at men without simply reversing this position, turning them into looking-glasses?

We have so many words for different ways of looking – to gaze, watch, see, glance, peruse, stare, observe, study, examine, regard, scan, gawk, glare, scrutinize, consider, peek, peep, ogle and survey. The word 'look' seems to be full of movement and implies not just the act of looking, but the act of looking away. The choice to 'look' at experiences of sexism has resulted in an experiential poetics in which men and masculinity are examined and used to reflect on gendered experience.

Rosemarie Waldrop said that '[w]e come to know anything that has any complexity by glimpses. So it is best to have as many different glimpses from as many different perspectives as possible, rather than trying to develop a linear argument where one follows from another' (N. Duffy, 2013).

To use the methodology of the glimpse to consider versions and variations of masculinity and the different ways that sexism is played out in the frame of a woman's life, the

insistence on looking at what is often not seen, acknowledged or talked about and the act of placing it in a poem is one way of wielding the female gaze.

Poetry about sexism says ‘I see you seeing me’. It privileges the body and emotion. It is a way of ‘feeling-seeing’ (Soloway, 2016). Looking at sexism often causes it to change shape, to shift, to move, even to become present in the room when previously it was hidden. Poetry steps into the space created by the shiftiness of sexism and forces us to look closer, look harder, at what we may have told ourselves was nothing. Often stories of sexism, particularly every day sexism have an absence at their centre. This idea of ‘nothing’ is something I return to again and again in my creative and critical work. The word ‘nothing’ becomes an effective protection, a wall to stop the mind imagining not only what could have happened, but also what the world might look like if these things did not keep happening.

In ‘All The Men I Never Married No 32’ (Page 28) I wanted to explore this idea of nothingness which is often at the heart of encounters with sexism. Nothingness is a tool of the perpetrator to minimise their conduct, but it is also a tool of the victim and used as a way of minimising the impact or importance of what has happened to them. In this poem, a man touches a 15 year old girl’s thigh and the speaker of the poem says:

> You pretend that nothing has happened,
> you turn it to nothing, you learn that nothing
> is necessary armour you must carry with you,
> it was nothing, you must have imagined it.
>
> (Page 27, lines 17-20)

Usually the pronoun ‘you’ is built on shifting sands and can mean both the self, and /or the ‘you’ who is reading or listening to the poem, or a ‘you’ that the poem is about. However, the poem makes clear that the audience are being directly addressed, right from the first line: ‘Imagine you’re me’, asking the audience to put themselves inside the experience, inside the body of a fifteen year old girl.

This is a deliberate technique to try to activate the female gaze as a ‘conscious effort to create empathy as a political tool’ and as a way of drawing attention to ‘the way the

world feels for women when they move their bodies through the world' (Soloway, 2016). In stanza 4, in contrast to this, the male gaze is invoked in the description of the girl who is deliberately described in terms of her body parts:

> A girl balanced in the boat with hair to her waist
> and he's close enough to smell the cream
> lifting in waves from her skin, her legs stretched out
> (Page 27, lines 29-31)

In the final stanza, the female gaze is activated again as the reader or audience are once again placed inside the body of the fifteen year old girl, looking outwards and remembering 'that shiver/sliver of time, that moment in the sun'. The problem of naming experiences like this is reiterated again with the repetition of 'Nothing. Nothing happened' at the end of the poem.

In a review of *In The Cut* by Susanna Moore, Katherine Angels writes that seeing sexual assault as 'exceptional, as a feverish conflagration, invites excitement about it – enables, perhaps, its eroticisation' (Angel, 2019a). Exploring different examples of sexism throughout these poems enables the day-to-day grind and monotony of women's contact each day with sexism to be examined rather than fetishized. It also allows experiences of sexism, sexual assault and violence to be seen as part of a continuum.

Angel's article also explores how violence and desire are simultaneously two opposing but interconnected forces. She asks 'How are we to represent in writing, the fact that sexual desire lives entangled with sexual violence? How are we to deal, in art, with the powerful, destabilizing forces of both violence and desire?' (Angel, 2019a).

The problem explored in this poem is that these two opposing forces of violence and desire are so unstable as to be almost unrecognisable. Is the unpermitted touching of another's body always a violent act? The type of touching might make us uncertain, but the power dynamic of young girl/older man seems to make it more clear cut, but the revelation that the girl enjoys 'being the one chosen' is troubling. Undermining the binary

of guilt and innocence and examining the wielding of power allows the reader to think about where desire, violence and sexism overlap and intersect.

To continue reading 'Not Looking Away: A Poetics Of Attention' turn to Page 28

MODE OF ADDRESS, OR WHO ARE YOU TALKING TO?

In Claudia Rankine's collection *Citizen* (Rankine, 2015), Rankine explores the complexities of address in contemporary lyric poetry and the effects this has on a reader or audience. Mary-Jean Chan writes that Rankine has created a 'poetics of racial trauma' (Chan, 2018:138), allowing for 'complex subjectivity and intimate address' (Chan, 2018:137). One of the primary techniques that Rankine uses to achieve this is her use of the second person pronoun 'you'. The shiftiness of this pronoun opens up the possibilities of address in her work. The address could be to the poet herself, to the speaker in the poem, but also to the reader of the text.

The use of 'you' often makes the reader feel as if they are being directly addressed, almost as if they are being told a story of their life: 'You are in the dark, in the car, watching the black-tarred street being swallowed by speed' (Rankine, 2015:10). This feeling of being addressed continues until the end of the paragraph, when we read 'he tells you his dean is making him hire a person of color when there are so many great writers out there' (Rankine, 2015:10). At this point a white reader is jolted out of the poem and jolted out of thinking they can inhabit this 'you'.

This technique draws attention to the way that white experience is often seen as universal, until it is made explicit that it is not. The white reader is jolted out of the centre of the poem, jolted out of thinking they can inhabit the you. The text demands that white readers see themselves as being racialised, demands that they take notice of the way they move through the world because of their race. There is an emotional back and forth going on here as a white reader, with the realisation that we inhabit the 'you' of a text automatically, even as we are de-centralised, realising we are not the ones being addressed. Even when we are not addressed, we cannot escape that 'you'. We are implicated and implicate ourselves when we are jolted from the centre of the poem, when we read and are surprised by what we read.

Danez Smith's new collection *Homie* takes on the problem of the 'white gaze' by not addressing white people at all. In a recent interview in *The Guardian,* Smith said:

> With *Homie* I stopped asking myself: 'What should I do with the white gaze?' Because I realised I wasn't interested in it. I asked myself: 'Why am I spending so

> much time worried about this gaze?' I think white people can learn a lot from the poems, but that's not who I'm writing for.
>
> (Smith, 2020)

Smith sets out their stall firmly from the outset of *Homie* by providing two titles to the collection, one for use by white people, one for non-white people. This gesture is political, playful and confrontational. It extends and pushes at the traditional mode of address enacted by lyric poetry and its traditional readership. In my own work, I have struggled and wrestled with thoughts of who I am addressing. Unlike Smith, I haven't managed to get to the point of not being interested in the male gaze. The poems in this thesis are addressed to women, but with the consciousness that they will be/want to be overheard by men.

In 'A Woman Speaks' by Audre Lorde, she challenges the tendency to assume automatically that women in poems are white, that women are white. The woman speaking is a generic woman who seems to be speaking on behalf of woman in general: 'I do not dwell/within my birth nor my divinities/who am ageless and half-grown' before the poem finishes with the lines 'I/am woman/and not white' (Lorde, 1997:234). In a similar way to many moments in *Citizen,* Lorde pulls the rug out from underneath the complacent white reader – the surprise of these last three lines forces a white reader to examine their own assumptions about race.

Bertram argues that 'There are few modes of public discourse in which women can speak as *women,* and this is reflected in their poetry, where it is rare to find an explicit address to other women, a collective female discourse' (Bertram, 2003:65). However, black women such as Audre Lorde and Claudia Rankine have been consistently speaking as black women in their poetry, although who they are addressing is perhaps more complex.

Rankine uses 'spectatorship and positionality as a means of bearing intimate witness to racial injustice' (Chan, 2018:141). Her use of positionality is complex and multi-layered. While her use of the second person perspective invites the reader to 'cultivate empathy towards others' (Chan, 2018:154), it is also an example of the female gaze in action, which Jill Soloway has described as a 'conscious effort to create empathy as a political tool' (Soloway, 2016).

Perhaps the place where her use of positionality is most apparent is in the form of *Citizen.* It is a genre-bending book, containing prose poems, short essays, photographs and art. In one photograph, there is a crowd of white people, some looking towards the camera, others looking upwards towards a tree. In the original, infamous photograph, two black bodies have been hung from the tree. The photograph is of a public lynching, and the faces of the white men, women and children range in expressions of excitement, happiness and even triumph.

In Rankine's version of the photograph, the black bodies are missing. We see only the white bodies. We are aware that these white bodies are participants, spectators, witnesses, and that each of these positionings come with their own responsibilities. As readers we are also participants in this. We are looking at the photograph again. We become spectators, passively looking at what is happening, and we are witnesses to a trauma, although the traumatised bodies are no longer the spectacle, in this version of the photograph. Instead what we are witnessing is violence, which resides in the white bodies who carried out, watched or participated in the act of violence, rather than in the bodies who were acted upon. In our passivity, we also become active participants, because looking can never be truly passive. We are implicated by our looking.

Rankine's erasure of the black victims in this photograph means that we cannot be spectators to black trauma. Instead, we are left looking at the people who took part, either by participating, witnessing or spectating, and they are looking back at us. *Citizen* is full of moments like this, where the female gaze is activated to shift the reader between the position of spectator, witness and participant, creating empathy, but also 'returning the gaze, not just in the act of looking back, but to say "I see you seeing me"' (Soloway, 2016).

This idea of black bodies and the violence being carried out on them being used as a spectacle was challenged in 2017 at the Whitney Biennial gallery when the white artist Dana Schutz exhibited 'Open Casket', a painting inspired by the life and story of Emmett Till, whose murder at 15 years of age sparked the civil rights movement (Sayej, 2017). The work was criticized by activists in an open letter, whilst another activist staged a protest, standing in front of the painting and blocking its viewing whilst wearing a shirt reading 'Black Death Spectacle'.

Rankine discusses the visibility or invisibility of the black body in episodes throughout *Citizen.* Incident after incident is recounted where the black body is not seen or is made invisible. A friend calls the 'you' by the name of her black housekeeper, a nun doesn't notice a girl cheating. A man at a checkout pushes in front and says 'Oh my God, I didn't see you…No, no, no, I really didn't see you' (Rankine, 2015:77).

In an interview Rankine said:

> I am not interested in narrative, or truth, or truth to power, on a certain level; I am fascinated by affect, by positioning, and by intimacy…what happens when I stand close to you? What is your body going to do? What's my body going to do? On myriad levels, we are both going to fail, fail, fail each other and ourselves. The simplicity of the language is never to suggest truth, but to make transparent the failure.
>
> (Rankine, 2015)

This mapping of a series of seemingly minor incidents builds to a 'biography of violence' (Ahmed, 2017:23) and creates evidence of a structure, or a series of events, or a pattern. These incidents could be described as a series of relational failures, and Rankine's bearing of 'intimate witness' (Chan, 2018) invites us to be intimate too and invites us into the position of witnesses.

This idea of making relational failure transparent is an interesting proposition in terms of my own poetics. It is implicit in the title of my poetry collection *All The Men I Never Married.* This collection is set out in a different way in this thesis, with the poems grouped under subheadings and numbered. When the collection is set out as a full collection rather than part of a thesis, the collection overall will be called *All The Men I Never Married* and each poem (and each man) will be numbered, to indicate they are part of a larger sequence coming under this overall title.

The title is both ironic and serious in its setting out of one of the ways men and women relate to each other, as if this is the only way of relating. My poetry examines this idea of relational failure, as opposed to a 'truth' about how men or women behave. Part of this relational failure is the failure of language - in many of the poems, the speaker, or the 'I' of the poem fails to speak out for different reasons, or conversely, hides their true feelings with language.

One example of this relational failure which also becomes a failure of language is in 'All The Men I Never Married No.6' (Page 61) which explores the relationship between the 'we' of the poem (who by the end of the poem shifts to an 'I') and a man who is an alcoholic. In the poem, the alcoholism is never discussed, or at least not discussed 'in the hearing' of the man who is an alcoholic. The subjects talked about are neighbours, 'someone you'd met on the street' and the last image the reader is left with is one of the man leaning forward, repeating the word 'here', waiting for the 'I' of the poem to turn and listen.

In 'All The Men I Never Married No.11' (Page 137) the speaker puts her book away instead of speaking out and pretends that she wants to have a conversation instead of reading her book. In 'All The Men I Never Married No.9' (Page 27) the speaker is silent and hides the fear she really feels with her action, turning back to give the taxi driver a tip. In 'All The Men I Never Married No.13' (Page 74) the speaker does not even get to finish her sentence before being interrupted and the poem finishes with 'maybe I'm just wishing I said that maybe I/just smiled and nodded my head'.

Like Rankine, I am using relational failure to examine experiences of trauma to create my own 'biography of violence' (Ahmed, 2017:23). However, whilst her main focus was everyday moments of racism (although she also writes intersectionally about racism and sexism, focusing particularly in *Citizen* on the treatment of the tennis player Serena Williams) my focus is to explore experiences of sexism and female desire.

Following Rankine's example, I have experimented with the positioning of the reader or audience member as both participant, spectator and witness in different poems, and how shifting this positioning in the course of a poem can produce different effects. In 'All The Men I Never Married No.32' (Page 28) I ask the audience to 'Imagine you're me' at the beginning of the poem, positioning them as participants, and by the end of the poem, I ask them to 'Imagine you're him' inviting them to change position from participant/victim to perpetrator.

In this poem, the man reaches forward to touch the leg of the teenage girl and she does not say anything. She does not speak up, does not protest. Language fails her in this moment, and afterwards, when she does not tell her parents, because the moment is

‘hardly worth telling’. In the poem, the speaker repeats ‘It was nothing. Nothing happened’. It is poetry that rescues this failure of language, pulling white space around itself to give this moment importance, to make it not-nothing, to say nothing terrible happened, but at the same time, *something* terrible happened. The use of the direct address means I can also bear ‘intimate witness’, as well as inviting the audience to do the same, using the female gaze to ‘create empathy as a political tool’.

To continue reading ‘Not Looking: A Poetics Of Attention’ turn to Page 30

GUILTY FOR BEING A MAN

Two colleagues, on two separate occasions, tell me my poetry makes them feel 'guilty for being a man'. This is not the first time a man has said these words to me, but it is the first time it has happened twice in the same week. I tell both men I do not want them to feel guilty. I express regret and worry that they feel guilty. At the same time, I feel angry, and irritated, and impatient, but I do not understand why until I read Audre Lorde:

> I cannot hide my anger to spare your guilt, nor hurt feelings, nor answering anger, for to do so insults and trivialises all our efforts. Guilt is not a response to anger; it is a response to one's own actions or lack of action. If it leads to change then it can be useful, since it is then no longer guilt but the beginning of knowledge
>
> (Lorde and Ddc, 1984:130).

When I read this quote, I feel as if a light has shone onto my experience, onto my feelings. Later on, I experience my own guilt, when I realise that I almost used this quote out of context, without acknowledgement that Lorde was specifically addressing white women's failure to listen, hear and understand black women's concerns.

I am at the 2017 Forward Prize ceremony. Claudia Rankine stands up to read. I start to feel more and more uncomfortable as she reads from *Citizen.* It is the first time I have realised that I have been complicit in racism, that I unconsciously participate in racist structures. Her recounting of everyday racism, of white privilege, which I have benefitted from makes me feel guilty and ashamed. I do not, however, go and tell Claudia Rankine this. I vow to do better. I start to think about how recounting experiences of sexism might have a similar impact on both men and women – could writing experiential poetry about sexism bring sexism to the consciousness of men and women in a similar way?

I am drawing an analogy between my behaviour as a white woman when confronted about racism in society and the behaviour of men when confronted about sexism. Even in doing this, I am moving on from considering racism and focusing again on my own situation. It is clear that 'The use of analogies provides both the key to greater comprehension and the danger of false understanding' (Grillo and Wildman, 1991:398).

In this thesis, I can use this analogy for greater comprehension, but I must not use this analogy to take back the centre ground when someone else is speaking about racism, because that would be a false understanding.

A man says 'Your poetry makes me feel guilty for being a man' and I try to understand my anger at this response, although it does not quite feel like anger. I am trying to understand my own feelings, underneath/covered by anger, by impatience. Maybe underneath my anger is shame, a direct response to their guilt. I have made them 'feel guilty for being a man' and I in turn feel guilty, because after all, they have done none of the things to me that I am complaining of. Guilt is passed back and forth between the two of us.

Guilt and shame are emotions of social control. Guilt and shame were and are used as forms of punishment. When men admit feelings of guilt for behaviour they have not carried out, the conversation changes from being about an experience of sexism, to being about their feelings of guilt, and how just or unjust they are. An admission of guilt can be a way of closing the conversation down and a way of making it seem as if men are being punished, just because a woman is talking about her experience of sexism. Ahmed (2017: 62) says that 'You can cause unhappiness by noticing something'. Is it possible to cause guilt by noticing something?

Strange things happen to some men when they feel they are being looked at. Maurice Merleau-Ponty says that:

> Man does not ordinarily show his body, and, when he does, it is either nervously or with the intention to fascinate. It seems to him that the alien gaze that glances over his body steals it from him or, on the contrary, that the exhibition of his body will disarm and deliver the other person up to him…
>
> (Merleau-Ponty and Landes, 2013:170)

Reading this made me wonder if this is what is at the heart of some of the defensive reactions that have come from some men regarding these poems, that men are not accustomed to being looked at, that when they are, they feel as if something is being stolen, or as if the 'looker' should be disarmed and delivered to them.

Each of my poems allow the writer and the reader or audience to look at men, but it is not their bodies that are displayed. I am looking at a man and placing him inside a poem, not to 'steal' his body, or to allow the display of his body to 'disarm' or 'deliver' me, nor to reduce their body to passivity and mine to an active agent, or vice versa, or even to make him feel guilty. My intention is always to examine what Luce Irigaray in *To Be Two* calls the 'between-us' (Irigaray, 2000:3). In this book she attempts to define a possible relationship between two people that differs from a subject-object relationship and instead is about recognising and respecting the interiority and alterity of the other. This path between the self and another and what it might look like, and what might happen in this space, is something I explore in my poetic practice.

In writing about the 'between-us', the path between the speaker and one of the 'All the men I never married', I am also writing about the 'between-us' between the writer and the audience. Merleau-Ponty writes 'Thus, I can see one object insofar as objects form a system or a world, and insofar as each of them arranges the others around itself like spectators of its hidden aspects…' (Merleau-Ponty and Landes, 2013:171). By writing about one man, maybe all the others are called to arrange themselves around the first, 'spectators of its hidden aspects' that are now not so hidden, not so secret. Is this where that troubling guilt comes from?

To continue reading 'Not Looking Away: A Poetics Of Attention' turn to Page 32

18.

two hours with you   sitting at opposite ends
          of your single bed

your feet level   with my chest
my feet level   with your waist

          almost like   being a teenager again
          almost like   a giving in

when you put your hand on my ankle
I do not move   your eyes are closed

the only thing speaking is your hand
          the slow circle of your thumb

do we all have an ex we can't forget
not the one   that got away

but the one who left
not the one   who left for good

but the one that stays just out of reach
your thumb circling the bone of my ankle

I know your patterns
                    I know how this goes

maybe we have nothing left
          to talk about anymore

do we all have someone   we can't forgive

can you feel my body humming
          underneath your fingers

I know I know   that's just me
          romanticising you again

22.

That night which I knew would be the last night
in your room, in your bed, in your flat,
when I said *be straight with me* and you kissed me again,
when I said *I think I'm more into this than you are*
and you kissed me again and said *let's go back to bed*
so we did and afterwards I said *answer me,*
the night and the morning still lodged in my chest,
my body turning under your hands and your eyes,
already looking past me and you said *yes,*
I guess you probably are and I knew I could not fall
into the body place with you again.
That the body can want one thing and the heart another,
that the heart can already be moving on to tomorrow
as the body yearns for the familiar embrace once again.
These were the things I learnt from your face,
tracing the outline of your bones and the slickness
of your chest. In the day you put on a suit and tie
and caught a train to another place. I ran with you
in the wind and rain, on the track or at the beach
and we thought nobody knew we went home together.
You did your washing on a Sunday and folded your clothes
and ironed your shirts and nothing could change this.
You were full of ambition for yourself and disdain
for your students. But in the dark you were none of this,
you were heat and blood and fingers and chest,
there was nothing neat about you.
Where are you now, did you get to London like you wanted,
are you in another immaculate flat, do you still read the papers
at the weekend, is everything tucked in, put away?
Part of me still hovers there, trying to work out
how you managed it, to hold something back,
how I managed it.

4.

And this, and this, is how I remember your collar bone,
its particular edge, the translucent colour of your flesh,
the curve of your lips – a child's drawing of a bird in flight.

I feel the same as I did when we were eighteen
you say, and you disappear again, to put an ocean
between us, to hold under water until it stops moving

this thing we cannot explain. Here is your head,
and all that it holds, your inner life, the day-to-day things
I can't share. Here is your dark cap of hair.

Somewhere you are playing the same jazz riff
over and over, the dominant seventh, the diminished,
whilst up here in the North, the days become shorter

and this life I never really came close to
shows its face – takes its last, shallow breath.

16.

And yes, doing what we did stopped all potential,
all possibilities, and marked out each path

leading to and away from each other,
put awkwardness between us like a wall

we couldn't see over, and doing what we did
meant we understood the language of the body

but no other language, that your language
and mine stopped talking to each other

and so, when I think of you now, I think only
of your glasses on the bedside table

and the light of a grey morning entering,
I think of *busy old fool, unruly sun*

and all the other possibilities gone.
And doing what we did gave us the laws

of ownership and possession, led us only
to the edges of each other, made everything

that came before seem unimportant,
the feral dogs running loose in the streets,

the one with the crooked, broken tail,
how we learnt nothing from those dogs

and the way they rolled over for each other.
We agreed that the night belonged to them,

knew that turning toward each other was really
a turning away, a giving up of difficulty

and settling for simplicity, we knew this
and still we did it, we did it anyway.

39.

