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OPENING CEREMONY: A WRITING PRACTICE TOWARDS QUEER FUTURITY

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OPENING CEREMONY: A WRITING PRACTICE

TOWARDS QUEER FUTURITY

BY

LAURA MARIE MARCIANO

A DISSERTATION SUBMITTED IN PARTIAL FULFILLMENT OF THE

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DOCTOR OF PHILOSOPHY DISSERTATION

OF

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ABSTRACT

Opening Ceremony is a collection of poems in completion of a creative dissertation in poetry at the University of Rhode Island. The book is a five-year writing practice towards queer futurity and considers, both in form and content, how poems can transgress hierarchal binaries and create exit discourse. The poems use lyric imagery, reference to color and material, space on the page, and colloquial language, to write the bodies, aesthetics, and experiences of contemporary queer life. It is a practice of not rallying against hetero-patriarchy, capitalism and white supremacy, which may restabalize binaries, but rather, giving homage to that which is built in spite of what tries to stop us.

The title of the book references the popular New York City boutique of the same name, which will close its doors this year for good, and move to online commerce. For years, the boutique was a house of treasures for shoppers looking to buy from up-and-coming queer and marginalized designers. To be able to contain such unique talent in one space, within the massive shadow of name brand stores in Manhattan, was a symbol of the possibility of a queer future, one I believed could be built, not in reverse of power, but in negotiation of it—even in its ever-present mists. *Opening Ceremony* is a writing practice with comparable goals. My first book, *Mall Brat* is an ode to teen life before and after the major market crash in 2008; having left the shopping mall, still with enormous economic uncertainty, I am ready for the queer boutique of the future.

The poems in this collection open with a dramatic scene that imagines a celebratory picnic of queer life. The use of both a humorous and tragic tone, serves to demonstrate the amount of creativity and care that are needed to build in spite of

adversity—not just as an imposition to societal control, but an endless becoming of the new.

The poems rally for creation with sensory imagery, flippant language, and constant self-reference to what is already built. To me, this is what is meant by exit discourse towards a queer future. Queer narratives are not a result of or an opposite to. They are a center and a force. I want readers to see more of themselves, and perhaps participate in more parts of their lives, by engaging with queer writing.

Though many theoretical influences are evident, including Audre Lorde and Sarah Ahmed, one is most important to this work. In her essay *White Glasses*, Eve Sedgwick discusses the trouble that fat women face in getting other people to see them as they wish to be seen. She compares this experience to her new feelings of disassociation between the gender others view her as, and that of which she actually feels inside, *dare she say it*, as a gay man. Sedgwick's desire to be seen as herself by others opens a portal for readers to be encouraged towards similar world building to make it so in the future.

Finally, this book considers the importance of translingual and experimental approaches in teaching writing. Through considering cultural rhetoric and the multiplicity of literacies students come to the classroom with, I write with an attention to how discourse produces knowledge, and how I wish to expand my writing to include a multiplicity of voices. I hope in reading my work, others are less reluctant to take great leaps in their own, even without similar models to follow. I say they can follow themselves to the future they want as a writer.

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DEDICATION

In dedication to Stephen Barber for always seeing me as I want to be seen.

PREFACE

This creative dissertation has been completed in manuscript form. The table of contents and introduction precede the body of the poetry collection, *Opening Ceremony*, which is presented as a separate document under the guidelines of manuscript form, with its own “Table of Contents,” dedication, and notes. The bibliography follows the manuscript. Though the book has not yet been selected for publication in full, several of the poems in the book have been published in various journals and one poem was featured on Poetry Foundation’s National Public Radio podcast: *Poetry Now!* These acknowledgements, and further notes, can be found at the end of the collection.

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INTRODUCTION

A WRITING PRACTICE TOWARDS QUEER FUTURITY

Opening Ceremony is a collection of poems and a writing practice towards a queer future. A reader of this work will find in both content and form, that these poems are written in homage to the experiences, aesthetics, and celebrations of queer life in the twenty-first century and a practice towards discourse written beyond that which tries to fix or erase queer bodies and narratives.