Now that you're here, it's no effort at all
to remember the mornings I lay in your bed
as you played transcriptions of Chet Baker solos.
The slight tilt of your hips. The veins on your forearms
lit up from the strain. How you spent hours
erasing the movement in your face, so the high notes
came easy, like reaching out and taking them down
from a shelf. Today you walk ahead to the bar,
your trumpet slung over your shoulder.
You're talking to me about gigging and trumpets
and a New York musician I'm pretending I've heard of
because this isn't my world anymore.
I get along without you very well, of course I do.
Play that one to me now, like you used to.

37.

he did not come to me as a swan
or a shower of gold

he was never a white bull
we did not meet by a river

I was never chased through the woods
he was just a man

like and unlike any other
he stood by my bed in the dark

afterwards many things happened
but no wife turned up to take revenge

to transform me into a cow
so I could stare at my self-not-self

reflected in the water
when I bent my neck to drink

no god or father scooped me up
the way Apollo carried Paris

from the battlefield
there was no battlefield

I didn't know it would be me
who carried him here

didn't know about walking
the length of the self

how the self disappears
how hard it would be

after five ten fifteen years

If you are interested in relationality, turn to 'Something In The Telling: A Poetics Of Relationality' on Page 60
If your body has ever spoken without you knowing what it said, turn to 'The Body Is The Blindspot of Speech' on Page 118
If you would like to read 'What Is Between-Us' turn to Page 133

SEXISM IS A SLIPPERY AND FLUID TERM

Rosalind Gill pointed out that 'the term sexism has quite literally disappeared from much feminist academic writing' (Gill, 2011:62). Calder-Dawe argues that, according to post-feminist discourse, the issue of sexism and gender inequality has disappeared, particularly in Western societies, where sexism has been transplanted onto other cultures. The problem of sexism is 'hidden in plain sight', 'routinely presented as harmless' and is a 'white noise' (Calder-Dawe, 2015:90).

In 2014 Laura Bates set up the 'Everyday Sexism' website. Women could upload their experiences – from the 'niggling and normalized to the outrageously offensive' (Bates, 2014:16). In April 2015, twenty months after the project was launched, 100,000 entries had been uploaded to the website. In the book *Everyday Sexism* which followed the project, Bates writes that while she 'initially set out to record daily instances of sexism', it quickly 'came to document cases of serious harassment and assault, abuse and rape' (Bates, 2014:18). When a woman tells the truth she creates 'the possibility for more truth around her' (Rich, 1975:190)and this can be seen in action, both on the Everyday Sexism website and today across various social media sites.

In 2017, the celebrity Alyssa Mirano spoke out on Twitter about her own experience of sexual assault, encouraging followers to reply with 'Me Too' if they had experienced something similar. The #MeToo went viral as women joined in to speak out about their experiences of gender-based violence. Though this was the moment the #MeToo movement arrived into a wider public consciousness, it was actually conceived by the activist Tarana Burke over ten years ago as a grass-roots movement, aimed at helping black women who were survivors of sexual assault and violence.

Despite the outpouring of #MeToo stories which have produced a shift in thinking around speaking out about gender-based violence, the word 'sexism' still has 'a quaint, old-fashioned ring to it – in a way that was strikingly *not* paralleled by notions of racism or homophobia' (Gill, 2011:61).

It is apparent that sexism is a slippery and fluid term which resists definition and boundaries to encompass harassment, oppression, abuse and assault. Gill's call for a

reconceptualization of sexism as an 'agile, dynamic, changing and diverse set of malleable representations and practices of power' (Gill, 2011:62) is both needed and relevant to my research. Even the term 'everyday sexism' with its connotations of being casual or ordinary comes under pressure when the everyday is more serious and more violent than has been previously understood.

In the same way that the Everyday Sexism website was inundated with serious accounts of sexual harassment and assault alongside more minor incidents, I realised through my own poetic practice that I categorised different types of gender-based harassment and aggression as sexism, when a more accurate descriptive term would be assault. The word 'sexism' becomes a coping mechanism, a way of diminishing or minimising what has happened.

The act of putting the white space of a poem around a recounting of an experience of sexism enabled me to look at the experience differently. Gregory Orr argues that the act of writing a lyric poem means that we have 'shifted the crisis to a bearable distance from us; removed it to the symbolic but vivid world of language. Second, we have actively *made* and shaped this model of our situation rather than passively endured it as lived experience' (Orr, 2002:4-5).

Shaping a model of my situation, as Orr puts it, allowed me to 'see' differently regarding experiences of sexism. It enabled me to understand my own complicity, and to understand that writing about sexism is messy work, because to do this, a writer has to 'think strategically, we also have to accept our complicity: we forego any illusions of parity; we give up the safety of exteriority' (Ahmed, 2017:94).

Part of this process involves coming to the realisation that for some women, 'feminine existence is in fact a traumatised existence' (Wolff and Stacey, 2013:59). This traumatised existence is multi-faceted and complex, and a part of understanding is acknowledging that women experience sexism in a multitude of ways. It can be concealed 'under the language of civility, happiness and love' (Ahmed, 2017:62), which can leave women questioning whether they have imagined it, or whether they are being paranoid or over-sensitive.

Understanding that some women's existence is traumatised may require a reframing and expansion of our understanding of trauma and resultant post-traumatic stress disorder to encompass the 'everyday assaults on integrity and personal safety' (Brown, 1995:105) that many women suffer. The traditional definition of PTSD required the individual to have been confronted with death, threatened death, or actual or threatened injury or violence, including sexual violence (Kinouani, 2019:36). This definition, drawn from the *Diagnostic and Statistical Manual of Mental Disorders* (American Psychiatric and American Psychiatric Association, 2013) has only recently been expanded to include sexual violence at all.

The historical recognition of PTSD has been limited to 'public and male experiences of trauma' (Brown, 1995:102) and has failed to acknowledge the daily lived experiences of women and other minority groups. Maria Root coined the term 'insidiuous trauma' (Root, 1992) to describe 'the effects of oppression that are not necessarily overtly violent or threatening to bodily well-being at the given moment but that do violence to the soul and spirit' (Brown, 1995:105).

The poems contained within this thesis attempt to capture what it is to be traumatised by existence, to be 'possessed by an image or event', (Caruth, 1995:5) to live with repetition and circularity, because if sexism has anything at its centre, it is its propensity to repeat, repeat, repeat.

What happens when the reader is asked to look, and to look again, and to choose again to look at the things that most people look away from, or ignore? Even when sexism is happening to me, I have chosen to look away, to pretend nothing is happening and even this action is a reliance 'upon the defences of denial and minimization' (Brown, 1995:107). Putting these experiences into the framework of a lyric poem ensures that I cannot rely on these defences anymore.

As discussed at greater length in 'Lyric Variations (1)' (Page 66), the lyric convention of significance comes into operation when these experiences are placed in the framework of a lyric poem. It is hard to minimise an event when the space of a poem is placed around it. It is hard to minimise a moment in time as only a moment when it is placed into the lyric present.

Sara Ahmed wrote '[i]f a world can be what we learn not to notice, noticing becomes a form of political labor' (Ahmed, 2017:32). I am writing poems that notice things. I am writing poems that recount the noticing of sexism, and in doing so, I become a 'retrospective witness of..(my)…own becoming' (Ahmed, 2017:32). The naming of something as sexism often happens afterwards, when we look back, and these poems are an acknowledgement of the responsibility that I feel to 'the project of describing our reality as candidly and fully as we can to each other' (Rich, 1975:190).

How do I create a 'female lyric voice whose authority is accepted as transcending its femaleness to speak of general insights or truths' (Bertram, 2003:7) when the truth I am writing about is sexism, and sexism is often denied? Is it possible to transcend femaleness when writing about sexism? Is transcending femaleness something I want to aspire to anyway? What I do know is that writing poetry about sexism and reading poems about sexism to an audience and being supported by the framework of a lyric poem feels safer and easier than a conversation across a table or amongst friends about sexism and its impact on my daily lived experience.

One common reaction, which fits into Ahmed's category of sexism or violence underneath the language of 'civility, happiness and love' is to finish a reading, and then be complimented straight away on my appearance by a man. I finish reading my poetry which might be about an experience of sexism, or female desire, or both, which will probably be a poem about relationality, and how we relate to each other and fail each other, and in the vulnerable moment after the reading, a man will come up to me and tell me how much he likes my hair, or my shoes. And these are compliments and I 'should' be flattered, but I am not, because my suspicion is that they are dismissals (whether conscious or unconscious) of my poetry and my self. Bertram argues that women poets, in any performance of their work, have to 'confront the implications of being a woman on display' (Bertram, 2005:40). Often the implications and the cost of being a woman on display is that you are dismissed as a poet, and instead your body is addressed, and it is as if your work did not exist. You are put into your place as a body.

I am giving a creative-critical reading of some of my PhD work. I have read the first paragraph, which introduces my topic and a man puts his hand up though he does not wait to be invited to speak. He tells me that sexism does not exist. The irony of giving a

talk about sexism and being interrupted by a man to be told sexism does not exist is not lost on me. It is exhausting to keep on insisting that something exists in a world which will not admit that it does exist. I tell myself that merely by talking about ‘sexism or racism here and now is to refuse displacement’ (Ahmed, 2017). I keep taking up space.

And yet. At the same event, which is a mixture of a lecture and a poetry reading, another man tries to offer support when the first man continues to talk. He tells the audience, and me, about a time when he had his bottom pinched in 1985 when walking through a factory of female workers, concluding that sexism does exist and it works both ways. I feel exhausted, even though I haven’t really begun my lecture yet. I think about the way analogies work. In a discussion of how white people often use analogies to re-focus attention on themselves and appropriate pain in discussions about race, Grillo and Wildman write that ‘The analogy makes the analogiser forget the difference and allows her to stay focused on her own situation without grappling with the other person’s reality’ (Grillo and Wildman, 1991:398). At the reading, the man who used the analogy about his own experience of sexism was well-meaning, but his anecdote succeeded in what Grillo and Wildman call taking back the centre ground, or ‘stealing the center’ (Grillo and Wildman, 1991:402). They also point out that members of dominant groups assume ‘that in discourse they should be the speaker rather than the listener’ (Grillo and Wildman, 1991:402).

It has become apparent in the performing of poems which explore experiences of sexism that many men do not know how to respond except through defensiveness, compliments about my appearance or false analogies to re-focus attention and time onto men, rather than onto women. I understand the impulse to analogise, because I do this when I am trying to understand racism, or homophobia, or the experience of disabled students moving through a world that is not designed to let them move safely.

Performing these poems, reading from creative-critical work is not a consciousness-raising session, and yet I have seen that these poems raise consciousness in both women and men. I return again to bell hooks and her call for ‘new and radical speech’. Can speech which contains information about sexism whilst also uncovering sexism in the room be new and radical, or are the same patterns being re-enacted over and over again?

Or maybe I am asking the wrong questions. Do I trust poetry to be transformative or not? The act of performing poetry and the space of silence around a poem as it is read, or the publishing of a poem and the white space of silence on the printed page – is this enough, am I speaking in a new and liberated voice? Maybe it is impossible to know what the right questions are, when thinking about sexism. Every question risks missing another part of the puzzle. I can ask questions like 'Can poems about sexism raise consciousness about sexism?' and 'Can poems about sexism raise the consciousness we already have about sexism to the surface?' and 'What does our consciousness around sexism look like?' I could ask what transformation looks like, what does a new and liberated voice sounds like, who am I talking to anyway, who am I looking at? Sexism is dynamic and embedded, fluid and static. It is all of these things, and so asking questions, the wrong ones and the right ones becomes an ethical, aesthetical practice, to keep trying to articulate the shape of what is missed by these questions.

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If you have experienced sexism before, turn to 'Not Looking Away: A Poetics of Attention' on Page 27
If you have been a perpetrator of sexism, turn to 'Not Looking Away: A Poetics of Attention' on Page 27
If you would like to think about relationality instead, turn to 'Something in the Telling: A Poetics of Relationality' on Page 60

SOMETHING IN THE TELLING: A POETICS OF RELATIONALITY

5.

Nothing has changed you still live at home
with your mum at the edge of an estate with lawns
edged with garden gnomes it's a ten minute walk
to the canal which is so full of water today
I could reach over and easily stroke its back
it's so full another day's rain could tip it over the edge
how many years are you going to show me
your initials carved on the railway bridge
how many times will you tell me about the day
you were thrown into the water I no longer get
that clutch of fear at my throat when I think
of how you could have died before I met you
you are telling me again of how you toy
with the idea of living on a boat and I want to say
go on then do it or don't do it but don't
talk about it as if it's exciting talking about it
don't keep telling me you're tired again
you're sad again did you know I can't remember
your bedroom did you know this is the first time
I haven't wanted to touch your arm
for old times' sake remember one year
you helped me over the stile and left your hand
a second too long on my waist and I felt it again
the dizziness like vertigo but less dramatic
now you're telling me your ambition
is to get a twenty-two year old girlfriend
like your brother who has a problem with drink
and keeping a house clean but manages
you tell me to get a beautiful girl
or a *pretty little thing* as you call her
to sit on his knee and be all over him
I want to say do you ever wake up and worry
about becoming a cliché but I don't I can't
be bothered to keep being disappointed in you
and the way your beautiful animal face turned out

6.

Your job was drinking. It was
the chore you assigned yourself
each night, a few cans with us
then taking three or four to bed
while you listened to music
on your headphones.

You drank steadily and well
and if we ever remarked
on the crushed cans pressed
like black and golden flowers
beneath your bed, it was never
in your hearing.

Last time I saw you it was summer,
at the top of the slag bank.
You were sunbathing, or maybe dead,
your chest and arms covered
in an angry rash. I knew it was you
because of the cans,

scattered like spoor around your tent.
I didn't recognise your eyes
or the way you moved.
You'd been sleeping outside for days,
told me the stars
were beautiful up here.

Here, you'd say, reaching out
to almost touch me on the arm,
ready to launch into another
of your stories, about your neighbors
or someone you'd met
on the street.

Here, you say, speaking now
though you're long gone, stretching out
the word so it becomes two syllables -
Ee aar, moving forward on your chair,
repeating the word over and over
until I turn to you, and listen.

24.

we walked into the beginning of summer and crossed a motorway to get to the woods you didn't care about fences or gates we thought nobody had ever been there the smell was earth and rotting wood and the only sound the distant singing of the motorway we walked to the park and sat on the swings and ate boiled sweets and you killed each wasp when they came to hover and sketch their way around the paper bag we wanted something to happen we were too young to know something was happening

we walked through the middle of summer and ran away from a man who pulled out his floppy dick and waved it apologetically in our direction we walked to your house you hated reading and writing you hated school but you'd built a pigeon loft from a map in your head and trained birds to fall from the sky into your hands you taught me about rollers you taught me about spinners you taught me about the mating of birds you held an egg up to the light and what was inside looked like a baby some days I wasn't allowed to see you

we walked toward the end of summer and lay down in a field where the grass was chest height we let the sun make its way across the sky did I imagine the man on horseback on top of the hill who was watching us as we rolled around in sweet smelling grass which trapped the heat which hid us from the world which hid us from everything but the sky maybe my heart made him up maybe my mind made him up we were young we stayed still as if staying still meant he wouldn't see we covered our faces you held my head to your shoulder when we looked again there was no horseman there was only you and I do you remember the horseman

29.

On the way from A wing to B wing
two prisoners start to circle each other

on the long corridor they call the high street,
where the leaves gather in corners

and the wind whistles past the canteen,
past the cell doors, through the high grilled windows.

They push their foreheads against each other,
their arms thrown back behind them.

A guard shoves me through a gate, a hand
in the small of my back, locks it after us.

We watch men emerge from closed doors
and gather around the two still locked together.

It's like an old black and white silent movie
except even the black is a washed-out grey –

their jumpers and jogging bottoms,
the doors a darker shade, the walls

an almost white, and just those leaves,
bright spots of colour, stirring a little

before they settle in the corner, brittle enough
to turn to dust if I could touch them

and not a sound from the men watching
or the two who are swinging at each other.

The alarm shrieks and prisoners drop to the ground
like fallen trees and we turn away.

Our men are waiting in the prison library
with poems on scraps of paper in their pockets.

Today Matt is leaving and Jack reads a poem,
asks him to never come back, forget they exist,

and Joe smiles like he's forgotten how,
and Luke tells me it rains in his mind, all the time,

and Arjun tells us about a country
where battles were fought with poems instead of swords

they are listening, some with their eyes closed,
their heads cradled in their arms,

some with their eyes wide open
and when the bell calls them back to cells

they walk out of the room and are transformed,
back to fallen trees, or they become the wall

and never leave, or they transform into a scrawl
of barbed wire and nobody ever touches them again,

or they become the bars of a locked gate
and cast their shadows on each other,

they become the silence, they become the corridor
and men walk up and down inside.

30.

Also my ex and that first morning I woke up with him,
wasting it going to work but returning two hours later
to find him still there, the fresh new joy of it.

Also the smell of sex in the room, taking my clothes off again,
thinking there would be many days like it,
thinking there might not be a day like this again.

Also that he likes it when I talk about him this way.
Also how he only rang when he'd had a drink.
Also I understood even then about drink,

the way it makes passing truths seem things
you cannot do without. Also I was a passing truth
to him. He was a passing truth to me.

Also sadness at never using the body in that way again.
Also remembering the times I was angry with him.
Midnight and he's throwing stones at my window.

I'm playing Beethoven's 5th to drown out his voice.
Also not understanding how it had come to this,
from the bed and those mornings,

the press of bodies and skin, to this,
him out in the dark wearing my nightie
with my name on his chest.

Also realising it was a child's nightie (bear, flowers)
and the shame of not knowing that till then.
Also his numerous requests for nudes which I ignore.

Also Polly, asking whether I'd heard of the valley of shit,
me wanting to answer, I know someone who lives in it,
honey. But maybe I misheard.

Maybe she said something else entirely.
Also Polly, asking did I know that magpies
are actually scared of shiny things?

And me remembering the strange gleam of him
and wanting to keep him where I could see him,
under my eye, in my bed, between my legs.

The loneliness sweet inside my chest and growing.
Also he called me *miss graceful arms* once in a text.
Also that my friends hated him.

Also that I swore he would never set foot in my flat again.
Also that stairwell. Stairs leading up to the roof
and that day slanting through my life like the brightest light.

Also that I left quickly, unhooked myself,
left him recovering himself, pulling himself together.
No, none of these, it was a gathering. Gathering himself in.

If you would like to read 'Doing Gender' turn to Page 107
If you would like to consider men, turn to 'Considering Men' on Page 138
If you would like to read 'Women's Images Of Men – Desire, Vulnerability And The Gaze' turn to Page 91

LYRIC VARIATIONS (1)

I am sitting at a table with friends, the type of friends I run with, who work in the shipyard or for the local council, the type of friends who run marathons and talk about running injuries and which races they are planning to attend, friends who have wives and children, friends who are all men, although that does not matter most of the time, friends who say things like 'Once my daughter is 16, that's it, I'm locking her up', friends who haven't thought about the way women's bodies are figured as owned, that someone else looking after your body and your sexuality, protecting/possessing it raises the question of what happens when they are not there to look after this body, this sexuality, friends who I would trust to walk me home late at night, friends who say 'he's running like a woman' and we all understand that this is an insult, though they do not understand that I might be hurt or changed by their words.

Sometimes I speak up, sometimes I just do not laugh when I am expected to, sometimes I ask a question they are not expecting, sometimes I get angry and disagree, sometimes I pretend I did not hear what they said, sometimes I just stay silent. Strangely, it is easier to write a poem about sexism or stand up on stage and read a poem about sexism or publish a poem about sexism than it is to say something in the moment, at that table, to turn myself into the 'feminist killjoy' (Ahmed, 2010:581) amongst a group of friends.

Why is it easier to talk about sexism and female desire in the space of a lyric poem? One answer to this question is the 'co-operative principle', which Jonathan Culler (drawing on Mary Louise Pratt's work on narrative) describes as a shared agreement that in a conversation, they are co-operating and saying something relevant. Culler argues that in literature, the co-operative principle is 'hyper-protected' and the 'convention that whatever is written will prove to be important is particularly powerful, and crucial in the functioning of many modern lyrics especially' (J. D. Culler, 2015:260).

This is a powerful counter-weight to the experience of describing sexism and finding out that 'what you aim to bring to an end some do not recognise as existing' (Ahmed, 2017:5-6). The co-operative principle cannot save the poet speaking about sexism or racism or any other 'ism' from all denials from an audience, as can be seen from some of the reader

responses detailed in this thesis. However, it does serve to carve out a space for the words to be heard in the first place.

There are other ways in which the form of the lyric poem supports a writer seeking to transform experiences of sexism and trauma into language, which I will return to throughout this section, but threaded throughout are assumptions that need to be unpicked about the use of the word 'lyric'. I found myself using this word without really considering what I meant by it.

While an outline of the history of the lyric poem falls beyond the scope of this thesis, it is useful to consider a brief overview of the historical context of the term and the ways it has been used to define a certain type of poetry, especially when considering how the contemporary lyric poem can engage with and extend these definitions and ideas about the lyric.

Historically, the lyric poem was seen as being usually spoken by a unified 'lyric I' who is separate from the poet. According to J.S. Mill, the lyric poem is always 'overheard' and is 'feeling confessing itself to feeling in moments of solitude' (Mill, 1860:95). These ways of thinking about lyric poetry have persisted throughout the centuries – as recently as 2006 the poet and critic Edward Hirsch described the lyric poem as a 'message in a bottle' and a 'solitude speaking to a solitude' (Hirsch, 2006).

Although the influence of Mill's thinking about the lyric is clearly present in Hirsch's writing, they differ slightly when considering the addressee of the lyric poem. Mill argues that the moment the poet addresses another, when 'the act of utterance is not itself the end, but a means to an end' then 'it ceases to be poetry, and becomes eloquence' (Mill, 1860:95). In contrast to this, for Hirsch, reading a poem is a 'particular kind of exchange between two people not physically present to each other' (Hirsch, 2006).

The idea of a unified lyric speaker, separate from the poet was 'consolidated and codified at mid-century by New Critics' (White, 2014:15). This unified lyric speaker, who will elevate personal experience to the universal, has led to criticism directed at the lyric in general as being a hostile space for writers who do not fit into the 'shared assumptions about experience, language and tradition' (Parmar and Kapil, 2017:29).