As a writer and thinker, I believe that queerness is an anecdote to reliance on binary thinking, and its expansiveness makes it a phenomenon that belongs both now and in the future. Eve Sedgwick's 1990 book *Epistemology of the Closet* describes the homo/heterosexual binary as an endemic crisis which fractured many of the major nodes of knowledge in twentieth-century Western thought (1). Though she believed that the fracture did not come simply from heterosexual power over homosexual power, but rather a "minoritizing view" or fixed view of homosexuality from within the community, rather than a "universalizing view" across a spectrum of sexualities and genders (1).

I understand the concept of the homo/heterosexual binary first from Michel Foucault's 1976 book *The History of Sexuality Volume 1: An Introduction*. Foucault interrogates the naming of the "homosexual" after the fall of the French Monarch, as a way to enforce societal control through sanctions and laws. Though there had often been taboos and unspoken rules against same-sex acts, naming the term homosexual, and equating it to one's identity, discursively produced a power relationship between those who did not engage in same-sex acts, and therefore abided by societal expectations, and those who were homosexual (106). The discursive response by the now named homosexual communities resulted in what Foucault calls a reverse discourse. He states:

“The appearance in nineteenth-century psychiatry, jurisprudence, and literature of a whole series of discourses on the species and subspecies of homosexuality, inversion, pederasty, and “psychic hermaphroditism” made possible a strong advance of social controls into this area of “perversity”; but it also made possible the formation of a “reverse” discourse: homosexuality began to speak in its own behalf, to demand that its legitimacy or “naturalness” be acknowledged, often in the same vocabulary, using the same categories by which it was medically disqualified.” (101).

What Foucault points out is that resistance to the homo/heterosexual binary, due of course to social, medical and legal oppression of gay people, often re-stabilized the binaries, by reifying the fixed view of the subjugated as “true” instead of expanding the view, and using new language, to persistently build a queer discourse that did not rely on the binary for presence.

As a writer, I find the practice of reverse discourse to be a futile fight that fixes the queer lens. What I propose in my work is to engage with a practice I call “exit discourse” which transgresses the homo/heterosexual binary. In order to write towards a future that continues to expand the “universalizing view” of queerness as Sedgwick wrote, one must consistently imagine a new lens, and then build a new lens, that accurately and with agency reflects the present experience of queer people and discursively produces a queer sensibility that can expand in the future. In her essay "Queer and Now" from her 1993 book *Tendencies* Eve Sedgwick discusses the practice of queer writers and teachers. When speaking about our work and our responsibility to the future, Sedgwick states:

"I think many adults (and I am among them) are trying, in our work, to keep faith with vividly remembered promises made to ourselves in childhood: promises to make invisible possibilities and desires visible; to make the tacit things explicit; to smuggle queer representation in where it must be smuggled and, with the relative freedom of adulthood, to challenge queereradicating impulses frontally where they are to be so challenged." (2)

Sedgwick here advocates for writing that makes visible what the homo/heterosexual binary limits or even erases. My practice then does what she proposes in challenging both impulses to re-stabilize the binary. In my poems, my use of the term queer signifies a multiplicity of genders, sexualities, and bodies, dismantling the homo/heterosexual binary, and expanding the lens in which queer people are seen. If *Opening Ceremony* were to never mention the word queer, it might be doing so in a faux effort to undermine the binary, and actually contribute to erasure. It is in the present and explicit writing of queerness, through a lens of multiplicity, that breaks the subjugated from discursive and definitional power. Foucault recognized throughout his writing that the dominance of disciplinary, normative and bio power, opened up space for subjectivity, reversal and negotiation through discourse. In this way new discourses can be produced (90-135). For me, exit discourse forgoes reliance on the power relation, and cognitively writes in a way that transgresses, or makes new, the queer lens for readers. As Audre Lorde has said, and I will say more about her, queer knowledge or ways of knowing can be produced through poetry. These knowledges might be a going in-between (negotiation) or beyond (exit) of dominant narratives, carving out a presence that is central rather than in opposition to.

I think poetry offers the opportunity of subtle, small negotiations, discursively, to shift ideas, even if a total revolution is not possible, or even desirable. The work that is done in poetry, through aesthetics, as Audre Lorde and William Carlos Williams have argued (and whom I will discuss later) can reveal realities, dream spaces, and emotive landscapes, written from a space of agency, that give knowledge of the present experience of queer people and engender new discourse that will build into a queer

future. Both writers also make it important to consider the role of imagination and dreaming in making what seems now impossible, possible in the future.

In *Opening Ceremony*, I use Sedgwick's "universalizing view" as a lens for queerness, both as a writing practice that works to dismantle the binary and create new discourse, but also, so that readers may see more of themselves, specifically the possibility of queerness within their own lived realities. In celebrating the multiplicity of queer realities in my writing I am building from Sedgwick's work. A shift towards a universal queerness, for example, may eliminate a need for a "coming out" statement. A universal queerness centers a margin and makes such painful practices a thing of the past. A queer future will not include a closet and will break from the homo/heterosexual binary indefinitely.

Queer futurity involves possibility, because queerness is something that is always becoming. The more explicit queer, non-binary, and trans visibility we can write into literature, the more personal freedom for readers that may be realized in the world. It could perhaps even lead to a lessening of state regulation of bodies, the intention of reverse discourse to begin with.

This queer future is not a promise of utopia, but rather a practice of writing with a sense of the limiting view a binary can create. Sedgwick, in *Epistemology of the Closet*, also did not see the blurring of binaries as a promise of utopia, but rather a cautionary knowledge of the power of manipulation that exists in reifying binaries, even in spaces of resistance (10). She also made clear that both sides of the binary were unstable, and continuously in flux (11) and that these ideas should be constantly revised by future thinkers. Here she critiques Barthes' idea on utopia and states:

“To understand these conceptual relations as irresolvable or unstable is not, however, to understand them as inefficacious or innocuous. It is at least premature when Roland Barthes prophesies that "once the paradigm is blurred, utopia begins...liberated from the binary prison, will achieve a state of infinite expansion."17 To the contrary, a deconstructive understanding of these binarisms makes it possible to identify them as sites that are peculiarly densely charged with lasting potentials for powerful manipulation - through precisely the mechanisms of self-contradictory definition or, more succinctly, the double bind. Nor is a deconstructive analysis of such definitional knots, however necessary, at all sufficient to disable them. Quite the opposite: I would suggest that an understanding of their irresolvable instability has been continually available, and has continually lent discursive authority, to anti-gay as well as to gay cultural forces of this century.” (10).

I agree that blurred binaries will not lead to a utopia, but rather, that a knowledge of the binary, and an awareness of how it creates a fixed view of queerness, can continue to open up the possibility queer sensibilities, sexualities, genders, and aesthetics. Sedgwick wrote a quite useful definition of queerness in her 1993 essay “Queer and Now” which appears in her book *Tendencies*. She states: “One of the things that queer can refer to: the open mesh of possibilities, gaps, overlaps, dissonances and resonances, lapses and excesses of meaning, when the constituent elements of anyone’s gender, or anyone’s sexuality aren’t made (or can’t be made) to signify monolithically.” (8). This expansive definition, along with her “universalizing view” informs my writing practice.

Sedgwick’s work made visible a multiplicity of experiences that were once not part of the “minoritizing view” of what queer studies might include. Her consistent building through her writing in the present made our current unconstrained view of queerness possible. We must continue her work. Sedgwick’s legacy of building towards a queer future makes me think of Susan Stryker, and the story she tells about the formation of trans studies in higher education, in her 2006 essay “(De)Subjugated Knowledges: An Introduction to Transgender Studies.” Stryker recalls a conference on “Lesbian and Gay

History” hosted by the Center for Lesbian and Gay Studies at CUNY Graduate Center in 1995, in which a veteran to the 1969 Stonewall riots, Jim Fouratt, stated the following about trans people, as remembered by Stryker:

“Transsexuals, he said, had started claiming that they were part of this new queer politics, which had to be stopped, of course, because everybody knew that transsexuals were profoundly psychopathological individuals who mutilated their bodies and believed in oppressive gender stereotypes and held reactionary political views, and they had been trying for years to infiltrate the gay and lesbian movement to destroy it and this was only the latest sick plot to. . . .” (2)

You can see here how the homo/heterosexual binary and a fixed view of queerness based on dominance, caused a queer man, to violently narrow the field of possibility. This view indeed once passed as progressive in gay studies – and a fear of further scrutiny by normative culture during the AIDS crisis, resulted in an anti-trans sentiment in gay studies. Stryker recalls going to a microphone in the auditorium to let Fouratt know, and anyone that agreed with him, that she was in fact “not sick.” Ten years later in 2005, in the same auditorium, she was at the same conference, now titled “Trans Politics, Social Change, and Justice” in a gender-diverse room, where many panels focused on the progress in transgender studies and queer studies. Oddly Jim was there again, trying to claim that transgender studies was erasing the experiences of people like himself. This time he was met with a clamoring of voices, not just one, to sit him down.