The criticism that a lyric poem is ‘personal’ rather than universal is most often levelled at women poets writing about subjects traditionally seen as occupying the feminine sphere such as domesticity, childbirth and the female body. In publishing my own work, I have been criticised on these terms, being told that my ‘poetry was personal, rather than political’ – a dismissal that is probably familiar to many women writers, and an incident which I discuss more thoroughly in ‘The Annihilation of Men’ (Page 125)

These assumptions are based on the premise that lyric poetry should elevate from the personal to the universal. A more interesting proposition might be if we engaged with lyric poetry in a different way. Instead of trying to draw an analogy from the poem to our own lives or experience we would sit with the discomfort of not drawing an analogy and inhabit and explored the ‘between-us’ that Irigaray talks about as being an important part of relationality.

If we did not expect to identify with every poem, but instead explored and examined what goes on when a poem isolates or annoys or connects with us, our reading practices would be enriched. Put another way, and referring back to Adrienne Rich’s poem ‘Trying to Talk With A Man’, when we read ‘Out here we are testing bombs’ (Rich, 2016:355), can we think of a lyric poem as a bomb that is being tested, as a way of testing ourselves and each other, rather than recognising (or not) our similarities?

This desire to recognise similarity or to feel familiar with a text is very human, and yet it risks reducing poetry and its effectiveness to whether the reader can identify with it. Helen Vendler in her introduction to the *Faber Book of Contemporary American Poetry* quotes one of the central lines from ‘Poem’ by Elizabeth Bishop saying that she hopes readers will say ‘ “[h]eavens, I recognise the place, I know it!” It is the effect every poet hopes for’ (Vendler, 1985). Charles Bernstein criticizes this impulse, arguing that he hopes that readers might say of *‘some* poems, “Hell, I don’t recognise the place or the time, or the ‘I’ in this sentence. I don’t know it’ (Bernstein, 1992).

Charles Bernstein was criticising the mainstream lyric tradition as he saw it, but his understanding of the definition and function of lyric poetry is just as narrow as Helen Vendler’s definition. In fact, any understanding of the lyric that has been discussed so far – that it is ‘solitude speaking to solitude’, that it can only ever be something ‘overheard’

and that lyric poetry is spoken by a single, unified speaker who does not need to address or take notice of an audience seems simplistic and doomed to failure.

White argues that the qualities outlined above that we think of as belonging to lyric poetry are actually 'lyric-reading assumptions' and that we are all engaged in a 'lyric-reading culture together' (White, 2014:35). She contests that both writers and readers of lyric poetry experience "lyric shame" which centres around our preconceived idea of a coherent, expressive lyric *I.* This preconception does not take into account that any reading of lyric poetry must reach across social, gendered, class and ethnic boundaries. Any lyric poem must reach across the boundary of the body, so the lyric poem as a 'message in a bottle' as defined by Edward Hirsch does not really exist.

White uses the example of Anne Sexton to dismantle assumptions about lyric poetry and so-called 'Confessional' poetry. Although Sexton's poetry is often described as highly personal, and criticised for this, White calls attention to the way that Sexton knowingly experiments with the space between the speaker in the poem and the audience and between the speaker of the poem and the poet. This experiment is what makes Sexton's work 'shameful'. The audience can 'no longer be "invisible listeners" and instead are turned into intimated readers "caught" in the act as unseemly voyeurs' (White, 2014:115). White contests that Sexton's poems 'draw on, foreground, and complicate the very fiction of "voicing" and "overhearing" that was so important to the conventional constructions of lyric that were paramount as Sexton began writing poems' (White, 2014:110). I would argue that all lyric poetry 'outs' both its author and its audience. Poets end up appearing from behind the curtain of language whether they want to or not, and in our own act of perception and our reading, we end up outing ourselves too.

As White points out throughout *Lyric Shame,* the binary between the lyric tradition and the avant-garde and LANGUAGE poetries is a misleading one. It is difficult, if not impossible to find a lyric poem that could be defined solely by the definitions of lyric that have become so entrenched. These labels are often used to fall back on when definitions of the genre are attempted, which only serve to narrow and constrict the possibilities of what the lyric can do. The use of shame is often deployed against women in particular when they write experiential lyric poetry, as if the fact that the content concerns women's experiences means that the poem has no structure or artistic merit.

The lyric poems that I am interested in writing trouble and challenge these 'lyric-reading assumptions'. Many of the poems in this thesis experiment with modes of address, and address the audience or reader directly. Charles Bernstein writes that in lyric poetry, the 'fourth wall' convention is upheld, in that '[n]othing in the text should cause self-consciousness about the reading process: it should be as if the writer & the reader are not present' (Bernstein, 1992). Although there are lyric poems that do this, there are just as many that do not.

However, this 'lyric-reading assumption' that is so widely prevalent means that when the audience feels themselves addressed, then the bedrock of ideas around lyric poetry shifts under their feet. The lyric is no longer addressed to unseen listeners and it can no longer be thought of as an accidental overhearing. Instead, audience and readers suddenly experience a 'sudden, problematic awareness of their own mediating presence as readers' (White, 2014:115).

This ability of the lyric to turn to and address the audience or reader directly is an important tool when writing about sexism and female desire, because of its potential to enlist the reader into different positions of spectator, witness, survivor or even perpetrator. It is an important tool, and yet it is one only in a list of techniques that make lyric poetry a more useful space to examine experiential sexism than prose, whether this is a journal, a novel, a short story or a news article.

Jonathan Culler argues that one of the most important features of lyric poetry is its use of 'triangulated address', where the audience or readers are addressed through someone else, whether this is a 'lover, a god, natural forces or personified abstractions' (J. D. Culler, 2015:8). The apostrophic figure is particularly important throughout this thesis, in that many of the poems are addressed to a 'you' and inhabit the 'overheard' character of the traditional lyric poem. Put another way, the 'gaze' of the poem is directed towards an unseen 'you' but often swings away from this 'you' to look back at the audience, breaking Bernstein's 'fourth wall'.

Culler also argues that the hyperbolic quality of the lyric should not be underestimated. It means that lyric can 'risk investing mundane occurrence with meaning' (J. D. Culler, 2015:18). The act of putting white space around an everyday occurrence of sexism makes

the everyday worthy of consideration, meaning that even small instances of sexism become impossible to dismiss as 'nothing' or not meaningful..

Writing about nothing when nothing is not what it seems. As set out earlier, the lyric poem utilizes the 'co-operative principle' to ensure that its content is seen by a reader to be of high value, and worth listening to. However, the lyric poem can relay an incident or anecdote without explaining its importance, relying on what Culler calls the 'lyric convention of significance: the fact that something has been set down as a poem implies that it is important now, at the moment of lyric articulation, however trivial it might seem' (J. D. Culler, 2015:282-283).

It is, then, the white space and line breaks of a lyric poem which call into existence the lyric convention of significance. Experiences and moments can be glossed over in prose – in a lyric poem, the reader is asked to pause and consider them. The white space makes the content harder to minimise or discount, and yet the white space signifies silence, the place where language has failed in some way, the place where time makes its presence felt. When Sara Ahmed says that '[t]he past is magnified when it is no longer shrunk. We make things bigger just by refusing to make them smaller' (Ahmed, 2017:40) the structure of the lyric poem supports this magnification.

Not only is the content of a lyrical poem assumed to be significant because of its form, Susan S.Lanser argues that '[l]yric poetry, with its conventional singularity, its commonplace anonymity, its almost axiomatic reliability, its likelihood of evoking aspects of its authors identity, and its relatively low narrativity, is primed for authorial attachment' (Lanser, 2008:213). She argues that the emotional truth of the poem is what readers attach to the author, rather than the specific events or situation used to illustrate this emotional truth (Lanser, 2008:215). This feature of lyric poetry is one reason why it is the most suitable format for discussing the theme of sexism, violence and trauma.

If you would like to read 'Lyric Variations (2) turn to Page 80
If you are not sure whether sexism exists, turn to 'Sexism Is A Slippery And Fluid Term' on Page 54
If you are interested in what we choose to look at in poetry, turn to 'Intimate Witness: Poetics Of Watching' on Page 112

12.

Once I knew a man who thought he knew everything. I often returned from work to find him asleep in my bed. It was like the sun had slipped itself between the sheets, or a lion, or something else born golden and sure of itself. Even though I knew all the stories about finding people in your bed, how it always ended badly – the three bears, the little girl with the red cape – what could I do but climb in beside him? He must have spent hours shaving his chest and back so that women like me could slide along him, as if we were bodies of water and he the dry and thirsty earth. The man who thought he knew everything never learnt that he didn't, and I realised too late. This was why he was the way he was, as if he'd been touched and turned to gold by a foolish, laughing king.

13.

After the reading a man waits around to tell me the poem I read about a beautiful man who thought he knew everything was objectifying how would it feel if the gender of the protagonist was reversed he says triumphantly I reply that it would feel like most other love poems in the course of human history and he says aha! so this is really a very ordinary subject and I say yes if you discount subversion and poetic tradition and female desire more accurately I only get to subversion and poetic tradition and female de before he interrupts to tell me how disappointed he is as I'm a better writer than this wasting my talent making cheap shots about men the man in my poem does spend the whole poem naked so maybe he is a little bit objectified but I like him that way now I start to write a poem about the opinionated man who is busy shaking his head at my misunderstanding of beautiful men and their complex desires which I've only skimmed over by not giving my man a voice of his own not allowing him to tell his own story to fully realise this poem I will have to make a general and sweeping statement about men isn't the man in your poem a bit one dimensional he opines can't you make him more interesting he says helpfully and I reply no I can't because that is the best thing about him or maybe I'm just wishing I said that maybe I just smiled and nodded my head

17.

She told me that when she woke, she was in the dark
in a strange room, fully clothed, apart from her knickers,
which she never saw again, apart from her top and bra,
pushed up round her throat. Imagine waking into silence,

to strange shapes in the dark, not knowing if you're alone.
Her shoes still on her feet. Her feet still in her shoes
and something deep inside aching, and nothing to do
except stumble from that bed and run away,

nothing to do but pass down the hallway like a ghost.
Like a ghost, disturbing nothing, holding her breath
until she was out in the crispness of a November morning,
walking along an avenue of silent trees

and fallen leaves. She told me she remembered
standing at a bar and a hand in the small of her back
that felt like fire. The world slowly turning and her
at the centre, no ghost yet, but getting smaller.

And she remembers a hand loosening a tie
but not what happened after. Nothing about a face.
Her body no longer hers. And somewhere is the man
who did this to her. And somewhere is the man

who must have put her in that bed and walked
that same avenue of trees, waiting for her to leave.
I learnt this when I was young, that these things
can happen, that it's possible to walk into a bar

one evening and wake up in a stranger's place
with someone's semen dried between your legs
and though your throat cannot remember saying no
your heart cannot remember saying yes.

23.

When her smile slips from her mouth
and her eyes drop to the floor

when she turns her face to the side, then down
and the president turns with a smirk to the crowds

there's no way we can know what he said.
Still, I'm there in her blue buttoned-up dress,

can feel the softness of her gloves
on my hands, there's that old familiar weight

pushing on my/her chest once again
and it's just like back then,

I/she does not move, I'm watching it
happen as if it's happening to another,

except it is, the people around me/her
see it and stay silent, I'm trapped in her/my life

and I'm rich, I'm so, so rich, and if I get out
it will only be back to my body, to my new life,

to read the posts on Facebook by friends
saying she knew what she was getting into,

she must have known what he was like
before she married him, stopping short

of saying she deserved it, she/I deserve it,
you/me deserve it.

28.

It's just me and him, alone in the staffroom
and he's talking about a colleague he hates.

I bet she has a big pubic mound. I bet
it's covered in spider's legs.

He's already on about the next thing wrong
with his life, with his job, with this woman

and I'm thinking about all the women I know,
how good they are at getting rid of things,

experts in the endurance of pain.
Look at me now for example, sitting here

not moving a muscle as I remember
taking a razor to my upper lip

because the boys at school called me names.
My mum saying *what have you done?*

You're too young to start this. Once you begin
you can't stop, there's no turning back.

After that there was bleach, the flame of it
burning my skin, testing myself –

how long could I stand it, how much
could I make disappear. The worst

was electrolysis, a needle into each follicle
and one dark hair at a time wished away.

Back in the staffroom he's saying
the next time someone annoys me

I should *flash them my tits,*
miming the action whilst making a cuppa.

Milk no sugar, I say with a smile
I hate myself for. I remember all the times

I heard that as a teenager. *Get your tits out*
for the lads. It sounds obscene now

but back then it was nothing, just one
of the things that boys said.

In my first class of the morning
a small boy asks why I have hair on my lip

and my stomach still drops like it used to
but I answer calmly this time.

All women do. Your mum probably does.
He looks outraged, maybe doesn’t believe me

and how can I blame him?
This is not what they told him

about bodies and women
and I long for the staffroom

and the easy misogyny
and the laughing along with it all.

34.

Many years ago, I lived in a house in the woods.
The woodcutter visited on nights when the moon
hid itself between the clouds.

Sometimes I go back to watch it happen again,
slip inside the body of the woodcutter,
to feel what it felt like to be him.

His arms and legs are heavier than mine.
The cigarettes on his heart, his lungs, his chest.
His finger to his lips, biting the nail to the quick.

I start to lose the border of where
his pain and mine begin and end.
I am in the body of the woodcutter.

But I am not the body of the woodcutter.
His body is a shallow dish and I'm a slick of water.
If I move too much, I'll spill out and over.

What I've really come back for is me,
ten years younger. Through his eyes,
she looks small and pale, a wisp of smoke

he could walk right through. Her face
turned in. Her mouth shut tight.
She smells of flight and all the things

this body hates. But when he presses her
to the ground, she vanishes inside herself
and nobody can reach her.

His tongue spits words I'd never say, and yet
here I am, inside his body saying them.
I leave the body of the woodcutter.

I leave it all behind – her, the house, the trees.
I return to myself, begin again.

Many years ago, I lived in a house in the woods.

If you would like to read 'All the Men I Never Married No.38' turn to Page 124
If you have lyric-reading assumptions, turn to 'Lyric Variations (1)' on Page 67

LYRIC VARIATIONS (2)

In ‘All The Men I Never Married No 34’ (Page 79) the tone of the poem recalls the language of fairy tales: ‘Many years ago, I lived in a house in the woods’. There is a woodcutter in the poem, and events quickly turn surreal when the ‘I’ of the poem goes back into the past and inhabits the body of the woodcutter-perpetrator.

This poem in particular plays and exploits many of the tropes and tools of the lyric poem. One of these is the tendency of the lyric poem to call into being other poems about the same subject. For example, a poem about a fox will conjure up in the mind of the well-read reader Ted Hughes’ poem ‘The Thought-Fox’, or a poem about a bird may conjure up Keats’ ‘Ode to a Nightingale’ (J. D. Culler, 2015:245).

By using the woodcutter, this poem conjures up and is related to not just the fairy tales where woodcutters are prevalent, such as Little Red Riding Hood, but also subversive takes on these fairy tales, such as Carol Ann Duffy’s *The World’s Wife,* where the traditional roles in fairy tales and myths are reversed, subverted and rewritten. In ‘Little Red-Cap’, Duffy’s Red Riding Hood follows the wolf willingly into the woods, into a sexual relationship, but one that is also built on a love of language. Red Riding Hood describes his lair, where ‘a whole wall was crimson, gold, aglow with books’ (C. A. Duffy, 2000:2-3). The woodcutter does not feature at all in Duffy’s poem – instead it is Red Riding Hood (or Little Red Cap as Duffy calls her) who takes the woodcutter’s axe and kills the wolf, finding her literal and literary ancestor inside his belly in the form of her grandmother’s bones. The axe is symbolic of the woodcutter of course, and in this poem, it is made clear that Little Red does not need the patriarchal protection of the woodcutter.

The speaker in my poem is not figured as Little Red Riding Hood, although she could be seen as a version of her. The poem examines the problematic nature of patriarchal protection by using the symbol of the woodcutter and turning him into a controlling and violent perpetrator.

Glick et al. identified two types of sexism – benevolent sexism and hostile sexism. Hostile sexism is self-explanatory, covering hostility ‘towards women who challenge male power’. Benevolent sexism is more complex and encompasses ‘attitudes that are subjectively

benevolent but patronising, casting women as wonderful but fragile creatures who ought to be protected and provided for by men' (Glick et al., 2004:715). In various studies, a correlation has been found between high levels of benevolent and hostile sexism (Glick et al., 2004), proving that these two types of sexism are interconnected and support each other. It is the connection between these two types of sexism that this poem explores.

In the poem, the problematic nature of the woodcutter as saviour/rescuer and symbol of a type of benevolent sexism is examined. The woodcutter visits 'on nights when the moon/hid behind the clouds.' At this point, it is not clear whether this is to protect or to attack the speaker on dark nights, but as the poem progresses, it becomes clear that the woodcutter is physically powerful, intimidating and violent. The speaker returns to the past to inhabit the body of the woodcutter and see herself 'ten years younger'. The speaker is 'small and pale, a wisp of smoke/he could walk right through'. It becomes clear this is an intimate yet violent relationship – the woodcutter 'presses her/to the ground'.

According to the national charity Refuge, 1 in 3 women in the UK will experience domestic violence during their lifetimes and it often starts with benevolent sexism – a jealous partner will be seen as being protective rather than possessive for example (Refuge, 2019). Fairy tales and stories of fathers/woodcutters 'protecting' their daughters or women configured as weaker and in need of protection feed into a tolerance of benevolent sexism.

The speaker in this poem is also configured as weaker – or at least her younger self is. She is a 'wisp of smoke'. However, her present-day self, whilst drawn to revisit this site of trauma again and again is not just reliving trauma. The speaker is seeking to understand not just what happened, but also to understand the woodcutter and how he behaved. In the same way that Duffy transforms the wolf and Little Red into much more complex figures, the poem seeks a new understanding of the woodcutter. Cathy Caruth argues that the impact of trauma is in its 'refusal to be simply located, in its insistent appearance outside the boundaries of any single place or time' (Caruth, 1995:9). The poem explores this phenomenon, inviting the reader to go back to the place and site of the trauma through memory, language and the senses.

Despite this poem utilizing symbols such as the woodcutter, and surrealist descriptions of going back into the past and entering the body of another, and even though it gives away no autobiographical details, I see this poem as highly autobiographical. It describes what it has been like for me to be experience trauma and be unable to move past it, to have a 'breach in the mind's experience of time' (Caruth and ProQuest, 1996:61).

Gregory Orr imagines the lyric poem as a 'threshold between disorder and order' (Orr, 2002:51), linking the threshold with a doorsill or doorway and going as far as to compare the rectangular shape of the page 'as the doorframe in which we seek shelter' (Orr, 2002:52). He says that '[i]t is on a threshold, at the edge, where we are most able to alter our understanding of the world and of our own lives in it' (Orr, 2002:53). This poem was a 'threshold' poem for me, in that the act of writing it helped me to shape an experience and alter my understanding of the world and my own life. Writing the poem helped me think through the ways that benevolent sexism had impacted my own life and my way of being in the world.

The poem is firmly embedded in the lyric poem tradition in that its mode of address is to an unseen other. Although it is not quite breaking the 'fourth wall', the act of repetition at the end of the poem, when the text is almost like a snake eating its own tail as it circles back to its beginning draws attention to the fact that this is a poem, and there is a knowingness there to the positionality of speaker and audience or reader, and how much information the poem allows to pass between itself and its audience.

Lyric poems, according to Jonathan Culler are rarely in the past tense, because 'the past tense is a narrative tense' (J. D. Culler, 2015:279). What is more common is for the lyric poem to begin in the past and move to the present, or as Culler puts it, the past is 'explicitly pulled into the lyric present' (J. D. Culler, 2015:286). Things are a little different in the poem under discussion. It begins in the past quite conventionally 'Many years ago I lived in a house in the woods'. This past tense continues for the first stanza. It is not until stanza 2 that the reader or audience are brought into the present, only for the 'lyric present' to be pulled backwards into the past, as they are asked to follow the speaker on a journey into the body of the other.

Lyric is ‘not timeless but a moment of time that is repeated every time the poem is read’ (J. D. Culler, 2015:295). What does it mean for a poet, what does it mean for a reader or an audience to be asked to repeat a moment of time, a journey, to be asked to look, and look again, and not look away, when what they are looking at is trauma?

In the same way that Rosalind Gill calls for a new definition of sexism as an ‘agile, dynamic, changing and diverse set of malleable representations and practices of power’ (Gill, 2011:62) perhaps a new conceptualisation of what lyric poetry is and can be is needed. Critics such as Jonathan Culler have begun to theorise and create models of lyric poetry, calling for a re-imagining of lyric poetry as a ‘series of variations’ rather than a developing linear history (J. Culler, 2013:245).

There is room and scope for the lyric poem to be a potent, radical and change-making space in which to discuss experiences of sexism. One possibility is to re-vision the lyric as it was once thought of in ancient Greece – as discourse ‘that aims to praise or persuade – as epideictic discourse’ (J. D. Culler, 2015:50).

Carolyn Forché, perhaps best known for coining the term ‘poetry of witness’ argues for a new kind of poetry that combines the personal, political and the social. In the introduction to her anthology *Against Forgetting: Twentieth-Century Poetry of Witness* she says ‘[t]he distinction between the personal and the political gives the political realm too much and too little scope; at the same time, it renders the personal too important and not important enough…We need a third term, one that can describe the space between the state and the supposedly safe havens of the personal. Let us call this space “the social”’(Forché, 1993:31).

It may seem inappropriate to include poetry written about sexism under the heading of ‘poetry of witness’, but maybe this is that tendency to minimise emerging again. Forché says that she ‘decided to limit the poets in the anthology to those for whom the social had been invaded by the political in ways that were sanctioned neither by law nor by the fictions of the social contract’ (Forché, 1993:46). Experiences of sexism and gender-based violence and misogyny are examples of how the personal is invaded by both the political and the social, so maybe ‘poetry of witness’ is an apt description for some of the poems included in this thesis.

Mary Jean Chan refers to Claudia Rankine's work as 'bearing intimate witness to racial injustice' (Chan, 2018:141). Can lyric poetry be the threshold, the doorway to bear intimate witness to gender based violence, misogyny and the resulting 'insidious trauma' (Root, 1992) which follows?

Rankine's form of 'intimate witness' in *Citizen* is carried out by her use of micro-observational techniques which challenge 'assumptions about the political significance of the micro-scale' (Love, 2016:424). This close attention to detail and refusal to look away from insidious trauma invites readers to think about the wider implications of the small-scale social scenes that she documents.

Robert M. Emerson argues that close attention to interactions makes accounts 'more trustworthy, more difficult to fabricate, reducing the risks of misrepresenting social life' (Emerson, 2009:536). Whilst critics of the technique of focusing on small-scale social scenes say that 'minute attention to the world as it is constitutes an endorsement of the status quo' (Love, 2016:427), the act of placing these social scenes inside the framework of a lyric poem gives them significance and importance. Lyric poetry, with its history of isolating a 'moment in time' is perfectly placed to explore the 'everyday as a significant site for the recognition and negotiation of race, gender, class and sexual inequality' (Love, 2016:427).

The form of the lyric poem transforms the everyday and makes it extraordinary, allowing structure and content to work together to achieve their effect. This hyperbolic quality of the lyric means that an image, such as William Carlos Williams' celebrated red wheelbarrow glazed by rain can become an epiphany. Using lyric poetry to write about experiences of sexism does not replicate the world as it is – it holds up a moment in time and asks the reader to look at the world as it was and as it is in the lyric present, and once this moment is made significant, something has changed, and if something has changed, nothing can be the same again, and the reader must make a decision as to what they do with their new-found knowledge.

Poetry can take the material of individual social interactions and transform it to social knowledge 'through the medium of relations' (Love, 2016:423) and this social knowledge

of what it is to be a woman will encompass sexism and female desire and at the root of both of these things an exploration of power – who has it, and who does not.

Emerson urges us to pay attention to the 'ordinary, small troubles that mark everyday life in any society…living with or around disturbance or upset' (Emerson, 2009:537). The problem with studying sexism in this way is twofold – firstly, that it is often unacknowledged, so it is difficult to gather evidence of it. Secondly, when it is acknowledged, it is often reduced to an 'ordinary, small trouble'. The recounting of the experience in a poem transforms it to something much larger for both the intended audience and the writer.

Emerson identifies three types of responses to 'ordinary troubles'. These are managerial responses where the complainant responds in 'ways that avoid or minimize confrontation', dyadic complaints, where the complainant 'directly complains to and confronts the other…usually in cautious and moderated fashion'. The third type of response is distancing and extreme responses which are 'systematic avoidance and/or strongly antagonistic punitive actions taken toward the other' (Emerson, 2009:539).

When I read Emerson's definition of the three types of responses, I recognised my own responses to sexism as mainly managerial responses in my everyday life. These could be choosing to walk a different way, laughing at something I do not think is funny, minimising something in my own thinking so that it does not upset me, pretending not to notice or hear something. The marked characteristic of managerial responses is that the person who has caused them often does not notice that anything has changed.

Does it help me to theorise my responses to sexism, to have a name for it? Yes, and no. Whether I will respond differently in everyday life is unpredictable, but I understand that writing lyric poetry about experiences of sexism is a response that does not seem to fall into any of the three responses. It is not a direct complaint and confrontation of the other. It cannot be, unless the individual who inspired the poem was in the audience and recognised the incident as something that he was part of. It is not a punitive response in that nothing bad is going to happen to the other. However, the lyric poem asks us to generalise from the individual to the social, so although it is not a direct confrontation of

the other as an individual, the poem can confront the 'oppressor which is planted deep within each of us' (Lorde and Ddc, 1984:123).

Lyric poetry as documentation, as a biography of violence, as feminist work. Lyric poetry as testimony, as intimate witnessing. Lyric poetry as social engagement, as epideictic discourse, as persuasion, as praise, as a path from past-to-present, from present-to-past. Lyric poetry as relational, as between-us, as a way of looking. Lyric poetry as micro-observation, as experiential, as personal, as political, as social, as rooted in history, as a repeating moment in time, as a way of generating empathy. Lyric poetry as a beautiful failure, as a container of silence, as a holder of the long, slow sounds, the echoes. Lyric poetry as implication and uncertainty (Graham, 2000:163). Lyric poetry as holder of symbol, of image. Lyric poetry as space where these things slide away or shatter or never existed at all. Lyric poetry as place of transformation for the reader, for the writer. Lyric as the place where nothing transforms at all.

If you would like to read 'Something In The Telling: A Poetics Of Relationality' turn to Page 60
If you would like to read 'To Give An Account Of The Self' turn to Page 144
If you would like to read 'All The Men I Never Married No.40' turn to Page 20

POEMS OF DESIRE: A MODE OF ATTENTION

14.

I imagine you at home on the other side of the world
in a town I don’t know the name of, driving your wife mad,

leaving your laptop in the fridge when you go to get a beer.
It’s hot. You’re wearing shorts and a dark t-shirt.

Your white feet look like two fish washed up on a beach
and gasping their last breath. I know this although

I’ve not seen your feet in this life. The last time
I saw you, you were fully clothed, black jacket, jeans

but now without them, I can see you stand with a stoop,
your shoulders hunched, your body apologetic.

You are singing something I can’t make out, your high
thin voice threads through the window and across

time zones and oceans to me here. When I think
of your voice, my soul drifts downwards inside my body

like a leaf falling side to side through the air.
Remember that night we were leaning into each other

like two doors loosening from their hinges?
Remember the darkness and how we almost

held hands? It wasn’t even that I wanted to.
But I didn’t not want to. It was complicated.

1.

This is not love. We are not speaking of love.
We are singing of Hardy: *Woman much missed,*
how you call to me, call to me we are speaking
only of this. Outside I shout the whole thing

into the wind (there is darkness between us,
there is the ocean.) My lips are moving
but nothing is heard. This is not love but it is
something like it. Here we are with the loyalty

of clouds. We are drifting, two boats on the water.
You have a little wild in you, little wolf.
This is what happens when the body is a boat
and the heart is high and bright as a lantern.

2.

I knew he was dangerous, knew he was not mine,
knew he belonged to another who he'd left behind
easy as slipping off a coat, knew that was a bad sign
but didn't know enough to turn aside, to turn my back,
to not pick up the phone when his name appeared.
Oh I knew nothing back then, I thought sex was a promise
that would keep being fulfilled, I thought love was a knife
pressed to the throat, not just his, not just mine,
I thought there was a blade in each of our hands.
I am telling this now so he appears, as real as that first night
when we didn't sleep, the slight red stubble of his beard,
the freckles covering his arms, his gaze, his attention
all mine, oh back then I never wanted it to end,
the touching, the looking, I knew nothing
of how a person is already fractured or broken
by the time we meet them. It was just like Rilke said,
his gaze was a lamp turned low, although at that point
I'd not read Rilke, knew nothing about what it means
to be seen, what it means to change or be changed,
to appear, to burst like a star.

26.

You are telling me about the city, about the city starving,
about the siege and forgive me for only half listening,

until you mention the woman with the cigarette
held between her fingers then quick between her lips,

how she stubbed each one out again and again,
her hair covering her shoulders. Forgive me for thinking

of her face when you're talking about the city,
about the city starving, forgive me for concentrating

on her skin, the woman with the nervous smile,
the woman with the sibilant name. All I can imagine

is her hair covering her shoulders while outside
your city dwindled to nothing, forgive me for not asking

how you survived in there. It's true that at first
I was distracted by your eyes until you mentioned

the woman then she bloomed in my mind,
her bare shoulders, her long hair and now I know

something is ending when you say make love
and I say sex, but either way I realise I don't want to,

or more accurately I don't want to stop wanting it,
I'd rather stay here, poised on this edge with you,

neither one thing or the other, a beautiful balancing trick,
half knowing nothing, half knowing your body,

and please carry on looking at me in that way,
I feel unclothed when you do, just for you,

though not nude, but naked with you in this space.
But don't assume I'm the woman in that place.

If I'm anything, I'm the cigarette, burning.
And you are the city. And you are starving.

If you do not want to look away, turn to 'Not Looking Away: A Poetics Of Attention' on Page 27
If you are interested in what can happen to the female poet when performing, turn to 'The Body Is The Blindspot Of Speech' on Page 118
If you are feeling looked at, turn to 'All The Men I Never Married No.40' on Page 20

WOMEN’S IMAGES OF MEN – DESIRE, VULNERABILITY AND THE GAZE

In 1980 an exhibition called *Women’s Images of Men* appeared at the ICA in London organised by a collective of women artists including Jacqueline Morreau, Catherine Elwes, Pat Whiteread and Joyce Agee. One of the aims of the exhibition was to find out ‘what women’s attitudes towards men’ were, and to highlight the ‘substantial group of women artists…using figuration and narrative to explore their ideas’ (Kent and Morreau, 1990a:13). At the time the use of figurative techniques were rejected by both the feminist avant-garde and the male mainstream.

This exhibition on the ‘hidden subject of men’ was a success and attracted huge audiences with over a thousand people a day attending. It broke all previous attendance records at the ICA (Kent and Morreau, 1990a:13). However, it was the reaction of the (usually male) critics which was most noteworthy. Of the ninety-eight works exhibited, twenty were male nudes, and only two of those featured representations of a penis or genital area. Despite this, the exhibition was described as a ‘veritable forest of penises’. The female artists were described in terms such as ‘overwrought ladies’ who thought of ‘nothing but the male’s sex organs’, of using a ‘shrill scream of pain and frustration’, and that the work was ‘hysterical overkill’ (Kent, 1990:58).

Looking back at the exhibition from a vantage point of forty years and through the medium of an accompanying book of essays and photographs edited by Sarah Kent and Jacqueline Morreau (Kent and Morreau, 1990b), it is striking how many of the concerns and themes explored are still relevant and being fought/thought over today. At times it feels as if nothing has changed from that seminal moment in the 1980’s, which so alarmed the male critics and the art establishment.

For example, in her essay ‘Looking Back’, Sarah Kent points out that ‘A woman who refuses to avert her eyes in the social or academic worlds and insists on speaking out risks ridicule or violence even today’ (Kent, 1990:55). In the course of my own ‘looking’, my own ‘speaking out’, I have experienced ridicule, dismissal, denial, minimization and verbal

violence, although this has not extended to actual physical violence. Depressingly, her words are as true today as they were in 1990 when they were published.

When a woman speaks out about sexism, the cry of 'Not All Men' will often (soon) be heard. Some men see a woman looking at a man, hear her talking about him, and feel defensive, because to them, every man is an Everyman. Maurice Blanchot wrote that 'the question which kept interrogating the writer while he was writing – though he may not have been aware of it – is now present on the page; and now the same question lies silent within the work...' (Blanchot, 1994:300-301). The question I thought I was asking was how to use lyric poetry to write about sexism and female desire, but there is another question that is haunting this thesis, these poems, this language, which is what happens when men are looked at, when they are placed as the object of the gaze? What happens to you, and what happens to me?

In her book *The Poethical Wager,* Retallack defines 'poethics' as 'an attempt to note and value traditions in art exemplified by a linking of aesthetic registers to the fluid and rapidly changing experiences of everyday life'. Retallack's concept of 'poethics' is helpful in terms of my own practice in that it calls for art that is constantly in conversation with our daily life. When Retallack says that '[l]iterature (in contrast to journal writing) is an entry into public conversation' (Retallack, 2003:11), I agree with her, and when I read '[w]ho knows what might lead some *us* or another to become better at transfiguration than re-enactment' (Retallack, 2003:19) I feel shame, and I feel hope at the same time, because I know that although these poems invite re-enactment, they also offer space for transformation and change, though I am not in control of whether one or the other will happen. I do know that I have been transformed. I also know that I have re-enacted past trauma, past violations in both the writing and the performing of these poems. I have uncovered sexism in the room and I could not make it leave. Blanchot tells us that with the act of writing you can be certain that 'what bursts into the light is none other than what was sleeping in the night' (Blanchot, 1994:305) and this haunting, this question plays itself out every time these poems are performed, every time they are read.

In Kent's essay, she also explores how 'the right to look is equated with sexual dominance', pointing out that when a woman artist exhibits a male nude, 'she will seem to be flaunting her immorality, while inviting the reader to join in her intimacy with the model – in our culture an obscene idea' (Kent, 1990:57-58). Twenty years later, I read a poem which lists ex-partners and intimate details and ask in the poem 'are you surprised, are you judging me yet' and an audience member shouts 'yes' (see 'Yes, I Am Judging You' (Page 22). Twenty years later, at the start of a reading, I say the title of my collection, and usually people smile or laugh. I tell them about numbering the poems and what number I have reached, and they laugh again. Although 'obscene' is maybe too strong a word, there is something surprising, maybe even shocking, in a woman talking about men that she has been intimate with, in conversation and in poetry. There is something that should remain hidden that is being brought out into the open.

The feminist critic and art historian Rosie Parker argued that '[w]hen we use men's bodies to reveal our perspective on society there is perhaps a greater chance that we will be heard – and understood' (Parker, 1980:6). I do not want to 'use' a man's body to reveal my perspective, but at times during this thesis it has felt like men's bodies are in the way, that I have to 'look' at them to 'see' clearly. I read that '[t]he present is, in fact, made out of the residue of the past' (Retallack, 2003:10) and I understand that to write as a woman, from a woman-place, I have to write about, towards, through men. Rosie Parker acknowledged in her review of the exhibition that some criticism of it came from feminists who saw an exhibition looking at men as 'wasting energy on men' but she did not agree, stating that the exhibition 'shifted power relations' so that 'presented through women's eyes, men can no longer be Man' (Parker, 1980:6).

Making men the object of the gaze of these poems has troubled me throughout the writing of them. Shoshana Felman also admits to being troubled by these thoughts, talking about how some of her writing was prompted by the 'desire to be understood by – and to reach an understanding with a man', asking herself whether this desire betrays the 'feminist perspective and my feminist commitment' (Felman, 1993:124). Adrienne Rich writes about her sense in Virginia Woolf's *A Room of One's Own* that Woolf was aware,

even while talking to a room full of women that she was being overheard by men (Rich, 1971:37).

One of the places Adrienne Rich led me, a desire line I followed was to the poetry of Judy Grahn, a poet she much admired. Reading Grahn's *The Work of a Common Woman* transformed something inside me, and I wanted to write my own versions, my own women, but I could not 'see' through the bodies of women to what was really happening. Many of my poems about men are really portraits of them, and owe something to Judy Grahn's portraits of women, but still, I was troubled by my desire to write about men, my desire to be understood by them until I read more of Felman's essay. She writes that eventually she realised the importance of addressing women and de-centering men, and that whilst she is also conscious of being 'overheard', she means to be 'overheard and heard' by men (Felman, 1993:127).

Felman asks a series of questions, and these questions in her text leak out into my life so that I carry them around with me. She asks '[w]hom do we write for?' and it is this moment when I know I am writing for women. She asks '[w]hom do we wish to be read by?' and this answer I am ashamed of, because I want to be read by women, but there is a small part of me that wants to be read by men, that craves their approval. She asks '[w]hom are we afraid to be read by?' and I know the answer to this one as well (Felman, 1993:130).

In the poems which explore experiences of sexism, I want to be 'heard' and I am not afraid of being overheard, of the conversations or criticism about the work or my decision to write about sexism. But in the poems which I think of as poems about desire, which could also be called love poems, or poems to failed relationships, or ex-boyfriend poems, I want only to be overheard because I am afraid, though these poems, on the surface, are the least challenging.

All The Men I Never Married contains poems I am afraid to read, which I call desire poems. I cannot call them love poems because each one failed. The knowledge of that failure is implicit in the title of the book, implicit in the mind of the reader from the first

poem, that this one is just one in a series of ones. Sarah Kent writes that if women 'intend, like men, to speak of sexual pleasure publicly through the medium of the male nude they must learn to do so without discomfort, embarrassment, guilt or a sense of disloyalty to their men, and to make images that speak without ambivalence, ambiguity or self-consciousness' (Kent, 1990:62).

I read this essay and it gives me courage to start to perform these poems, to experiment. The first time I can feel my face heating up and tension in my shoulders. Each time becomes a little easier. At one reading I listen as a male poet tells another female poet that 'she is too pretty to be a poet, all the female poets he knows are ugly'. Is it this that I am afraid of, how women poets can be reduced to their bodies, and how performing poems about desire can invite this to happen? After he says this, the female poet tells the other female poets at the festival. We gather together to warn each other about men at the festival we must be wary of, and the power of these comments are diluted, held up to the light as ridiculous instead of being carried within us.

I write more poems of desire. I want readers to wonder how much desire one life can hold.

I want my poems to crystallize 'around an implicit or explicit center: an image, a scene, a thing or event'. I want to take this material of personal interaction, of social interaction, and transform it into social knowledge (Love, 2016:433) through the 'poetics of desire' (Alford, 2016:7). Alford's 'poetics of desire' is characterised by 'inflections of interest and lack' (Alford, 2016:7) and her understanding of lack is that it is characterised by 'physical and temporal distance' (Alford, 2016:9). She distinguishes between desire and love poetry, arguing that in the poetry of love, the distance is 'less central and greater emphasis is placed on appreciation and enjoyment of the relation of proximity', whereas in desire poems, the relation is 'more dominantly characterised by distance, by not having' (Alford, 2016:8).

Alford argues that poems that take place after 'having, of union' are no longer poems of desire. However, I would argue that poems that take place afterwards (after sex or after a

relationship has ended) can still be poems of desire, and driven by a poetics of desire, but they must contain two things. The first is the 'lack' or 'distance' which is so important to Alford. The second is that the object of the desire must be foregrounded. Alford argues that the distance between poetry of desire and a form such as the ode is that in poetry of desire, the 'subject's consciousness of its own standing in relation to the object' (Alford, 2016:12) is paramount.

My poetry of desire is characterised by a temporal distance. This temporal distance is an inbuilt resistance to the 'closing of desire's gap' (Alford, 2016:10), enabling the sustaining of desire throughout the poetry. Although many of the poems are written in past tense, as is usual with many lyric poems, they often pull the past into the lyric present. The true 'lack' or 'distance' is not just temporal, but also a distance of understanding between the subject and the one who is 'looked upon', and a distance of understanding as to what was really happening.

In 'All The Men I Never Married No.2' (Page 88) these distances of time and understanding are meshed together. The poem is not addressed to a 'you' but instead to an unseen and undefined audience. It has the air of explanation with its first line which reiterates what was known, while the past tense places the text firmly in the mode of poetics of desire with the repetition of the word 'knew' five times in six lines.

The emphasis on what is known and not known continues throughout the poem, as it becomes clear that what the speaker thought they knew was false: ('I thought sex was a promise/that would keep being fulfilled,/I thought love was a knife/pressed to the throat'). In line 10, the poem pulls the action into the lyric present, but this is also done in a 'knowing' way. The speaker says 'I am telling this now so he appears'. In this line, the face of the poem turns directly towards the audience, acknowledging that they are present, that they are watching.

In *Lyric Shame,* Gillian White discusses how the poet Anne Sexton 'exposes' the audience, by 'figuring the lyric audience and foregrounding the lyric addressee' which reminds us that 'lyric is an exchange subject to a poetic culture' (White, 2014:111). White argues that

many reviewers were hostile to Sexton's work because they believed her poems reflected her lived life, which then meant that they felt 'suddenly addressed by, or in the presence of, a historically viable person' which disturbs and dismantles the critic and audiences' traditional role in regards to lyric poetry which was to be the 'unseen overhearer' (White, 2014:115).

This exploration of the space between the I and the you in the poem, and the writer and reader is important in terms of expanding how we think about lyric poetry, and what it is capable of.

The poem also experiments with the male gaze when the 'he' appears both to the speaker and to the reader or audience. He is figured by a listing of body parts 'the slight red stubble of his beard,/the freckles covering his arms'. This method of description, using body parts is a tried and tested method of description by male poets when describing women and can be seen throughout the history of poetry. However, the poem draws attention to the action of the gaze in the following lines, when the list of body parts changes to 'his gaze, his attention / all mine'. In a book of poems which focus the poetic gaze on men, it felt risky to call attention to the male gaze in this poem, and riskier still not to condemn it, to write about desiring the gaze. Looking is as active an action as touching in this poem and the speaker 'never wanted it to end'.

The desire to understand another and to understand the self runs through this poem, but the understanding that is reached is in the realisation that it is impossible to know 'how a person is already fractured or broken/by the time we meet them'. Although the poem does not elaborate on what this brokenness is, this fracture, this realisation is distanced again by the lurch of the poem back to the past with an interjection of 'oh back then'. This temporal distance is expanded further with a reference to Rainer Maria Rilke's 'Archaic Torso of Apollo', which is figured in the poem as a text not known in the past that the poem is reaching back to. The lack is one of knowledge, of understanding. The lack is one of reading the right thing. The lack is one of knowing. The lack is of the desired one, who appears only briefly in the text before disappearing again.

The poem directs the gaze of the audience to focus on the poem by Rainer Maria Rilke, and on a specific translation by Stephen Mitchell, with the distinctive translation of 'his gaze, now turned to low' (line 4). The poem directs the gaze of the audience to a poem which is about an encounter with another piece of art. The piece of art in question has no gaze because it is headless, and yet, it is a poem which is all about looking, and being seen. It fixes its own gaze back on the audience with its final last-minute turn when it tells us 'You must change your life' (line 14). Or perhaps it is the speaker telling themselves this. Or the poet telling himself to change his life. The poem tells us 'here there is no place/that does not see you'. It is a poem about being seen, being known, being perceived by art.

A poetics of desire with a gaze that passes from one man to the next and to the next subverts expectations and traditional power hierarchies. This is a poetics of desire where none of the endings are explained or clear – where the story of the ending is not elaborated on. A true poetics of desire addresses the complexities of desire, not the path from one desire to another, but the place of desire, the landscape that desire took place in.

Alford points out that '[t]he relation between *I* and *thou,* or between *I* and the absence of a *thou,* is fundamental to the lyric tradition from its earliest instantations'. This relationship, the 'address of gaze and speech between one and the other', is, according to Alford, the 'primary ethical and relational dynamic in the poem' (Alford, 2016:7). It may be a relational dynamic, but it is not necessarily the primary one. In any poem, there are other relational dynamics taking place, most notably between the writer and the reader and between the *I* of the poem and the audience or reader, and between language and the writer/reader, and between language and meaning.