Stryker’s work followed the call of Sedgwick, by transgressing the homo/heterosexual binary, and building discourse that challenged, instead of stabilized, the medical, legal, and social oppression of queer people. Her work to write presently the lived realities of trans people expanded beyond a reverse discourse that reinforced narrow stereotypes, medical oppression and legal violence, even within gay, lesbian and feminist studies. She writes on her work in what I will call exit discourse:

“What began with the effort of emerging and marginally situated scholars and activists such as ourselves to be taken seriously on our own terms, and not pathologized and dismissed, has helped foster a sea-change in the academic study of gender, sex, sexuality, identity, desire, and embodiment. Histories have in fact been rewritten; the relationships with prior gay, lesbian, and feminist scholarships have been addressed; new modes of gendered subjectivity have emerged, and new discourses and lines of critical inquiry have been launched. “Transgender” moved from the clinics to the streets over the course of that decade, and from representation to reality.” (3)

I do believe that Sedgwick’s work helped to make pathways for this expansive and transgressive view then for Stryker, now presently, and into the future, opening up now further possibilities around the specific concerns of millennial and generation-z aged queer writers, which with my work engages with. Sedgwick’s groundwork was building towards queer futurity, and I hope my creative work can contribute to this building. As the definition of queerness deepens and expands, as well as the definitions of beauty, gender, class, and race in the twenty-first century, so must the practice of making queerness visible to readers beyond binary ways of thinking, seeing and writing. *Opening Ceremony* is one small and flawed exit or portal towards this shared goal.

ON OPENING CEREMONY

My first full collection of poems, *Mall Brat*, was published with Civil Coping Mechanisms Press in March 2016. The poems in this book are an ode to teen life for a speaker who came of age during the 1999 Columbine school shooting and the September 11, 2001 terrorist attacks on the World Trade Center, and who graduated college during a global economic recession in 2008. The poems in this collection were situated in proximity to revelation, a young speaker who spends her time at shopping malls, experiencing the restrictive binaries of society for the first time. *Opening Ceremony*, my second collection of poems, is named after a queer DIY boutique in Manhattan. A reader to this collection will encounter a more mature speaker, who has taken the painful lessons of her youth in New England and used them to live a more present life in New York City.

In this new collection, the queer experience is now explicitly stated through bodies and passed on through affect and relations. As Kara Keeling writes in *Queer Times, Black Futures*, poetry can be a portal to view the future we want for ourselves, as well as for readers who engage with the work (xiii). This of course relates to the idea of subversion and transgression, as I discussed earlier, to shift marginal narratives to a present and future over time.

Mall Brat, in that sense, served as a portal to *Opening Ceremony*, and both as portal towards a queer future. The speakers in this new collection transgress from a fixed view of queerness informed by the homo/heterosexual binary, to an expansive one. The poems are also aware of the unique circumstances of twenty-first century queer life, as defined by the specific experience of mass shootings, terrorist attacks, and grave economic uncertainty. Though an unconstrained queer representation has been somewhat

achieved in society in the last five years, there is a renewed struggle for agency and authorship of our own narratives; and due to economic instability, there is a need to negotiate with corporate power, finally interested in our narrative, as well.

The poems in the collection open on a queer picnic, with the title poem “Opening Ceremony” a surreal and real pastoral of contemporary queer life. The poems then continue to reflect the lived experiences (“Hot Girl Summer”), bold choices (“Vince Guaraldi Trio), difficulties (“For Girls Who Kiss Wet...”, “Coming In”), and joys (“Ash Weed”) of queer life. The last two poems in the book “Primarie\$” and “After” evokes a battle cry for queer life, and a sense that our narratives will continue to expand into the future.