In 'All The Men I Never Married No.14' (Page 87) the address is to an unseen 'you'. The poem is in couplets, mirroring this intimate address between the 'I' and the 'you'. As the poem progresses, it becomes clear that it is about a relationship that is not clear-cut. The speaker is imagining the 'you' into existence, though she has not seen his feet, she imagines what they look like. The speaker and the 'you' never quite touch. They are 'like

two doors loosening from their hinges' and 'almost hold hands'. They are separated by both distance – the 'you' in the poem is 'on the other side of the world' and by time as the moments of intimacy took place in the past. They are also separated by the speaker wanting two things at once and the complication of this.

In 'All The Men I Never Married No 26' (Page 90) my intention was to write a poem that more clearly fitted the poetics of desire described by Alford. Her perception of desire as 'a mode of poetic attention' which is 'brought into tension by inflections of interest and lack' (Alford, 2016:7) encouraged me to experiment with a poem set in the present tense, but one which was full of interest towards the desired 'thou' but also full of distance, full of not-having, not-happening, of almost-happening. This poem is also in couplets and is again addressed to an unseen 'you', situating itself firmly in the lyric tradition, with the audience being placed in the position of 'overhearing', rather than being directly addressed in the poem.

The poem recounts a conversation, or at least a telling of a story, however there is no direct speech. The story is reported second hand and has all the unreliability and shakiness of ground that any second-hand story has. The poem proceeds in long, tumbling sentences, with insistent repetitions of both images 'the woman with the sibilant name', the 'woman with the cigarette', the 'woman with long hair covering her shoulders' and instructions ('forgive me'). These long sentences give an air of breathlessness, but also of things passing too quickly to make sense of, to get hold of, as if the moment the poem is recounting can only be seen through misted glass, rather than clearly. There is a hint of a larger historical story playing out in the 'city starving' but this is not elaborated on, and the significance of the woman is never explained. The long sentences, the couplet structure, the address to a 'you' all work to make the poem feel incredibly intimate.

Alford argues that 'there are many poems of not yet having' as well as 'poems of having had' but there are no poems 'situated upon the zero point of having, of union just so'. This is primarily because 'language disappears' at this point (Alford, 2016:10). This poem is a poem 'of not having' but it is a poem that tries to teeter on the brink of not-having, to

stay ‘poised on this edge’. Again, the male gaze as something desired comes into this poem when the speaker says ‘and please carry on looking at me in that way,/I feel unclothed when you do, just for you,/though not nude, but naked with you in this space’. These lines recall John Berger’s comments in *Ways of Seeing* when he writes ‘To be naked is to be oneself. To be nude is to be seen naked by others and yet not recognised for oneself’ (Berger, 1972:54). Being poised on the edge allows the speaker to be ‘seen’, to ‘be oneself’.

The end of the poem changes in tone. It is the only place where the ‘you’ of the poem could feasibly be a direct address to the reader or audience. The audience are implicated by this direct challenge, this instruction not to assume meaning or the significance of symbols or images used in the poem. Both the unseen ‘you’ and the audience are told ‘don’t assume I’m the woman in that place’. Instead the *I* is the ‘cigarette, burning’ and the *you,* both the audience and the unseen ‘you’ are figured as the city, which is starving. The starving audience, hungry for details, for confessionalism, sensationalism, the starving you, hungry for sex, to move from being ‘poised on the edge’.

If you would like to read ‘Lyric Variations (1)’ turn to Page 67
If you would like to read a poem filled with women, turn to Page 19
If you would like to read ‘What Is Between-Us’ turn to Page 133

AN ELECTRIC CURRENT: POEMS OF WILFULNESS

20.

When he tells me I'm not allowed to play with cars
because I'm a girl, I bring his arm up to my mouth
and bite. I'm sent to the Wendy House to pretend

to be good. Blank-faced dolls stare up at me.
Pretend oven filled with plastic fish-fingers.
Pretend windows with flowery curtains

sewn by someone else's mother. Pretend hoover,
pretend washing machine. Pretend teapots
and tea set. I watch through a gap in the wall

as my teacher sits in her chair, crossing her legs
in the way she told us only yesterday
we should copy. *Be ladylike* she said.

Stop showing your knickers. I'm burning in here
as she calls the class to order, waits for them
to cross their legs and settle. I long to sit

at her feet, listen to all the old stories
of sleeping and women who wait to be rescued.
The book is a bird, its wings held tight in her hands.

She bends the cover back so the spine cracks,
balances it on one palm, turns to me and tells me
turn around, at once, face the wall.

21.

That a man approached you in a nightclub.
That you were polite at first, then turned your back.
That he insisted on giving you his number.
That you put it in your pocket.
That you danced with your friend all night.
That he stood and watched you.
That you were drinking tequila.
That you licked salt from the back of your hand.
That he was waiting outside.
That when he grabbed your arm and spun you round, you snapped.
That you've always had a temper.
That you were not afraid.
That you swung your fist and clipped his jaw.
That he kicked you between the legs.
That he shouted *I will end you.*
That you fell to the pavement.
That he tried to kick you again.
That he shouted *I will end you, I will end you, I will end you.*
That a bouncer came and held him back.
That the police were called.
That he vanished into the night.
That you were taken to the station.
That he turned up with his lawyer.
That you still hadn't sobered up.
That he was smirking.
That it was fresher's week.
That you were in pain.
That it was hard to explain about his number in your pocket.
That you became afraid.
That you were advised not to press charges.
That you hit him first.
That this all happened many years ago.
That you laugh about it now.
That you say *well, I shouldn't have hit him.*
That I both agree and disagree with this statement.
That being our bodies in public is a dangerous thing.
That being in public is a dangerous thing.
That our bodies are dangerous things.

25.

If I’m ever bored of monogamy,
I’ll come and find you,
we’ll go to bed and do

things we would not do
with any other (I will not name
them here.) I don’t blame

you for asking, I blame
you for not asking sooner.
I used to think you were a user.

I thought I knew what a user
was. I thought it was just lust
but you were the best

at some things, the best
that I’ve known. How we pretended
none of it mattered! It’s splendid

to look back on it now, it was splendid
to know you. If I’m ever bored of monogamy
I know who to turn to.

31.

One of my exes shared my poem on Facebook
and wrote *I'm glad you didn't write one about me*
and I replied *how do you know I didn't write one about you*

and he wrote back *because only the women in my family*
know the real me so I replied *I think you've misunderstood*
what a poem is for then he wrote *ok I'll let you win this one*

just like you won my heart (poem) which pissed me off
because of his use of brackets. Also, there was no winning
of hearts. Once I saw him sniffing cocaine

from a toilet seat in the ladies' loo and when he turned
and looked back at me his eyes were bright
like crushed flowers left inside a book.

I never saw him cry or get angry or shout.
I made him laugh but couldn't tell you what it felt like.
I never borrowed one of his shirts and forgot to give it back

although there were nights I wore his boxer shorts to bed.
I saw him lots with no clothes on but loved best seeing him
in just his jeans, the way they hung from his hips,

the bones jutting out like two beautiful half-formed wings.
His skin was always full of sun. He was never white,
not even in winter when I turned pale.

On our first date we went to an art gallery and I hated him
for it because I'd never been to one and didn't know
what to do. Once we walked from his house to town

and he kept asking me over and over why the cranes
all point the same way and I said I didn't know and he said
well think about it, think about it logically and I kept saying

I don't know. I knew if I started one thought in my head
about those cranes or uttered one word about them
I'd never look him in the eye again and there'd be some sort

of permanent damage to my heart. Now I have to tell him
I wrote a poem about him, but at least I can say
you were right, I didn't know you, I didn't know you at all.

7.

We hated the way you followed us around,
called us your girlfriends, the top of your head

barely reaching our shoulders, and the smell,
not just unwashed skin, the same clothes day after day,

the same trainers with holes in, but something else,
some animal smell I thought was contagious.

You often tried to hold our hands or stroke our hair,
or rest your small white fingers on our legs.

I wasn’t sorry for you when we ran away
because you tried to lift our skirts above our waists,

or when the boys held their noses
because you’d peed yourself again.

It was Sports Day when one of the girls
finally snapped and hit you with a rounders bat.

I can still hear the *thunk* from across the field.
I wasn’t sorry, even when you ran past crying.

At the other end of the track, children cheered
as the whistle was blown and the rounders bat

sailed through the afternoon, turning over and over
thrown by that girl, the first in our class to wear a bra.

She said you’d tried to touch her strap,
that she’d hit you again if she had to.

Brown sacks crumpled on the grass,
spoons from the egg-and-spoon race in a glittering heap,

children moving crab-like across the field
and you already running toward the classroom.

The next day your mother waited in reception.
She never came to parent’s evenings or concerts,

yet there she was, hunched over and staring at the floor,
while you sat next to her, pale-faced and silent.

I like to imagine I felt sorry for you then,
knowing you had nobody to speak for you about the bat,

your unwashed clothes, your hands,
the way they could not stop touching things.

27.

All night a bird beats its wings
behind the wall. In the space between rooms
it has the quietest scream. (I realise I cannot live
without desire). At first I think it's trapped
behind the wall. Is it another bird
that moves, that seems to fall and rise again?
I am hiding something
in the mirror. In the morning
I am searching for myself
but see a bird rising up behind my eyes.
I think about a girl with hair covering her face
and the bruise of her body and one person listening.
I think about what he said, about the need
to *throw a stone behind to catch the one ahead.*
The bird calls to me from between the walls.

The bird calls to me from between the walls
to *throw a stone behind to catch the one ahead.*
I think about what he said, about the need
and the bruise of her body and one person listening.
I think about a girl with hair covering her face
but see a bird rising up behind my eyes.
I am searching for myself
in the mirror, in the morning.
I am hiding something
that moves, that seems to fall and rise again
behind the wall. Is it another bird
without desire? At first I think it's trapped,
it has the quietest scream. I realise I cannot live
behind the wall, in the space between rooms.
All night a bird beats its wings.

If you would like to see what is between-us, turn to 'Between Us: A Poetics Of Perception' on Page 48
If you would like to read 'Doing Gender' turn to Page 107
If you have ever watched the Goo Goo Dolls singing 'Iris' in the rain, turn to 'To Give An Account Of The Self' on Page 144

DOING GENDER

I am thinking about the kind of trouble these poems will get me into, have got me into. I am thinking about Judith Butler and the binary of man/woman I have set up in these poems. How the numbering of each poem allows each man to march past in their singularity and plurality. Men, plural. And I, constituted in relationality to all of them. All the men I did not marry, apart from the one I did, significant in his absence, who is summoned into being at the margin of each of these poems, as all the men I did not marry come into view.

In *Gender Trouble,* Butler contested binary terms like 'man' and 'woman', arguing that gender is not something we are, but something we continually do, arguing that gender is 'the repeated stylization of the body, a set of repeated acts within a highly rigid regulatory frame that congeal over time to produce the appearance of substance, of a natural sort of being' (Butler, 2002:43-44).

Gender is a set of repeated acts, but being a woman, and repeating stories about men is not something women are expected to do. If Butler is correct, and it is the performing of gender that creates the subject then a woman admitting to desire in a world where this is not recognised as a typically 'feminine' thing to do subverts expectations of how women should behave, both towards men, and in themselves.

This challenging of the heterosexual framework is a radical act and has often proven to be unsettling to readers and audiences at performances, but I also consciously exploit this unsettlement on a regular basis. I announce that my next collection will be called *All The Men I Never Married.* Some of the audience will smile. I say I am still writing it, and I am currently at No.30 and people laugh. It is an easy way of getting a laugh at the start of the reading, but increasingly, I feel more and more dishonest. I am provoking a laugh at the audacity of a woman talking about men and desire, but I am bored of it being audacious.

At a reading, a man who looks as if he is in his mid-to-late sixties comes up to me and nudges me as if I have known him for years. 'You don't look old enough to have known all those men!' he says and winks. When he says the word *known* he emphasises it, his voice dropping lower. I smile and say 'Well, artistic licence!' and he nods and says 'of course, of

course'. I feel suddenly exhausted. I think about knowing, and how we know anything. Did I 'know' any of them? Is this what the whole thing is about, trying to get to know them again?

In the poem 'All The Men I Never Married No 31' (Page 104) a man states that the speaker could not have written a poem about him 'because only the women in my family/know the real me'. The speaker points out that this is a misunderstanding of 'what a poem is for'. The rest of the poem is a series of intimate details about this man – his eyes are bright 'like crushed flowers left inside a book'. The poem captures him walking towards the speaker in just his jeans, the bones of his hips 'jutting out like two beautiful half-formed wings'. However despite this succession of recollections, the speaker concludes that 'you were right, I didn't know you, I didn't know you at all'. The implication that now the speaker suddenly 'sees' more clearly and 'knows' the man in a better or at least different way to the way she knew him in the past is only a suggestion or even a ghost of a suggestion. Katherine Angel writes that 'writing is how I experience my experience'(Angel, 2019b:111) and this sense of gaining a deeper understanding of the past and the present for the writer ghosts its way through this poem.

Butler writes that 'we regularly punish those who fail to do their gender right' (Butler, 2002:178). Women have always been punished for their sexual histories. The man who nudged me, who told me I was not old enough to have 'known' all of those men was talking about sex, without using the word. I was 11 years old when I was first called 'frigid' because I did not want to kiss a boy in my class, and 12 when I was called a 'slut', but that man is not a 12 year old boy, and I am not that 12 year old girl anymore. Part of the job of being 'woman' or even 'girl' has been to negotiate these categories, to 'give an account of myself' (Butler, 2005), to have a life that slides between and past these terms, until now, with these poems, in the performing of these poems.

At the same reading, I leave the stage, and a younger man in his thirties approaches me and compliments me first on my shoes and then my jumper. He says the shape of my jumper looks like 'I'm wearing a holster', that I 'look like I don't take any messing'. He does not mention anything about the reading, even though I have just stepped off the stage, and though the female gaze is a 'truth gaze' and a 'see-me gaze', I cannot force him to see me, when what he wants to see is woman not as poet, but as gendered body. I

smile and thank him for the compliments, and wonder about the type of messing I take, and am taking.

When Butler says ‘the very terms by which we give an account, by which we make ourselves intelligible to ourselves and to others, are not of our making. They are social in character and they establish social norms…’ (Butler, 2005:21) I know what she means. Somewhere between my language and the receiving of it, something happens that I am not in control of. My words must be heard through social norms, as if social norms are distorted panes of glass we must peer through before we see/hear anything at all. The social norms that came into play in that moment were ones that meant that man found it more comfortable and less scary to relate to me as a body rather than a poet, to take notice of my body rather than the words that I gave to the air between us.

When I give a reading about sexism or female desire on a stage in front of an audience, I am ‘doing something with this telling, acting on you in some way. And this telling is also doing something on me, acting on me, in ways that I may well not understand as I go’ (Butler, 2005:51). Sometimes this telling is uncomfortable or difficult for some of the audience, and someone (usually a man, but not always) approaches me because the telling has done something to them, and they do not like it.

I am engaged in a process of recognition between myself and the audience, but what they recognise might not be the thing I want them to recognise. There is always a ‘constitutive loss in the process of recognition, since the ‘I’ is transformed through the act of recognition’ (Butler, 2005:27). Sometimes I will be transformed from a poet into a female body, and ‘To be a body, is in some sense, to be deprived of having a full recollection of one’s life’ (Butler, 2005:38). The life that I am telling is not the life they hear.

Sexism and acts of sexism can be seen as part of a gender performance we place on the body of others as well as our own, which enable performances of masculinity and sexuality. They are ways in which ‘a body shows or produces its cultural signification’ (Butler, 1990:192). If a man does not join in with sexism, he might be considered less of a man. If women are not flattered by compliments, they can be accused of being unfriendly, aggressive, ungrateful. Sexism is part of the process of doing gender, and as Butler points out ‘If human existence is always gendered existence, then to stray outside

of established gender is in some sense to put one's very existence into question' (Butler, 2004:27).

When I 'stray outside of established gender' by standing on stage and reading poems about sexism and female desire, some people feel the need to place me back in my established gender role, to make sure I understand that they see me as a body. Though it is now becoming more acceptable to speak publicly about sexism, serious assault and rape, speaking out can still lead to punishment, to ridicule, to disbelief. Sexism is a gendered activity. Men are the main performers of it and sexism helps to keep the binary categories of 'man' and 'woman' alive and breathing.

Sarah Salih argues that for Michael Foucault, 'merely speaking about sex was a way of simultaneously producing and controlling it' (Salih, 2004:59) – is this also true of sexism? When I speak about sexism in a performance, sexism is often produced in the room, like an echo or a call and response to the sexism I have spoken about. When this happens, can I control it or change it, and if I can, how? Can I change it by writing about it, relating it here, in this thesis, witnessing it, retelling it?

The book *52 Men* (Leonard, 2015) carries out a genre-bending act of literary innovation. In a cross between the prose-poem, memoir and auto-biographical fiction, Leonard writes a series of 52 portraits of men that she has been in relationships with. She uses the first name of each man, revealing intimate details about herself, the men and her relationship with them. Sometimes these portraits drawn in language are accompanied by a photo of the actual man concerned. The photos, and the names make each of the 52 completely specific, or at least give the appearance of specificity. Whilst being utterly compelling, in some ways they let the reader off the hook. There is no chance of them 'seeing' themselves or their behaviour in the text because they are so intimate. They are not 52 ways of being a man, but rather 52 reports of how these men were men.

If each of the poems in my thesis looks at a man and in doing so, says 'This is a man' and then changes its mind and says 'No, this is a man', no, 'this is a man', then the category of man and what it means to be a man becomes shifty and unstable. These poems are not, in fact, looking at men. When we look at anything, 'we are always looking at the relation between things and ourselves' (Berger, 1972:9). These poems are looking at a man in

relation to a woman, which is another thing entirely, a different thing altogether, to looking at a particular man, standing alone.

If you have ever been objectified, turn to 'The Body Is The Blindspot Of Speech' on Page 118
If you have ever objectified someone, turn to 'The Body Is The Blindspot of Speech' on Page 118
If you would like to read 'Poems of Desire: A Mode of Attention' turn to Page 87
If you would like to read 'All The Men I Never Married No.38' turn to Page 124

INTIMATE WITNESS: POETICS OF WATCHING

33.

Remember that night we'd been out drinking
and on the way home heard raised voices,

saw a couple across the road, arguing, leaning
towards each other and then he slapped her,

once across the face, then turned and walked away.
She stood there for a while and then she followed,

down Rawlinson Street as the lights from passing cars
fell on her, then swept on by. We didn't call out

or phone the police. We didn't speak, not to her
or him or to each other. When we got home

we didn't talk about the woman in the denim skirt,
holding her white shoes by the straps.

It's not possible I saw her feet, yet I remember them,
the blackened soles from walking on the pavement,

the sore on the heel where her strap had rubbed
and raised a patch of red. We did not speak to her

and so we made her disappear, limping into the night,
trying to keep up with that man, who knew she'd follow

so did not turn around, hands thrust into his jeans,
front door key hot between his fingers.

35.

When I open my ribs a dragon flies out
and when I open my mouth a sheep trots out
and when I open my eyes silverfish crawl out
and make for a place that's not mine.

When I open my fists two skylarks fall out
and when I open my legs a horse gallops out
and when I open my heart a wolf slips out
and watches from beneath the trees.

When I open my arms a hare jumps out
and when I show you my wrists a shadow cries out
and when I fall to my knees
a tiger slips out and will not answer to me.

Now that the beasts that lived in my chest
have turned tail and fled, now that I'm open
and the sky has come in and left me
with nothing but space, now that I'm ready

to lie like a cross and wait for the ghost
of him to float clear away, will my wild things
come back, will the horse of my legs
and the dragon of my ribs, and the gentle sheep

which lived in my throat and the silverfish
of my eyes and the skylarks of my hands
and the wolf of my heart, will they all come back
and live here again, now that he's left,

now I've said the word whisper it rape
now I've said the word whisper it shame,
will my true ones, my wild, my truth,
will my wild come back to me again

3.

It didn’t really help, the story of Othello and Desdemona
and Iago and poison in the ear and though our teacher

taught us about poor Desdemona, bad Iago, Othello escaped
almost blame free, possessed by jealousy, driven into a state

so when my ex became my stalker all the boys in class ignored me
and every lesson he looked through me until the evenings when he

was drunk and in a nightclub and then he’d ring and start to cry
and try to find out where I was or where I’d been, asking why

I wouldn’t listen, why I’d stopped picking up the phone.
Sometimes I answered it with silence, imagined him alone

listening to my nothing. That year of A-Levels, I got myself a stalker
and the police said *aren’t you flattered?* In the station there was laughter

at the forty phone calls every day for weeks. He said that I’d agreed to
be with him forever, and then I’d changed my mind, what could he do

but become my stalker and wait till darkness fell and slash my father’s tyres
or call fire engines to my house though there was nothing catching fire.

When my ex became my stalker, he convinced my mum to let him in
then locked himself inside the bathroom. It felt like I’d let him win

even though it finished with him in a police cell because of texts
he’d sent with threats and words like *kill* and *guess what happens next*

and so the police kept him overnight to think about his actions
and rang his mother who had no idea how any of this happened.

15.

The night I left home, walked away even though
he told me to come back, I caught a night bus
into the city. Around me were young women
wearing the clothes I used to wear, bra-straps
showing, bare-legged, lounging like cats.
Their laughter washed over me as the bus
staggered and heaved itself around corners.
I was so light I didn't even move as they swayed
and fell into each other. Through the window
I watched a man skirt around a puddle,
his briefcase pressed against his chest,
a strange and solitary dancer.
He looked at me, then looked away.
I wish I could say I stayed out all night,
had a life-changing encounter with someone
homeless and lonely and worse off than me,
or even that I'd stayed in McDonalds,
drank cup after cup of lukewarm tea,
vowed never to go back to him again.
The truth: I was too afraid to stay out all night
because everything wild within me was gone.
I went to my sister's, though I knew
he would find me. The path in darkness
and the crunching of snails underfoot.
The many small deaths of that night.
His fist on the door, again and again.
My name in his mouth, wheedling, gentle.
His foot on the door, again and again.
Realising he would not leave, pretending
it would be ok, that this was an ordinary row.
Making myself go downstairs and get into his car.
And what happened next, and what came after,
I do not remember. I see the same things you do now.
Him walking down the path in his leather jacket.
Me following after. The back of my head. His smirk
as he opens the car and mock bows me in.
My sister standing in the light of the porch,
her arms crossed, angry and silent.

19.

When you rewind what happened, your fist
moving away from my face, your arm pulling back,
tracing a half moon in the air, do you watch yourself
running backwards from the flat,
that moment and all its violence unfrozen,
do you imagine me rising from the bed
to return to my place in the chair?
Do your words return and push themselves back
into your mouth, are you forced to swallow them
again and again? Not *sorry* but *you fucking bitch,*
those words and ones like them, finally lifting from my skin.

I know the living can haunt the living without trying.
Slag. Slut. If I imagine our lives in reverse,
my eyes are always lifting from the floor,
good things are happening. Are you watching
as I vanish into the last gasp of a bus, reversing
through the city? Sometimes I imagine seeing you again,
sitting on the back row of chairs in a village hall,
your arms folded, listening to me read
about transformation and violence and loss.
You cannot touch me when I'm speaking,
though what I'm speaking about is us.

36.

There is always a train leaving for another place.
There is always a missed connection. A tree on the line.
A bridge down. Somewhere else (not here) there is rain.
Somewhere else (not here) there is weeping.
In a place with no station, no platform.
In a house that nobody enters or leaves.
It would take many days to get there.
It would involve many hours of walking.
It would mean making a map and retracing steps.
Many years ago I vaguely got on the wrong train.
I willfully got on the wrong train. I was thinking.
I wasn't thinking. I knew about the weeping stranger.
I gave the order to take up the track. I gave the order
to stop the trains running. I kept the bricks of the bridge
in my house. They basked in front of the fire like cats.
Nobody knew they were there. We called it the broken bridge.
We called it the passing place. The place that has passed.
We called it nothing. The weeping carries on.
I look out of the window at the sky and the stars,
anything but the bridge with the missing pieces
and the house with no windows or doors.
When I go back for the weeping stranger, I will need
to follow the sun. I will have to leap over the gap
in the bridge, or else bring the bricks on my back.
When I get to the house it will be about hands and forgiveness.
The weeping continues. It's been there for years.
Like tinnitus in late night silence. I tend to the river
though the river looks after itself. I gave the orders
for the train to run in other parts, in other places.
Something like work must go on.

If you have ever been on public transport and taken part in a conversation not of your choosing, turn to 'Considering Men' on Page 138
If you have a biography of violence, turn to 'Insidiuous Trauma: A Biography of Violence' on Page 73
If you are interested in the female gaze, turn to 'Women's Images of Men: Desire, Vulnerability and the Gaze' on Page 91

THE BODY IS THE BLINDSPOT OF SPEECH

Judith Butler wrote that '[i]n speaking, the act that the body is performing is never fully understood; the body is the blindspot of speech' (Butler, 1997:11). Who is she talking about? Is it the speaker lacking understanding or the audience? Maybe it is both.

When I read the word *blindspot* I think of my driving instructor telling me to 'check my blindspot' before pulling out into the road. The blindspot as danger, as something where trauma can occur if not checked, if not noticed. I think of the twisting of the body as I look over my shoulder. The blindspot as the place where things or people are missed. The blindspot as a refusal to see. The blindspot as being rooted in the body, and the eye in particular. What we choose to look at or not, once again.

In the summer of 2018, I am a guest poet at a festival in a hot country. Another poet tells me she enjoyed my reading, and then says 'I'm sure you know exactly what you're doing. Reading poems about men with your legs out'.

I know what I said in that reading and could list the poems I read, but I do not know what I am doing, or what my body was saying. My body was saying something, all on its own. The body is the blindspot of speech and I do not know what it whispers. What do I say with my body when I am performing? When I read poems about sexism, what does my body say about sexism? When I read poems about female desire, what does my body say about female desire?

Of course, the desire I am exploring is a desire from the past, a desire that has already both lived and died. The reader knows this because of the title of these poems, and the use of numbers to differentiate between them, the relentless marching on of numbers and the unspoken promise that there will always be one more number. In *A Lover's Discourse,* Barthes writes that 'the love which is over and done with in each poem passes into another world like a ship into space' (Barthes, 1990:101). The love that is over and done with in each poem passes into the white space between the poems, and moving from one poem to the other, moving from one relationship to the other, is like acceding to 'another logic' (Barthes, 1990:102).

Barthes argues that '[h]istorically, the discourse of absence is carried on by the Woman: Woman is sedentary, Man hunts, journeys; Woman is faithful (she waits), man is fickle (he sails away, he cruises)' (Barthes, 1990:13-14). It is easy to think of examples from literature – Penelope waiting for Odysseus to return, Sleeping Beauty not only waiting for the Prince to find her, but waiting in sleep, completely cut off from the world. However, in these poems, the opposite is happening. The female gaze is always moving, always searching. It finds what it is looking for, what it must gaze at. It gives this its full attention, and then stops looking and moves onto the next man, the next relationship, the next 'between-us' (Irigaray, 2000:3).

I am speaking about sexism, and maybe my body tells of desire. I am speaking about desire, and maybe my body calls sexism into the room.

If absence can become an 'active practice' (Barthes, 1990:16), by speaking about desire which has passed, which is in the past, by using language to tell about desire, I am manipulating absence. By addressing the men in these poems through the use of the pronoun 'you', they are both absent and present. They are here because they are being addressed, but they are also absent in that they are nowhere to be found, except in language.

When Barthes writes '[w]hat I hide by my language, my body utters' (Barthes, 1990:44), he is talking about hiding his passion, his desire. I am doing one thing with my language and one thing with my body. The woman who said 'I'm sure you know exactly what you're doing' was certain of this. She smiled when she said it. The body as a perlocutionary act which performs certain consequences. Speaking about female desire as a perlocutionary act. Speaking about sexism as a perlocutionary act. The body is the blindspot of speech, and its acts are never fully understood. Parts of the body (like bare legs) become sexual signifiers and when your body is a sexual signifier, the assumption is always that this is deliberate, that you know what you're doing. The body is performed not by the speaker, but by observers, who project meaning onto the surface of the body.

When Judith Butler writes that '[t]o be injured by speech is to suffer a loss of context' (Butler, 1997:4), I know she's talking about hate speech, and I am talking about a woman making a remark about my legs, but I remember my cheeks burning, because in that

moment, I felt like I was a body, not a person, certainly not a poet. Can any speech act that means the listener suffers a loss of context be deemed an 'injurious address' (Butler, 1997:2)? When a reviewer mentions an author's photo and shade of lipstick in a discussion of their work, the loss of context is the delaying or side-lining of a discussion of the poets work rather than their appearance.

The body is the blindspot of speech and I know nothing and everything about what it says. When Butler writes that the body is 'sustained and threatened through modes of address' (Butler, 1997:5), it is my body and yours she is talking of. The bodies of audiences and readers can be both sustained and threatened by poetry that addresses them directly, that asks them a question, such as in 'All The Men I Never Married No.40' (Page 20) with the line 'are you surprised, are you judging me yet?' or poetry that asks them to imagine, such as in 'All The Men I Never Married No.32' (Page 28) with the first line that asks the audience to 'Imagine you're me, you're fifteen'. Audiences can be both sustained and threatened by poetry that asks them to empathise, to feel, that ignores them entirely and talks to someone else. When Butler writes that by addressing another, we expose the body of the other as 'vulnerable to address' (Butler, 1997:13), then the possibility of understanding something about power, who has it and who does not is revealed.

The body is the blindspot of speech, yet often it is the body that speaks if language fails. In 'All The Men I Never Married No.8' (Page 30) the sea of white space means that the poem sways down the page, reflecting the content of the poem and the speaker's levels of intoxication. White space is also used to indicate changes of location and the passing of time: 'first I was there/now I'm here/on the bed/on my back' as well as the movement of inanimate objects: 'the staircase bending/and swaying'. Later in the poem, white space in the middle of lines is used when one body overpowers the other, creating a visual gap between the two bodies that is not there in the image created by the poem:

> your knees   on my wrists
> your hands   on my shoulders

In 'Projective Verse', Charles Olson writes that

> 'the poet has the stave and the bar a musician has had…he can, without the conventions of rime and meter, record the listening he has done to his own

> speech and by that one act indicate how he would want any reader, silently or otherwise, to voice his work'

Voicing is particularly important in this poem, though it is a poem about being silenced, about having power taken away, another poem where it is the body that speaks. The white space is needed to fragment the voice of the poem, to indicate the type of speech that can be used to describe moments of trauma:

> but my body
>   my body asks nothing
> just whispers
>   see
> I did not let you down I did not
> let you down I did not let you down.
>   (All The Men I Never Married No.8, Page 30)

In 'All The Men I Never Married No 9' (Page 27) the taxi driver in the poem tells the speaker to 'relax, just relax', even though the speaker has not communicated verbally that she's frightened. The body communicates in place of language. It is the arm that 'flings open the door before I give it permission'. The body not as the unconscious happening, but the conscious. The speaker in this poem knows that this is a dangerous situation yet tries to pretend it is normal. The rules of polite society bind her much more tightly than the man she is in a car with, but the body will not be bound by these rules or expectations.

The unruly arm with a mind of its own reminds me of the wilful girl, a fairy tale explored at length in Sara Ahmed's *Living a Feminist Life,* but originally a Grimm's fairy tale (Grimm and Grimm, 1884:125). The wilful girl who will not do as she is told. Eventually God allows her to become ill because she is wilful, and she dies. Even in death, her arm rises from the grave, until her mother takes a rod and beats the arm until it is still (Ahmed, 2017:66).

In 'All The Men I Never Married No 9' (Page 27) wilfulness is figured as silent resistance, as running away, as moving away, as removing the self from the situation. When this wilfulness, this resistance shows itself, the speaker is told to 'relax'. Ahmed tell us that '[w]hen we are not willing to participate in sexist culture, we are wilful' (Ahmed, 2017:83). The body of the speaker is not willing to sit in the car a moment longer than necessary, even while the speaker is willing to placate and pacify by giving the driver a tip.

The body as wilful. The arm as wilful, though the speaker was not, though the speaker was silent and did not speak up. The arm as the active agent that 'flings open the door'. The leg, not a bare leg this time but a leg with a will of its own which 'finds the pavement before I can think'. In this poem, the ground may not be in the place it is expected. In this poem, it is possible to be both wilful, and willing, to resist and to comply.

Ahmed points out that the story of the wilful girl is addressed to a 'willing girl' (Ahmed, 2017:68) who does not appear in the text. The willing girl is the reader of this story, this warning. I do not want to address my poem to a willing girl, or a willing woman. I do not want it to be a warning about what could happen to you as a woman. It cannot be a warning because situations like this are already happening and have happened to women. Can a poem be a call to be wilful, to allow the body to be wilful, to know what it knows and act upon it?

Maybe there is no such thing as a 'wilful' woman/girl or a 'willing' woman/girl. In real life, we are all composites of both of these figures and we move between the two of them consciously and unconsciously. I want my poems to address the wilful/willing woman and call her to attention. I want the call to wilfulness/willingness to be a call both to the body and to language.

I also want to address those men who are part of this story. As Ahmed points out, '[s]o often people do not recognise their actions as violent' (Ahmed, 2017:73). By placing the space of a poem around the re-telling of this incident, by using the female gaze to generate empathy, I hope that this poem addresses men too and allows them to recognise and re-think their own roles and actions in a society where sexism is a normal behaviour.

The story of the wilful girl, and Ahmed's discussion around wilfulness helped me to come to terms with my own complicity in the incidents explored in the poem. Through her discussion of wilfulness, that wilfulness can be situated in the body as well as in language, I began to understand that part of the process of becoming a feminist is acquiring 'a will of one's own' (Ahmed, 2017:74), and that in this acquisition, 'wilfulness is an electric current, it can pass through each of us, switching us on' (Ahmed, 2017:82).

If your body has ever been wilful, turn to 'An Electric Current: Poems of Wilfulness' on Page 101

If you would like to consider what is between-us, turn to 'Between Us: A Poetics of Perception' on Page 48

38.

I let a man into my room because I couldn't bear
the thought of him with someone else.
Even though he wasn't, never had been,
never would be mine. I showed a man
into my room as if I was selling him the space.
I opened the door and let a shadow
follow me inside. I didn't turn on the light.
I turned on every light. I allowed a man
into my room and he was kind.
I let a man push past me through the door
and told myself I didn't really mind.
I let a man follow me to my room
and didn't close the door in time.
I let a man into my room which turned
into a lift and we were together then apart
then together then apart depending on
whether the door was open wide.
I let a man into my body and let him sleep
inside my room. I let him in, I let him in,
I said that he could do those things
but only in my mind. I let a man
into my room and took a vow of silence,
took a vow of there's no turning back,
because a mind is not for changing.
The men inside my room do not like leaving.
They think they know my name
but one of us is lying. I step across
the threshold. I follow them inside.
Once they're in, they're in.
I open then I close my eyes.

Turn to Page 125 to read 'The Annihilation Of Men'

THE ANNIHILATION OF MEN

Timeline

13th March: 'All The Men I Never Married No.38' (Page 124) is published under the title 'I Let A Man' in *The New Statesman*

20th March 8.17am Tweet from @[redacted]

"@kimmoorepoet What a horrible, unpleasant poem, 'I Let A Man'. Take a step further and you can objectify all men and we know where that trail leads"

20th March 10.47am Retweet from @kimmoorepoet of @[redacted]

"Oh dear this poem has upset another man #poetryshame"

20th March 10.51am Tweet from @[redacted] replying to @kimmoorepoet

"Unfortunately it is part of a current trend to denigrate men, and is the respectable face of, potentially, extremist ideology. Objectifying men is one small step from racism and other forms of extremism. It's nasty stuff."

20th March 10.59am Tweet from @[redacted]

"Objectifying men is no response to previous wrongs. The tone of the poem is horrible. It presents all men as being a certain way. As I say, it's a step away from extremist ideology"

25th March 3.55pm Tweet from @[redacted]

"My apologies to @kimmoorepoet about last week. The poem was more personal than political. I was out of line. Sorry."

26th March 7.53am Tweet from @kimmoorepoet

"Thank you for the apology. I appreciate that. Without getting into an argument, I would say the personal is political (and social!) of course, but then I would say that. Best wishes"

Letter published in *The New Statesman* 29th March-4th April edition

Adverse reaction

> I'm writing after reading Kim Moore's poem "I Let A Man" (The NS Poem, 15 March). Given the magazine's substantial male readership, I'm surprised that you published this poem. Moore's abilities as a poet are not in question. However, I am disturbed by the ideological stance the poem takes. It is part of a growing liberal backlash against men, seeking to denigrate and reduce them at every turn . Take Moore's stance to its extreme conclusion – which is being echoed in many ways and through many platforms and it will result in the annihilation of men, as outlined in V Solanas's *The Scum Manifesto.*
>
> Via email

Other readers and poets were more supportive. tweeted

> "I'm late to reading both the poem and this thread & I'm confused by an angry response to a nuanced piece of writing which - apart from anything else - does not offer a single 'truth' but makes something unsettling and beautiful out of the tapestry of experience, like good art can"

and replied

> "I thought it was an outstanding, unsettling poem. Interestingly enough, the title refers to 'a man' and not 'all men'."

Throughout all of these exchanges, I begin to wonder about the word objectification. It is not the first time a man has accused me of objectifying men in a poem, although it is the first time this poem has had that accusation levelled at it. I wonder if this man knows what objectifying means. I wonder if I know what objectifying means.

Martha C. Nussbaum writes that at the heart of objectification is the action of treating a human being as an object, and identifies seven different ways of doing this. These include:

1. Instrumentality: The objectifier treats the object as a tool of his or her purposes.
2. Denial of autonomy: The objectifier treats the object as lacking in autonomy

> and self-determination.
> 3. Inertness: The objectifier treats the object as lacking in agency, and perhaps also in activity.
> 4. Fungibility: The objectifier treats the object as interchangeable (a) with other objects of the same type, and/or (b) with objects of other types.
> 5. Violability: The objectifier treats the object as lacking in boundary- integrity, as something that it is permissible to break up, smash, break into.
> 6. Ownership: The objectifier treats the object as something that is owned by another, can be bought or sold, etc.
> 7. Denial of subjectivity: The objectifier treats the object as something whose experience and feelings (if any) need not be taken into account
> (M. C. Nussbaum, 1995:257)

Nussbaum argues that these seven different ways of objectifying someone can take place in conjunction or in different combinations, or one at a time. It is possible to objectify without knowing. In this next section, I will carry out a close analysis of my poem 'I Let A Man' to identify if there is any objectification in the text.

It could be argued that writing about any person (man or woman) in any kind of text is treating them as a tool for the writer's purposes, which would fall under the first category of instrumentality, whether they are being used to advance the plot of a novel or to make them into a symbol or cipher. Following this line of thought is not useful however, as it would mean any writer writing about any other person could be accused of objectifying them. It is particularly difficult to ascertain whether the man or men are being treated as tools in this poem because the poem is never entirely clear as to whether it is referencing one man exhibiting different behaviours or a series of men. The poem deliberately leaves space for both of these interpretations.

The question of 'denial of autonomy' or 'inertness' is an interesting one and is something that many of the poems in this thesis explore. Right from the first line of 'I Let A Man', the problem of autonomy – who has it and who does not is explored. The repeating use of the word 'let' shows that the man in the poem has the desire to enter the room and the autonomy (in some cases) to carry this out. 'Let' implies that his desire comes before the desire of the speaker in terms of importance. As a verb, it implies a reluctance of some kind, but the nature of this reluctance changes throughout the poem, as does the nature of desire on display.

The first two lines of the poem ('I let a man into the my room because I couldn't bear/the thought of him with someone else') come dangerously close to objectification because they treat the 'him' as if he is something that the 'I' owns and that must be kept from another person or owner. This is a different desire to own than the one in magazines such as *Playboy* where women 'become very like cars, or suits, namely, expensive possessions that mark one's status in the world of men' (M. C. Nussbaum, 1995:284). The desire expressed in the poem is not a desire to possess another as a status symbol, as it is taking place in the privacy of the room. However, it is a desire to keep the other for the self, to keep them away from all others, and it could be argued that this is a type of objectification, although this desire is then contradicted in lines 3-4.

The speaker says: 'Even though he wasn't, never had been/never would be mine' and this can be read in multiple ways – either the speaker is leaving open the possibility that the 'he' is someone else's, or alternatively, the speaker knows that the 'he' does not and cannot belong to anybody. The movement of the poem is away from objectification and people being possessed as objects.

In lines 4-5, the verb changes from 'let' to 'showed', from passive to active. By saying 'I showed a man/into my room as if I was selling him the space', the clear implication is that the man is a prospective buyer, the 'I' is the seller, though not of the body, but of the space that they will meet in. It is not clear whether this is the same man mentioned at the beginning of the poem, or a different one, but the speaker has become more active here.

Line 6: ('I opened the door and let a shadow/follow me inside') ascribes agency to the 'I' – they open the door, but are then followed by a shadow which they 'let' enter the room. The use of the word 'shadow' allows readers not just to imagine a shadow entering the room, but also the man that the shadow belongs to.

How the speaker in the poem feels about the shadow is not clear, although there are clues in the use of verbs such as 'let'. In the next two sentences, the speaker seems to contradict themselves, saying 'I didn't turn on the light./I turned on every light'. The light

here figures as a literal light switch but also light as a metaphor for seeing and not seeing, or refusing to see. Another possible interpretation is that the speaker behaved in different ways with different men/shadows who came into the room.

In line 8 a new verb is introduced: 'I allowed a man/into my room and he was kind'. 'Allowed' is normally a word we associate with power in some form – we are usually 'allowed' to do something by someone in a position of power over us. At first glance this sentence seems positive and relatively straightforward, but by describing the man as 'kind' seems to imply that kindness is unusual enough to be remarked upon.

Lines 10-13 attempt to examine complicity whilst avoiding slipping into victim blaming. This can be a difficult and upsetting process – it is easy to fall into the trap of making suggestions as to how victims of abuse, trauma and assault could have behaved differently or better, rather than focusing the responsibility for change on the abuser. The problem with advising women to modify their behaviour to avoid violence is that 'our every action and move becomes a more or less responsible management of the naturalised risk of rape' (Angel, 2019a).

In lines 10-11 the speaker says 'I let a man push past me through the door/and told myself I didn't really mind'. In these two lines, both parties have autonomy and agency in that the speaker 'lets' the man push past, and then lies to themselves as a protective mechanism. The man 'pushes' past, an aggressive action. The use of the verb 'push' steers these two lines away from victim-blaming – although the speaker does not verbally say 'no, please don't enter', her body is standing in the doorway, blocking the entrance. Her body is saying no, even if she does not have the words to articulate this.

In lines 12-13 the speaker says 'I let a man follow me to my room/and didn't close the door in time'. Here the self-blaming starts earlier, in the approach to the room when the speaker says they let a man 'follow' them to their room. The self-blaming continues with the second half of the sentence – the speaker says 'they didn't close the door in time'. It is common for victims to try to attach blame to their own behaviour, often as a way of asserting some form of control over events. To admit that they were not in control, that

there was nothing they could do to stop the situation is often more frightening than realising and accepting they had no control over what happened.

In a review, Angel (2019) points out that 'women have no choice but to explore and discover their lives, and indeed their sexuality, in a landscape of sexual violence'. The poem asks how do we 'let' someone into our bodies? In a physical sense as women, we do this when we have penetrative sex, but in the text, the more intimate act seems to be that the speaker lets the man 'sleep inside my room'. The repetition that follows this of 'I let him in, I let him in' takes on a plaintive tone. When the speaker says 'I said that he could do these things/but only in my mind' the reader is never told what the 'things' are that the speaker agreed to 'in her mind'. This raises the question of consent, and how consent is given and received. The pressure that can be felt around consent, and the possibility of taking back consent once it has been given is explored in the last section of the poem.

The agency and control appear to return to the speaker by the end of the poem – she follows the man inside the room. She chooses to 'step across the threshold', but this agency is again called into question by the end of the poem, in the last sentence. She walks in with her eyes closed, not seeing anything. She opens her eyes, sees what is happening and chooses to close them again.

The problem of whether the poem is about the same man or a series of different men could mean that the men are being treated as being interchangeable with other men, which could be a type of objectification identified by Nussbaum as 'fungibility'. However, one important distinction is that the man (or men) are not treated or described as objects in the first place. They have their own autonomy, their own ideas and agency. What is actually being explored here is not a series of men and their behaviours, but different types of relationality between the self and others.