The title of the collection, *Opening Ceremony*, embodies two rhetorical meanings related to the way the poems are organized within the book. First, the book references the boutique of the same name, a small retail shop within the infrastructure of much larger clothing brands between Chinatown and SoHo.¹ The queer-owned boutique has promoted the work of marginalized, unknown, and queer designers since its opening, and eventually went on to attract the attention of larger brands and fashion houses who collaborated with these designers. The naming of the collection after this boutique is significant because it represents the power of centering the margin, not in opposition to dominance, but as an equal entity in commerce. The title reference also points to a queer authorship, rather than a twenty-first century appropriated queerness by those wishing to profit or gain influence from the margin. The poems in my book do similar work; they

¹ Opening Ceremony was founded in 2002 by two friends from UC Berkeley, Carol Lim and Humberto Leon, as a place to share their passions for travel, art, and DIY fashion. It has since supported the work of emerging designers from queer communities.

build a present voice for queer experiences that is strong enough to forgo reliance on binaries for a sense of relevance.

Also, as almost all people use language and wear clothing, both poets and queer people do these tasks with an aesthetic sensibility, and artistic intelligence, that subverts words into lyric, and fabric into fashion. This is not lost on me, and reference to personal style and fashion also punctuate my poems, the materials of the queer boutique of the future, the wish fulfilment of comfort and luxury. This is also a symbol of the transgression and negotiation with dominance that I previously discussed.

This idea of fashion as a transgressive tool for queer people to both signal a sense of class mobility through cultural capital, and also, expand definitions of gender, comes to me from my own life, but also from the 1990 documentary by Jennie Livingston, *Paris is Burning*, which illuminates the underground and racially diverse world of “Ball Culture” and queer families, that invented Madonna’s “voguing” and experienced the deaths of so many of their loved ones to violence, poverty, and HIV/AIDS. The title was also inspired by Monica McClure’s essay “Poetry and Fashion: Parallel Dreams” in which she states: "Fashion culture practices social listening — plugging into collective dreams; it seeks to resonate with the culture in order to influence or illuminate it. In that sense, and others, fashion is more than a language; it's poetry." In a sense, to be able to dress for the life you want, through a wide queer lens, is a language consistent with living and surviving beyond today.

Beyond its reference to the boutique, the title invites the reader to mentally exit from homo/heterosexual binaries and “open” onto a queer picnic, the content of which is elaborated in the title poem of the collection. In this poem, the reader experiences the

day-to-day anxieties of the speaker and works through these anxieties with tangible beauty: “eating apricots with basil, whipped cream on our bodies, our own guest list.” The picnic is both grounded and hedonistic at the same time, evoking both pleasure and pain, as a symbol of the lived reality and coping mechanisms of queer people in a culture where visibility nor agency are totally achieved. This poem sets the tone for the rest of the book to be read.

This title poem also refers to William Carlos Williams’ 1948 lecture “Poem as Field of Action” as it builds a surrealist scene, with all the trimmings of desire for the reader to live within. The poem transforms lemons to lemonade and is symbolic of the use of imagination and surrealism as a tool towards a queer future. In order for poetry and poetics to transgress binaries, imagination and surrealism become necessary to encounter the marvelous in the mundane, or even painful reality, of a queer life. This idea of possibility through imagination builds to a more wide-ranging queerness.

Williams’ essay is also directly referenced in the poem “House of Ferrari Avorio” in which the speaker reveals their deep wish, in this case materialized in the poem as the most extravagant house they can imagine, one they believe is worthy of the queer family they are building, in spite of the homo/heterosexual binary expectation for queer life. They are dreaming and then building this space for queer life. The queer femmes, weirdos, sex workers and downwardly mobile “failsons” at the picnic, and throughout the book, have accepted a greater malignant society and still found possibility for more.

These picnic attendees are a reference to my community. I became a part of the “Alt-Lit” poetry scene in 2011 and found my voice in publications such as *Illuminati Girl*

Gang.² I witnessed my community rise up against sexism, homophobia and racism, and transform into a more inclusive space, over the last nine years. In 2014, I founded the collective *gemstone readings*, to promote digital narratives in queer poetry. New publications such as *Peach Mag* and *Wonder Press*³ also reflect this growth toward a queer future in poetry, specifically opening new space for trans, non-binary, and sex worker writers and poets. Though it is yet to be known, these publications may someday be remembered in the same light as *City Lights* and *New Directions*, mid-century presses run by connected communities of poets in San Francisco and New York, collectively.