There is objectification in this poem, but it is directed at the self by the speaker, in that they are recounting behaviour and things that happened that meant they were 'lacking in boundary integrity' and 'as something whose experiences and feelings are not taken into

account'. This lack of boundary integrity permeates the poem in the lack of boundaries around entering or leaving a room, which a reader would presume to be a bedroom, perhaps the most private and intimate space in a place of residence.

The complexities of power, control, complicity, consent, victim-blaming and responsibility are not questions that can be solved by poetry, but poetry can pose questions about them, and the role they play in our own lives. Poetry can be a way of opening up these words for investigation, of establishing that there are whole worlds within these words that need to be investigated. Poetry can be a way of examining the 'between-us' between self and other, between writer and reader.

The speaker in this poem moves against a 'landscape of violence' and yet carries on anyway. In some ways, it is the speaker who is the shadow slipping in and out of the room and we never catch sight of her. Her ambivalence, her two-mindedness, her undecidedness is impossible to control and maybe it is this which is threatening to some male readers when they read this poem.

Katherine Angel writes about the difficulty and complexity of desire, arguing that

> Sex is social, emergent, and responsive; it is a dynamic, a conversation. Our desires emerge in interaction; we don't always know what we want; sometimes we discover things we didn't know we wanted; sometimes we discover what we want, or don't, only in the doing.
>
> (Angel, 2020)

This complexity around desire and attempts to discuss it, even in a poem, can often prompt men to try and shut down the conversation. Writing poems about the men I never married is not an attempt to talk about women's desire in a vain hope that acknowledging female desire will eventually mean women will stop being shamed for having it. Women will continue to be shamed for not knowing what they want, which has also been described as leading someone on. Worse than this, it is dangerous as a woman to admit to having desire - as Angel points out, a cursory glance through reports of rape cases where the way a woman is dressed, or the fact that she met her attacker on a dating website proves this.

If a discussion of female desire can invite a ‘performance’ of sexism into the room and invite men to re-centre themselves in the conversation then this can be used to advantage if this process is then held up to the light and questioned. It is interesting to me that I felt the need to ‘prove’ that the poem did not objectify men, that I felt the need to justify myself.

Experiential poetry can describe what it is like to live as a woman in a ‘landscape of violence’. At the same time, merely writing a poem about women’s experience can re-create the same ‘landscape of violence’, where women have to waste time and energy explaining and defending their creative choices to write about lived experience. However, a positive aspect of this exchange is that it opens other people’s eyes to the reality that they are also living in the ‘landscape of violence’. Men and women live in this landscape together and we are all implicated, impacted and changed by it in different ways. Lyric poetry can hold a space open for a discussion of the complexity of desire, even if some people choose not to engage. If finding out what we want in terms of desire ‘only in the doing’ can be talked about in a lyric poem, the next step is to discover how to talk about desire in this way in real life, how to acknowledge that it is a both a ‘conversation’ and a ‘dynamic’.

If you have been a long time without thinking, turn to ‘All The Men I Never Married No. 11 on Page 137
If you feel that men need more consideration, turn to ‘Considering Men’ on Page 138
If you would like to look at desire, turn to ‘Poems of Desire: A Mode Of Attention’ on Page 87

WHAT IS BETWEEN-US

Luce Irigaray argues for the importance of 'perception', stating that '[c]ultivating perception means being attentive to the qualities of both what is perceived and the one who perceives' (Irigaray, 2000:41). The poems in this thesis could be described as a series of portraits of men, but they are also a series of self-portraits. No matter how hard I try, I cannot get away from my self, which insists on being inserted into these poems, alongside the men I am looking at. I am standing alongside them, in the failure implied in the title, in each type of relationality I describe. I am there in my perception of them, and their perception of me, and the reader's perception of us both.

How can I utilize poetry to ensure that I cultivate perception? How can my poetry ensure I remain attentive to the qualities of what is perceived as well as being present as the one who perceives? When Irigaray asks '[h]ow do we humans share this cradle, this nest, these surroundings?..How do we share the air […]how is the between-us possible?' (Irigaray, 2000:3) I want to answer her with poetry. I want to write the 'between-us', not the 'I' or the 'you'.

I am writing about the between-us from a distance of years, through the distance of language. There are poems of desire here, and poems of trauma, and poems of violence, and sometimes the poems of desire contain the biggest distance of them all. Inside the poems of desire there is always a kind of failure, or a documenting of the failure to recognise the 'between-us' in the moment of it happening, to be destined to recognise it only when looking back through distance.

Adriana Cavarero explains that '[l]ife cannot be lived like a story, because the story always comes afterwards, it results; it is unforeseeable and uncontrollable, just like life' (Cavarero, 2000:3). I am telling you a story which is also a poem and what happens next is 'unforeseeable and uncontrollable' and could change both of us. It is only afterwards we can write the 'between-us', only afterwards we can make a story of it, a poem of it, a telling of it, create an 'exchange of ideas' (Cavarero, 2000:54).

Throughout *To Be Two* Irigaray calls for the reconceptualization of two human beings as two separate subjects, rather than 'subject' and 'other'. She argues that 'coming to a stop

in front of the other is recognition, but it is also a desire and appeal to overcome the interval which separates us' (Irigaray, 2000:37). These poems are a way of coming to a stop in front of the other, to discover the distance which separated and separates. If these poems are driven by perception, then they will become a 'bridge towards a becoming which is yours, mine and ours' (Irigaray, 2000:43), and what I mean by the use of these pronouns is not just the men contained in these poems, or the versions of them, but the readers of these poems, who I hope may also be invited to look with perception.

One way to ensure that the 'between-us' remains perceptible and present in my poetic practice is to ensure that I activate the female gaze, which always says 'I see you seeing me' (Soloway, 2016), rather than the traditional male gaze that objectifies. Irigaray writes that '[i]n their desire for the other, male philosophers generally evoke sight and touch. Thus, like their hand, their gaze grasps, denudes and captures' (Irigaray, 2000:20). I do not want to reduce the body (mine or another's) to something that can be seen and touched, that can be denuded, grasped or captured, even if these actions are only carried out in language.

In 'All The Men I Never Married No.40' (Page 19) I list a series of men with a single identifying feature such as 'the one who had an ear infection' or 'the kickboxer with beautiful long brown hair'. I risk reducing them to objects, a paper-thin version of a fully rounded human being. And yet. I hope they are rescued, I hope the poem is rescued by the insertion of the self, the one who is perceiving – how, in the poem, I sit with the man with the ear infection 'always on his left'. I hope the kickboxer with 'beautiful long brown hair' is rescued from being 'reduced to sensation' (Irigaray, 2000:40) by the inclusion of the gesture – his hair 'tied with a band at the nape of his neck'. The nape of the neck as an area of vulnerability. The noticing of this as a moment of tenderness.

The noticing of this without grasping, without capturing. To make the noticing full of moving on, full of letting go, full of refusing possession. The perceiving of these details is not to objectify, but an attempt to describe the 'between-us' in language, to hold with the female gaze both their bodies and their consciousness, and my body and my consciousness.

And to do this and not to ‘reduce the other to mere meaning, to my meaning’ (Irigaray, 2000:9). To always ask through language ‘how do we give each other grace, how do we see each other, the one in the other?’ (Irigaray, 2000:10). And to do this and find that one way of perceiving is that the female gaze could transform into the glimpse, as the other moves into the line of sight and then away again, or the glance – the other seen from the corner of the eye, a sideways look, which is quick enough for understanding, quick enough for perception, fleeting enough for grace.

To hold in my consciousness the difference between nude and naked. To be naked is ‘to be oneself’ (Berger, 2008:54). I am talking about the bones of his hips, ‘jutting from his jeans like two beautiful half-formed wings’. His hair ‘tied with a band at the nape of his neck’. Our bodies together ‘like two unlit candles’. His eyes ‘like two pieces of winter sky’. To perceive that to be nude is ‘to be seen naked by others and yet not recognised for oneself’ (Berger, 2008:54). To always recognise those men as selves. As oneself. As themselves.

In No.26, the speaker of the poem acknowledges the gaze of the other:

> ‘and please carry on looking at me in that way,
> I feel unclothed when you do, just for you,
>
> though not nude, but naked with you in this space.
>
> All The Men I Never Married No.26 (Page 89)

but this is not the male gaze, where the woman is ‘displayed as sexual object’ (Mulvey, 1975:11). This is a different type of gaze, one in which the looked-at also takes part in. In this poem, both speaker and addressee are looking at each other, and both feel ‘naked’ rather than nude.

In ‘All The Men I Never Married No. 22’ (Page 48) the gaze of the poem comes to rest on the ‘last night’ between two lovers who try to articulate what is between them. The desire between them can be seen from the start of the poem. It begins in the dark, with the body of the speaker ‘turning under your hands’. The suggestion by the unnamed ‘you’ ‘let’s go back to bed’ tells us that this is where they have been already. There is intimacy, knowledge of each other’s bodies. The speaker traces the ‘outline of your bones’ and the you is described as ‘heat and blood and fingers and chest’.

Despite this apparent reduction of the other to a series of body parts, this reduction is always in an attempt to perceive, to understand the other. The gaze of the poem continually circles back to the failure of the speaker to truly 'know' the other, and the realization that the knowing of the other cannot be achieved through the body, or through desire. It becomes apparent that the other transforms to someone unknowable when they get dressed and enter into the outside world. There is a strangeness attached to the everyday actions of doing washing or ironing implied in the act of remarking about them. When other people are around nobody recognizes the 'between-us' between them. The speaker writes 'I ran with you/in the wind and rain, on the track or the beach/and nobody knew we went home together'.

The poem is infused with the failure to not know the other, with a series of questions addressed to the other that remain unanswered appearing towards the end of the poem, which contrast with the earlier intimacy previously portrayed. The last sentence explores the space that existed between them and asks how they both managed 'to hold something back'. Irigaray would argue that this holding back is a necessary part of any relationship. She writes '[y]ou who are not and will never be me or mine are and remain you, since I cannot grasp you, understand you, possess you' (Irigaray, 2000:9).

Some of these poems are portraits of men but all of them are portraits of the between-us, of what was impossible and possible. The between-us that I am writing about, I give to the reader, or the audience, in the hope that it conjures up the between-us in the room, in the hope that language can be used to describe it.

If you would like to read 'Insidious Trauma: A Biography Of Violence' turn to Page 73
If you would like to read 'An Electric Current: Poems Of Wilfulness' turn to Page 101
If you would like to read 'Between-Us: A Poetics Of Perception' turn to Page 478
If you would like to read 'To Give An Account Of The Self' turn to Page 144

11.

The mind as an empty and flooded field.
The mind as water rising up through the green.
The mind as the tree at the edge of the field.

I have been a long time without thinking.
White birds with no names.
The birds row away through the air.

I have been a long time without thoughts of my own.
They built a fence round the field.
They named the trees and the birds.

They told me to walk up and down.
If I did it, they cheered.
I am reading in the place that they built.

Adrienne Rich said *read as if your life depended on it.*
A man asks me what I'm reading.
He tells me about his job and his wife and his children.

I put my book away. Repeat. Repeat. I put my book away.
He tells me about money and Brexit and immigration.
I have been putting my book away all my life.

I put away my hands and my mouth and my eyes.
I can sit here and listen and live without field or water or green.
Or go back and fold into myself.

Or enter and drink at the flooded place.
Or enter and prepare to be followed.
Or not.

I am worried that they made the field.
Maybe they gave me the water.
I am worried about madness and the next sixty seconds.

I put away my heart and the stillness inside.
I smile and say so what do you do tell me again and
how many kids do you have remind me again of your wife.

If you would like men to be considered here, turn to 'Considering Men' on Page 138
If you would like women to be considered here, turn to 'Considering Men' on Page 138

CONSIDERING MEN

I am reading Adrienne Rich's *Notebooks on Poetry and Politics: What Is Found There* (Rich, 1994) on the last train home between Manchester and Barrow-in-Furness. It is important that it is the last train, that it is a Saturday night, because the last train home has a distinct feel and rhythm to it. At Lancaster groups of men and women who have been out drinking get on and converge into one carriage, some still brandishing cans of beer and wine bottles. It sounds like a party is happening on the other side of the sliding doors.

In my carriage, I am alone until I am joined by a man with a long coat on over what look like chef's trousers. He's been visiting a friend but is now on his way to work at a hotel in Grange. I know this because he sits down at my table and tells me, despite the fact that every other seat, every other table in the carriage is empty. I feel as if Adrienne Rich could be talking to me now, in my ear, as if she could be sitting next to me at the table. I feel as if something is building inside me, some sort of pressure. I feel as if I am waking up, and the world is not the one I went to sleep in.

I turn the page and read the words '[y]ou must write, and read, as if your life depended on it' (Rich, 1994:32). I do not get any further than the first line of this essay because the man who sat down opposite me at the table continues to talk. The open book on the table in front of me does not put him off. I am silently furious, but I do not say anything, because I do not want to be rude, because I am on my own in a carriage with him, because there is nowhere to move to apart from the carriage with the party. I feel ashamed. I cannot stop reading the line. It keeps running through my mind. I think about Adrienne Rich, what she is telling me to do, how I cannot do it, because I cannot ask a man to be quiet.

These words are still running through my mind, more than a year later. I keep them with me all the time. Maybe I would have lost them if I had not had to fight to take her advice.

The experience with the man on the train was one of those experiences Rich talks about which 'throw a sudden floodlight on the ways we have been living, the forces that control our lives, the hypocrisies that have allowed us to collaborate with these forces' (Rich, 1977:215). These forces are situated both in the other, and in the self. We are a force

onto/unto/into ourselves. I write a poem which throws a floodlight on my own experience, which lights up the corners of my thinking, which examines my collaboration with these forces. I write *I have been a long time without thinking.*

Without the convergence of these two encounters – the conversation with a stranger on a train and the reading of Rich's essay, the poem would not exist. Through this encounter, through writing the poem, I learn to let my reading 'pierce the routines, safe and impermeable, in which ordinary carnal life is tracked, charted, channeled' (Rich, 1994:32). I want to let my reading into my life. I want to let my life into my reading. I write *I have been a long time without thoughts of my own.*

I want to question 'what women and men have been to each other' (Rich, 1995:36) through poetry, and this must involve scrutiny of the self and the recognition of personal experience as a symptom of something larger. I realised that the encounter needed to be transformed in the poem into a metaphor or symbol for 'what women and men have been to each other', in the same way that in the poem 'Aunt Jennifer's Tigers' (Rich, 2016:4) Aunt Jennifer is a metaphor for women trapped by expectations, and the tigers are a metaphor for desire and creativity.

The beginning of the poem uses images from that train journey, which are also images of flooding. This flood imagery works as a metaphor for the pressure that the mind is under in our society. First the mind is an 'empty and flooded field', then the mind is the water 'that rises up through the green' and then it is the 'tree at the edge of the field'. The detached tone of the description emphasises the disconnection felt by the speaker from both the landscape and the mind.

In Rich's poetry, the landscape often becomes part of the oppression, part of the problem. The first line of her poem 'Trying to talk with a man' is 'Out in this desert we are testing bombs' (Rich, 2016:355). To talk with a man, she must go to a desert, which implies emptiness because their conversation is as dangerous as 'testing bombs'.

The poem utilizes short, declarative sentences throughout that never span across more than one line until the last two lines of the poem. The anger in the poem is tightly contained by this structure, until the last stanza, when it tumbles across the line end. The

absence of enjambment contrasts with other poems in the collection which utilize long sentences to drive forward a coherent narrative.

The ‘I’ of the poem does not enter until the second stanza, when the assertion that the mind has been both present but ‘empty’ and without thoughts is established. The introduction of the nameless white birds in stanza 2 is both literally birds seen from the train, and metaphorically the thoughts that pass through the mind that are not named or engaged with.

In stanza 3 the plural ‘they’ is introduced. Though it is never explicit that this ‘they’ refers to men, it is implicit in the assertion that they ‘named the trees and the birds’, referring to the biblical naming of living creatures by Adam. The ‘they’ in the poem are all powerful, building a ‘fence round the field’ with the field is still being used as a metaphor for the mind.

The introduction of this plural ‘they’ is a moment of anxiety, in that I am setting up a deliberate dichotomy between an ‘I’ and a ‘they’. I think about when women speak about sexism, and the cries of ‘Not all men’ that answer them. In an article which attempts to trace the historical use of ‘Not All Men’, Jess Zimmerman points out that it is a ‘classic derail, a bad-faith argument used to shift the focus of a discussion instead of engaging with it’ (Zimmerman, 2014). My discomfort is because I know I am deliberately being provocative, writing about ‘men’ as one homogenous group that have power over another. I am inviting someone to respond with ‘Not All Men!’ I think about what it means to placate or appease, to provoke or challenge. I think about discomfort, my own. I think about the discomfort of others and the potential for change, and I let the ‘they’ stand, a box of a word that I must allow the reader or audience to unpack.

The personal experience at the heart of this poem is the encounter between the self, the stranger and the words of Adrienne Rich. The full quote from Rich is ‘[y]ou must write, and read, as if your life depended on it’ (Rich, 1994:32), although when writing the poem, I misremembered this quote, and decide to let this misremembering stand in later edited versions and the final draft. To realise that Adrienne Rich has spoken to me and told me to ‘read as if your life depended on it’ and instead I ‘put my book away’ and have been ‘putting my book away all my life’. To realise I am trying to write about a moment which is

both life-changing and insignificant. A moment with 'nothing' at its heart again. A moment which happens often – a man talking at a woman (not to). A woman putting up with it. A woman listening. The man is 'telling' about 'money and Brexit and immigration'. The man is telling about his 'job and his wife and his children'.

I return again to Rich's poem 'Trying To Talk With A Man' and think about the importance of the 'with', and how the poem would change if it was called 'Trying To Talk To A Man'. The good intention behind the poem, the notion of wanting to talk 'with' another. The good intention despite the shock of the first line. *Out in this desert we are testing bombs.* The acknowledgement of the inherent danger of talking about these things, and the trying anyway.

In my poem, it is not just the book that is put away, though this is important. Glyn Maxwell points out that '[t]he recurrence of words isn't repetition. Ever. What's intervened between the two technically identical lines is the need to say the same again' (Maxwell, 2012:53). In 'No11', the short sentence 'I put my book away' is repeated and this repetition is emphasised even further by the instruction 'Repeat' and the ambiguity of whether this instruction is addressed to the audience or reader or is the speaker addressing themselves. The first time 'I put my book away' occurs it reads as a simple statement of fact. The second repetition holds the realisation of the significance of this act.

The speaker 'puts away' many body parts that are used to perceive and communicate with the world: 'I put away my hands and my mouth and my eyes'. By the end of the poem, the speaker explores their own complicity with what is happening – they put away their 'heart and the stillness inside' and ask a series of questions of the man, settling down into the role of passive listener.

In its first draft, this poem was formed as one long column, rather than three-line stanzas. It was one long breathless sentence which held some of the anger that I experienced at the time. 'The mind as an empty and flooded field, as the water that rises up through the green, as the tree at the edge of the field, the tree with no name, the one I've not touched'.

As I began to draft and redraft the poem, I wanted the anger to be more in control. I also realised that using punctuation, making each line a single breath, a single thought felt more definite, more stable. I wanted the tone of the poem to be more detached and to utilize a colder anger. The other phrase that went round and round in my head when I was editing was the title of a poem by Adrienne Rich (which Rich had taken from a play of the same name by Ibsen): 'When we dead awaken'. I wanted the cold anger of these words to seep into my poem.

The three-line stanzas came quite early in the editing process. The white space of the stanza breaks signify time passing, and the lateral thinking of a mind that has not thought and made connections until now. The poem embodies the mapping of a mind as it thinks and comes to consciousness and realisations. Perhaps the most painful of these realisations is that the speaker is complicit in her own oppression. She does not protest. She puts her book away.

The poem reflects the reality that it is easier to think, talk and protest about sexism in a poem than it is in the moment and there are no easy answers to solve this problem. There are inherent difficulties in being a woman in a public space such as public transport. How women move through these spaces and claim them as their own, rather than feeling intimidated or as if they are there to entertain/listen to men is a problem that has not been solved, or even fully acknowledged. Using public transport is both public and private in nature – public in that it is a public space, and private in that it consists largely of individuals going about their own business. Lyric poetry is also balanced between private and public worlds, a 'strange hybrid; existing on a crepuscular boundary between private and public worlds, its roots lie in the personal, but it transforms this originary matter, and then offers it up to the world at large' (Bertram, 2003:6).

This common experience of being a woman on the train and being interrupted and talked 'at' is a private one which takes place in public. It can be transformed through the use of lyric poetry and offered up as an examination of how men and women take up space, and how domination can work.

In *On Lies, Secrets and Silence* (Rich, 1995) Rich writes that the 'possibilities that exist between two people, or among a group of people, are a kind of alchemy' (Rich,

1975:193). This is something she explores at length in both her poetry and her prose, and it seems in many of her poems, possibility is always present, even when impossibility is acknowledged. In the poem ‘In the Evening’ she says ‘Our minds hover in a famous impasse/and cling together’ (Rich, 2016:234). There is an impasse, but their minds are clinging together. Both minds are considering the impasse, both focused on it, even if they cannot quite get past it. In ‘Trying To Talk With A Man’ both the speaker and the man are testing bombs. They are both doing the same thing, both invested in the testing and by the end of the poem we understand that the testing that is being carried out is of themselves: ‘as if it were not ourselves/as if we were testing anything else’ (Rich, 2016:355). These poems seem to imply that the answer to these problems can only be found in how we relate and communicate with each other.

What kind of reaction can be set off if the possibilities between men and women are examined and held up to the light, if they are talked about honestly, if women feel safe to say how they really feel? What can happen in the world if when Adrienne Rich tells a woman to ‘read and write as if your life depended on it’ that woman is free to pick up her pen or her book and do what she has been advised to do?

If you would like to read about possibilities between men and women, turn to ‘Something In The Telling: A Poetics Of Relationality’ on Page 60
If you would like to read ‘All The Men I Never Married No.38’ turn to Page 124
If you wonder about how some women see some men, turn to ‘Women’s Images of Men – Desire, Vulnerability and the Gaze’ on Page 91

TO GIVE AN ACCOUNT OF THE SELF

A friend sends me a link to a video. It is a band I have only vaguely heard of: *The Goo Goo Dolls.* They are playing on an outside stage in the pouring rain. The lead singer's hair is plastered against his face, and his black shirt, half undone, clings to his chest and stomach. I find out later the song is called *Iris,* although this word is never mentioned in the lyrics. At one point, in the bridge, while the guitarist plays a solo, the singer turns to the camera man and tells him to turn the camera so we can see the crowd. They stretch far into the distance, and though there are only a few umbrellas dotted here and there, the people do not seem to mind or even notice the torrential rain.

And it is torrential, the type of rain (if you have a warm house you can return to) where there is nothing to do but laugh about it, no way of even trying to stay dry, the type of rain that can invigorate you.

And though copyright rules make it impossible to quote it here directly, there is a line that he sings over and over again in which the singer pleadingly wants to be known by another person for who they are. This line reminds me of Barthes, and Butler and Irigaray. The line is not an insult or a slur, but the desperate desire of it makes it hurt like one. It is the same desire that Roland Barthes articulates in *A Lover's Discourse* when he writes 'I want to understand myself, to make myself understood, make myself known, be embraced; I want someone to take me with him' (Barthes, 1990:60). If you watch the video and listen to the song, you will know the line I mean.[1]

The 'you' that the singer addresses in this song is both the unseen lover and the audience. He holds the microphone out to those thousands of faces, and they sing those lines back to him. What does this mean for Irigaray, who insists on unknowing, who says '[w]e can remain together if you do not become entirely perceptible to me, if a part of you stays in the night' (Irigaray, 2000:8).

Now I am singing along with Irigaray, I am singing along with Barthes, I am singing along with *The Goo Goo Dolls.* Is it possible to want someone to know who you are without possessing them? The never ending desire of it. I know that '[t]he more one seeks oneself

[1] https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=_HZM0QiuUS8

in language, the more one loses oneself precisely there where one is sought'(Butler, 1997:30). I understand this. And yet. The singer wants the other person to know him for who he is. The song, the poem, the sentence as beautiful failure, as always falling short. I cannot explain what happens between the space of one poem and another, how the self that is present in one poem transforms and becomes the self that is present in the next.

In each of the poems, men and their actions are placed at the centre of the poetic gaze. The relationality between the men and the speaker of the poem is traced and in turn this traces a relationality between the speaker and the audience, between the writer and the audience.

If I am telling you I want you to know me in some way, then it is on the pronoun 'you' that the text falters, creates an unstable ground. The 'you' can be both the self (I want to know who I am) or the audience or reader (I want you, or I want all of you to know who I am) or the 'you' could refer to the man that the poetic gaze is focused on (I want him to know who I am). The man in each poem is both a man and a cipher or a symbol of a man, a man that never existed, or an everyman and the 'you' in the song is something else entirely.

It is not just the pronoun 'you' that creates unstable ground in a text. According to Judith Butler, 'when the 'I' seeks to give an account of itself, an account that must include the conditions of its own emergence, it must, as a matter of necessity, become a social theorist' (Butler, 2005:7). When I give an account of sexism, I realise that the conditions for my own passivity, my own acceptance are threads linking me to the social world, linking me to what has come before.

In 'All The Men I Never Married No.20' (Page 101) the reader can identify that the poem is set in an infant school by the inclusion of toy cars and a wendy house in the first stanza. The speaker in the poem is told by an unidentified 'he' that she is 'not allowed to play with cars' because she is a girl. The speaker's reaction is to bite the boy on the arm, which results in punishment in the form of being sent to the wendy house. The use of a toy which is stereotypically a girl's toy as a form of punishment is an insidious form of sexism which the teacher is complicit in. The space of the wendy house is used to punish and isolate and the notion of space is explored in terms of bodily space as well – the girls are

told to cross their legs so that they are ‘ladylike’. Being ladylike is equated with taking up less space. The girls are also sexualised at a younger age as well when they are told to ‘stop showing your knickers’.

The lessons learnt in this poem by the speaker are numerous – firstly that there are certain things that girls cannot do, such as playing with boys’ toys or retaliating with violence, that girls should not take up too much space, that a girl’s body, even in infant school is sexualised and she is responsible for this sexualisation, that girls toys are not as desired as boys’ toys and in fact can be used as a space for punishment, that girls in stories spend their time sleeping or waiting to be rescued, and finally that women are not only complicit but play an active role in these injustices.

The account given in this poem of an early experience of sexism links to other more traumatic and serious encounters with sexism merely by being placed in a poem alongside other poetic treatments of this subject. The white space which surrounds these encounters both separates them and links them together. The poem demonstrates what Butler is referring to when she argues for the need of the ‘I’ to become a ‘social theorist’ when giving an account of itself.

I am thinking of the song again, and the lyric about wanting to be known, the desire it articulates. I want to give an account of myself and an account of oneself ‘is always given to another, whether conjured or existing’ (Butler, 2005:21). Performing these poems has situated me at the border of what I know and do not know. It has forced me to confront what it is like to:

> continue in a dialogue where no common ground can be assumed, where one is as it were, at the limits of what one knows yet still under the demand to offer and receive acknowledgement to someone else who is there to be addressed and whose address is there to be received.
>
> (Butler, 2005:21-22)

I am at a reading, where I will be performing two sets, one in the first half, one in the second. I read ‘All The Men I Never Married No. 9’ (Page 27) which examines an experience of sexism with a taxi driver and my conscious and unconscious reactions to it. In the interval, a woman comes up to me and asks ‘Haven’t you got any poems where women fight back? If a man put his hand on my leg on public transport, I would just say

‘No!’ very loudly!’ I talk about victim-blaming and how it is tempting to blame victims, because maybe then we can kid ourselves that we are in control of these situations.

I cannot remember whether she replied or even whether she listened, which seems unfair now, that I could forget something like that. Did the conversation shift anything inside her in the same way I felt something shift inside me when she asked that question? In the second half, I stood up and said that somebody had asked me if I had any poems about women fighting back, and then I read ‘All The Men I Never Married No.20’ (Page 101) which is not about a woman fighting back, but about a girl lashing out, and what happens to her, and how the body is used to shame her and control her, and how space is used to shame her and control her.

I am singing the song again but I write ‘I want to give an account of myself’ and conjure up Butler instead of a rock band singing in torrential rain and there is a link between that girl sitting in the wendy house and burning inside, and the silent woman sitting in the taxi, letting men say the things men say and somewhere between the girl in the wendy house and the woman in the taxi is what happened to me in my twenties, which led to a sequence of poems in my first collection *The Art of Falling* (Moore, 2015) which explore domestic violence using fragmentation and examining transformation as a metaphor for what violence does to an individual.

I want to give an account of myself and I am talking to myself and to you. I have come to understand that many of the poems in this thesis are a way of accounting for myself, a way of understanding how I ended up in a violent relationship, as opposed to the sequence itself, which was a way of understanding what happened during that time. In a discussion of Nietzsche, Butler says that for Nietzsche, ‘accountability follows only upon an accusation’ (Butler, 2005:12). The accusation comes from myself, and also a wider society that still asks why women ‘don’t just leave’. These new poems are trying to answer these questions, from a place of not-knowing, to describe how women move through the world and how the conditions for tolerating violence and trauma are created.

Female poets in the UK such as Pascale Petit, Helen Ivory, Fiona Benson and Moniza Alvi have utilized techniques ranging from surrealism and deploying myth and folk tales to explore and make sense of feminine existence as a ‘traumatised existence’ (Wolff and

Stacey, 2013:59). However, there is a silence in lyric poetry around the wider spectrum of gender-based violence, which is only recently beginning to be broken with the publication of anthologies such as #MeToo, published by Fair Acre Press in 2019.

Two contrasting theories of lyric poetry that are dominant in both academic and poetic discourse are relevant here. The first has its roots in Romantic poetry and in particular William Wordsworth and his often-quoted assertion that lyric poetry is 'the spontaneous overflow of powerful emotion'. The second has its origins in the New Critics assertion of lyric poetry being an expression of a persona rather than the poet. Both of these viewpoints based around a humanistic rationale fail to take into account the long history of the lyric which has ancient roots in epideictic discourse – discourse used to praise or persuade. Lyric poetry can be used to start a conversation about female desire, sexism and its effects on both the individual and society, connecting with its history of being epideictic discourse - 'discourse about meaning and value' (J. D. Culler, 2015:350).

Judith Butler points out the danger of trusting the 'seamlessness of the story' and that the truth may exist in 'moments of interruption, stoppage, open-endedness' (Butler, 2005:64), but this is exactly why poetry is an ideal vehicle for examining these subjects. The truth about sexism and desire is dynamic, mobile and shifting, and poetry is an ideal form to contain and open up these questions, rather than providing answers.

In the performing of these poems, the limits of what I know are contained within the poems themselves, as I try to articulate the relationality between my self and an other, and allow this to be framed by the relationality between my self and an audience. As Butler points out: '[m]y account of myself is partial, haunted by that for which I can devise no definite story' (Butler, 2005:40). Publishing and performing these poems has allowed me to experience this partiality and to understand that an account of the self through poetry reaches its completion in the reception of the work by an audience or a reader (even if that reader is unseen or unknown). Often an understanding of the experience of sexism only arrived through the writing of the poem.

Butler's ideas around the importance of change to both the addressee and the speaker in the act of giving an account are relevant here. She writes '[a]nd this telling is doing something to me, acting on me, in ways that I may well not understand as I go' (Butler,

2005:56). The ‘telling’ which takes place in a poetry reading has an effect on both the writer and the audience. It is not possible to predict how our words will be received, and this uncertainty becomes part of the story of sexism, part of the story of female desire.

I am at another reading, another festival, in another part of the country. A few days later, I get an email from a woman in the audience. She writes:

> ‘I think a dynamic of your work is that it allows for the re-perceiving of earlier experiences, previously cast as shameful (a woman’s interpretation) in a gendered social context’
>
> (personal correspondence, 18 February 2019)

This email exchange leads me back again to Adrienne Rich, and the way she advocated for ‘[r]e-vision – the act of looking back , of seeing with fresh eyes, of entering an old text from a new critical direction’ (Rich, 1972:35). Can re-vision also be used when looking back at our own lives? Liz Yorke wrote about Rich’s ‘lifelong allegiance to poetry (and later, a theory) emerging out of lived experience – the actuality of personal, social and historical experience becomes both ‘source and resource’ for the work’ (Yorke, 1997:10-11). Can I use re-vision on my own life?

Sometimes I do not have to look back at my old life with fresh eyes. Sometimes I just have to look at my life, the life I am living now. Sometimes I do not even need fresh eyes, I just have to open the eyes I have. Sometimes I just need to awaken. Sometimes I am awake and I behave the same way anyway, and go home and write about it. Sometimes I am awake and I protest about what is happening, with language or silence or my body, with different degrees of success.

The goal of writing and performing these poems has shifted in the writing and performing of them, in the writing of this thesis. I know that what the singer wants is impossible, that what I want is impossible, that I cannot give an account of myself, yet I cannot stop those words, both Butlers and the line from the song going round and round in my head. I cannot stop singing that song. I cannot stop wanting. But I can understand that this is impossible. Maybe the task of poetry is to ‘re-vision’ our lives, to illuminate what Irigaray calls the ‘between-us’, the path between you and I as writer and reader, performer and audience, individual and society.

If you would like to read a biography of violence, turn to 'Insidious Trauma: A Biography Of Violence' on Page 73
If you would like to see the shape of wilfulness, read 'An Electric Current: Poems Of Wilfulness' on Page 101
If you would like to be an intimate witness, turn to 'Intimate Witness: Poems of Watching' on Page 112
If you would like to reach a conclusion, turn to 'Variations On A Conclusion' on Page 151

VARIATIONS ON A CONCLUSION

1.

If I am an intimate witness   I am an intimate witness of the body   my own
    but also the male body   of ways of being a male body
of ways of being a male body with a woman   alongside a woman   inside a woman
    on top of a woman   of ways of being a male body leaving a woman
of what men look like looking at women   if I am an intimate witness of men

I am also an intimate witness of the social life of a woman   the personal life of a woman
    the historical life of a woman   the political life of a woman   the social-
political-historical-personal life of a girl-become -woman   an intimate witness of a series
    of failures   of beautiful failures   of beautiful frightening failures of ways
of failing which could also be called surviving   an intimate witness of surviving

an intimate witness of desire   of surviving desire   of surviving violence
    surviving trauma   of living-with   of putting-up-with
ignoring-colluding   with all I was surviving   I am an intimate witness of power
    I can frame it with language   with silence   I am an intimate witness of the past
though I have forgotten much of it   though I am looking through frosted glass
    though I return to it in language

to bring the part of me that's left there back again   to show you what an intimate witness
    looks like   I was always a witness of the between-us   I did not know
what I was witnessing   I am an intimate witness of myself   my self without them
    haunted by the ghosts of them the almost-known of them
    an intimate witness of the space between us

I was there   when sexism entered the room and left again   I was a witness
    to the way it moved   I felt it enter and leave the room   I felt it
enter and leave me   it put its hand on my shoulder   the everyday-ness of it
    I didn't notice for many years   oh desire   I held my tongue
I made this text to hold them both   to give them both a shape
    to call them to account   to make myself a witness

2.

When I try to write this conclusion and am confronted with the blank page, I begin to believe that the last three years are filled with blankness, despite evidence to the contrary, despite the thousands of words that I have written that are there waiting to be drawn upon, despite the poems, despite the conversations I have had with other poets, with readers, with audience members, conversations which thread through this thesis and through the thinking which has informed it.

I realise I am struggling to conclude because sexism does not have a conclusion, and neither does desire. Sexism is a shape-shifter, and so is desire. Sexism is a conversation of sorts, and so is desire. Sexism and desire are always emerging, always in retreat or advancing. It is not in their nature to be still, to not exist. Sexism as something made bigger by denial, and though everyday sexism still happens, something has changed about it in the act of putting a poetic frame around it. Something in me has changed through writing about it.

3.

I conclude that sexism does not mean the thing I thought it meant at the start of this study. What I meant by sexism at the beginning were encounters I have remembered all my life without thinking about why I remembered them. Stories I considered small not because of their smallness, but because there was a difficulty in saying what they actually were. There was a nothingness at their heart put there by me and by other people. I thought at the beginning of this project that sexism was something I both shrugged off and carried with me, like a bag I could not put down but which did not stop me going about my everyday life.

Putting the frame of a lyric poem around these encounters made me see them differently. The whiteness of the page started to magnify them. Culler's concept of 'the lyric convention of significance' helped me see them more clearly. I wrote 'All The Men I Never Married No. 8' (Page 30) and when I started, I thought of it as sexism, something that happened to me because I was a woman. By the time I finished the poem, I realised it could also be called assault. A near-miss. I began to find it impossible to dismiss or

minimise my own experiences and this was because the framework of the lyric poem would not allow me to. Using the lyric poem as a structure allowed me to talk about sexism in a way that was impossible in normal social interactions where it is routinely dismissed or minimised. These were unforeseen and welcome outcomes to my creative research.

4.

My research allowed me to explore why I was drawn to write about sexism using the form of lyric poetry as opposed to another literary form, and what I meant by the term 'lyric'. After navigating various lyric theories and taking into consideration Gillian White's thoughts that what is often meant by 'lyric' are actually 'lyric-reading assumptions' I realised that the lyric poetry I was writing did not fit the proscriptive and widespread definitions of it as poetry that is overheard, or poetry that is only personal.

The lyric poetry I have aimed to write as part of this thesis has its roots in epideictic discourse – discourse that aims to persuade or praise, discourse about meaning and value. My aim throughout my poetics was to create a discourse that crosses boundaries between private and public, social and individual, personal and political. I wanted both my poetry and my poetics to move between these boundaries. I wanted the lyric poetry I was writing to be rooted in epideictic discourse, but also to remain open-ended and non-conclusive as a place for transformation both in the writer and the reader.

One technique I explored to achieve this was to experiment and play with a central question of who is being addressed in the poem, calling attention to what Charles Bernstein calls the 'fourth wall' in lyric poetry. As the fourth wall convention is (according to Bernstein) one of the hallmarks of lyric poetry, it became important to address this in my poetic practice to stretch the boundaries and definition of lyric poetry.

I also utilized Culler's theory of the 'triangulated address' in lyric poetry, experimenting with different forms of address in the body of the poem and reflecting on the different responses and reactions this provoked in audiences.

This use of ‘triangulated address’, direct address and challenge to the fourth wall links in with ideas of sexism being something that we are all implicated in to different degrees. It means that the reader or audience member cannot be just a passive spectator or witness, but they become an active participant in choosing to ‘look’ at sexism and female desire and feel themselves implicated in turn.

5.

At the start of this project, I wrote poems of female desire, or love poems because I could not help writing them. At first I thought they were a different project, then I felt relieved because I thought I could use them to ‘prove’ that I did not hate men. See, I had loved this man, and this man. And this one. And then I learned that female desire often calls sexism to show itself, to come out from where it had hidden its face.

I learn at a conscious level (although I already knew this in my body) that to be a woman and admit to or talk about desire is a dangerous thing. Women understand that whilst it can be risky to say no to sex, it is also inherently dangerous to say yes. Katherine Angel points out that ‘[e]vidence that a woman has used apps such as Tinder to meet sexual partners can work against her in a courtroom, even if this is irrelevant to the allegation before the court’. Angel argues that women know that ‘their sexual desire can remove protection from them, and can be invoked as proof – not that violence did not take place, but that violence wasn’t wrong *(she wanted it)*’ (Angel, 2020).

So when I write that to talk about desire is a dangerous thing, to write about it, and then to perform it, I mean to use the word dangerous. Still, I did it anyway. I could not help it. There was something compelling about it, not just the writing, but in the performing. D.Soyini Madison, when discussing performative autoethnography wrote that performance ‘illuminates like good theory. It orders the world and lets the world loose’ (Madison, 1999:109). I began to realise that I could not predict or determine what would happen when I performed poems about sexism and female desire – that often sexism was conjured into the room, or more accurately, was uncovered. I wanted to order the world. I wanted to let the world loose.

Spry writes that a ‘primary goal of effective autoethnography in print and performance’ is one of transformation in the researcher and reader/audience’ (Spry, 2001:712). Using lyric poetry as autoethnographic scholarship and performances of lyric poems as performative autoethnography became an integral and essential part of my practice, allowing me to reflect and create new work from the discourse and reactions that arose in both myself as a researcher/creative writer and performer and from the reader/audience.

6.

I became a bricoleur in the course of this research, using fragments of methodologies to produce a bricolage which aims to ‘provoke readers rather than to convey a closed message’ (Hammersley, 2008:67). Becoming a bricoleur allowed me to transition smoothly between the roles of poet, academic, researcher and performer, utilizing and drawing upon the knowledge and skill sets of each role.

7.

I felt unsatisfied with the traditional way of setting out a PhD thesis, with the creative work either at the beginning or the end, and a critical discussion of the work almost as a separate entity. I felt that this would not reflect my research process, where the two types of thinking and writing grew in conversation with each other. It also would not reflect the subversive and slippery nature of sexism and my desire to reflect my belief that we are all implicated in upholding and colluding with sexism as a structure.

Using *Fighting Fantasy* gamebooks which I enjoyed in my childhood as an inspiration, I have devised a reader-directed thesis to braid the creative and critical work together and which gives the reader control and autonomy over how they progress through the text. The use of choices which the reader must make to move forward through the text also became a way of drawing attention to how as readers, we are implicated in what we choose to ‘look’ at in poetry and in our own reading. Adrienne Rich advised bringing our lives into our reading, and our reading into our lives and these textual signposts are one way of doing this.

These multiple paths through the text mean that each reading of the thesis creates a different text, a different object and a different interpretation. Setting out my research in this way has meant that I have had to relinquish control and trust that the different sections of text and groups of poems will build, reflect and unfold around each other as a reader progresses through.

The importance of titles as a way of directing how a reader looks at a text took me by surprise and is something that has grown and developed throughout the project. I have used titles as a way of inviting the reader into a particular mode of looking or paying attention. It is a form of textual control, but it is also an invitation to challenge or disagree with this particular mode of looking. Many of the signposts invite the reader to reflect on their own background which they bring with them to any act of reading before making their choice, highlighting that all acts of reading are an interpretation which we make based on our own histories.

Using textual signposts which ask the reader to reflect on their own thoughts, feelings and experience, drawing attention to their role in the reading process and experimenting with the fourth wall and triangulated address links my creative and critical practice together, bringing the reader into the creative and critical process.

All of these techniques have the aim of making the text as interactive as possible to explore the implication that sexism is a problem at the level of both the individual and the society, and we are all implicated and active in the structure of sexism.

8.

Underpinning the whole of this thesis is an interest in the female gaze as defined by Jill Soloway to say 'I see you seeing me' and as a 'conscious effort to create empathy as a political tool' (Soloway, 2016). By using the female gaze in my poetry, I was able to explore the 'between-us' and avoid objectifying the other. Through performative autoethnography, I understand that performing poetry is a form of 'giving an account of oneself' and that in any address, the body of both the performer and the audience can be 'sustained and threatened'.

Perhaps the most surprising, and yet most obvious discovery is that explorations of sexism and female desire cannot be reduced to black and white simplicities. I have raised my own 'critical consciousness' and created a space for transformation of the self, and at the same time I have written about staying silent when confronted with sexism. I have written poems which are at the same time wilful and willing, and both of these things can exist at the same time.

Going further, I believe there is more research to do on the impact that poetry which explores sexism can have on audiences and readers. How to measure the impact of a poem is an interesting question in itself – how do you measure the impact of reading a poem which you remember for the rest of your life – how does this change the way you live your life, if at all?

Another area of interest would be the use of lyric poetry as a way to start a conversation around sexism and gender-based violence in institutions such as schools or prisons, and whether this way of working could both generate new work from participants, and generate new ways of thinking and behaving.

There is also room for more research on innovative ways of presenting both poetry and academic work to open up these two closed worlds to new readers. Developing this project further, I would like to ask readers to read through the thesis multiple times, and reflect on the different experiences this presented.

9.

And this has to do with the telling, and the way it acts on you, and the way it acts on me. This has to do with poetry as a way of accounting for oneself, which can only ever be partial.

And this also has to do with the body, and in particular the female body in performance, and how it says things that cannot be controlled. This has to do with your body and mine, and how they can both be sustained and threatened by poetic address.

And this has to do with the between-us, the space that exists that is not you or me, but something made by both of us, something emerging, dynamic, unpredictable, intimate.

READERS CHECKLIST

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