I am acutely reminded of the power of the queer writer to find beauty in times of distress such as now, during the outbreak of COVID-19. It may be that the response to the HIV/AIDS crisis is a shared inheritance, but in any case, my community is using mutual aid to ease stress and create a safety net for those most in need. Countless friends are hosting virtual poetry readings, offering digital Reiki sessions, organizing fundraisers for essential workers, calling for rent strikes and clemency, and even suggesting the development of a phone sex company. The reliance on queer aesthetics for an imagining beyond today, a survival and a presence, is something I hope comes across to a reader as it has inspired so much of my work.

I have worked on the poems in this collection for the past five years, and in doing so, believe the work is representative of cultural and societal shifts in thinking about a writing practice that has emerged between 2015-2020. I believe there is opportunity for

² *Illuminati Girl Gang* was an online and print zine established in 2011 by Gabby Bess.

³ *Peach Mag* is an online literary journal founded by Rachelle Toarmino in 2016. *Wonder Press* is an online literary journal and print press founded by Ben Fama in 2014.

discourse beyond the oppositional; for discourse that celebrates and also survives all that tries to fix or restrict it from becoming.

I invite you to read with an awareness of our stubborn social reliance on the hierarchal binaries, not only as influence, but also as reference, and try to process outside of those marks—I know many of you already live there, with me, and so I mean no disregard. I also hope that readers can begin to see how poetry and art in and of itself can transgress and negotiate with definitional power, and that the process of writing a creative dissertation can push possibilities for what theory and scholarship can be – to give homage to queer writers and the way we write our stories.

ON QUEER FUTURES

Though Sedgwick's "universalizing view" of queerness is the concept of queer futurity I am working towards, the concept of "futures" and "futurity" has been a central conversation in twentieth and twenty-first century thought: from space exploration, modernity, climate change, crypto-currency, body modification, and the ways technology has and will transform our lives. In literature, the idea of queer futurity is speculative, writing the bodies and experiences of queer people in a way that they will survive and thrive into the unknown landscapes of time and space (Keeling, 3-5). When queer authors engage with this writing practice, they envision a future beyond what is predictable under hierarchal binaries that fix or erase their narratives.

To me, the idea of queer futurity is a concept that continuously challenges the homo/heterosexual binary and fixed view of queerness, as well as the mark of the queer as indefinite inferiority in discursive relationships that favor heteropatriarchy, keeping queer narratives on the margins. As I have previously stated, Michel Foucault argues in *The History of Sexuality Volume One: An Introduction*, that the presence of discursive power, opens up space for subjectivity, reversal, and negotiation through discourse (92). Where queerness is oblique to power, reverse discourse is often the response of writers. The thought process behind my writing practice explores a concept of exit discourse through transgression to open new discourse in response to queer bodies and lived realities through a constant writing of the present. This process might at times reify normative power, but also work to change the discursive relationship, as power is always and constantly in flux.

This work of an ever expanding view of queerness is perhaps a fourth movement of Julia Kristeva's *Women's Time*, in that queer writers are actively negotiating space for

a presence beyond a binary, not a utopia, or what Alice Jardine called a “future perfect” – “a modality that implies that neither we are helpless before some inevitable destiny, nor that we can somehow, given enough time and thought, engineer an ultimately perfect future” (5). Queer writers invite their readers into linguistic and ideological spaces beyond the time they are written, which may produce a cultural shift through the affect of readership. Kristeva suggested a movement was inevitable to balance the social, political, and violent forces that regulate the subjugated, and called this an “interiorization of the founding separation of the sociosymbolic contract” (34).

Perhaps in considering a queer futurity, in which a queer, trans and non-binary reality exists from reliance on hierarchal binaries, the power of said binaries will cease to matter. After all, it is really the hierarchal binary systems that rely on queerness for dominance, even relevance. Queer narratives stand on their own and should not shy away from our own centering. This work is being done more often, of course, by many writers and so what may have once been oppositional, even radical, as Kristeva believed, is situating itself as a central narrative in contemporary literature. I am happy to be a part of this sociocultural revisioning.

The idea of an expansive view of queerness in the future, beyond hierarchal binaries can be looked at through additional works in conversation with my poetry. First is the essay “White Glasses” by Eve Sedgwick, in which the author acknowledges a sense of gender anxiety: her physical likeness to her friend Michael Lynch cannot be seen by a dominant homo/heterosexual lens. This essay made acute to me the pain of queerness, the melancholy of a “queer life unlived” as referenced in my title poem, and throughout the manuscript, where both dominant and resistant discourses may not have the lens for

which to view an unrestricted queerness. Many of the speakers in my poems express similar pain, feeling “too much pain around appearances” or being erased by binary fixed views of gender. Sedgwick breaks down the homo/heterosexual and the fat/thin binary in the following passage:

“Now I know I don’t “look much like” Michael Lynch, even in my white glasses. Nobody knows more fully, more fatalistically than a fat woman how unbridgeable the gap is between the self we see and the self as whom we are seen; no one has more practice at straining and straining to span the binocular view between; and no one can appreciate more fervently the act of magical faith by which it may be possible, at last, to assert and believe, against every social possibility, that the self we see can be made visible as if through our own eyes to the people who see us. The stubborn magical defiance I have learned in forging a habitable identity as a fat woman is also what has enabled the series of uncanny effects around these white glasses, uncanny effects that have been so formative of me – shall I call it my identification? Dare I, after this half decade, call it with all a fat woman’s defiance, my identity?—as a gay man.” (197).

As an affect theorist, and with great clarity and emotion, Sedgwick personalizes the ways in which hierarchical social binaries may limit a person’s ability to be perceived as they wish, or to make habitable their own body. Not only is Sedgwick’s body subjugated as a fat person in a world where thinness equates dominance, but at the time she is writing in the 1980s, the homo/heterosexual binary would not allow for a cis-gendered woman, married to a man, to express their identity in a way that was intelligible to others, even within gay communities. At the time she writes this, she is being radical in her self-actualization of her own queerness, her own identity, even though it has not yet been made visible as a result of binary thinking. Her future, and that of others like her in 1993, is yet to be won.

This passage works as a call toward a queer future in which Sedgwick’s identity could be made visible. In an intellectual and emotive shift towards expansive queerness,

those bodies unseen by others, or only in relation with said binaries, may cease to be erased. The work I am engaged with as a poet is to write such invisible/visible bodies into literature and our broader cultural understanding. This “magical faith” of asserting one’s self, demonstrated by Sedgwick, also informs the subversive tone of many of my poems in this collection.

In her book *The Promise of Happiness*, Sarah Ahmed describes the way in which some bodies become blockage points to heteropatriarchal communication and halt the passing of the material and societal objects that produce happiness for cis-gendered, straight, wealthy and white people. She describes the tension caused by queer people when they refuse to put the comfort of dominant-aligned individuals before their own. In this tension queer people, or other marginalized groups, by living, acknowledging, and writing about their experiences, can shift the object of happiness over time to be more aligned with a queer experience, and build toward a queer future. Queer people do not deny themselves joy by refusing a binary way of seeing, rather, they open up possibilities for deeper experiences of joy beyond the homo/heterosexual binary, and into the future. To accept limitations, rather than resist them, is to be able to live finally on one’s own terms (69-70).

The speakers in my poems take up some of the roles described in Ahmed’s book: the “feminist killjoy” and the “unhappy queer.” Both figures are described as alien to the dominant expectation of what should bring one happiness. Yet Ahmed points to a solidarity for these outsiders in recognizing their needs for joy or fulfillment differ from that of society overall. She writes: “There is a solidarity in recognizing our alienation from happiness. There can be joy in killing joy...” (87). It is as if queer people are

“Bartleby, the Scrivener” proclaiming, with joy, “I would prefer not to.”⁴ Yet it is in this recognizing of the powerful manipulation of binary thought that possibility is born.

Ahmed also speaks to a need for the “shameful and difficult feelings” (88) associated with being queer as part of the narratives we write. She describes these feelings as a “shared inheritance” that builds solidarity. These difficult feelings may be a result of being an outsider to centuries of societal doctrine, medical malpractice and legal control that favors heteropatriarchy, yet they do not have to be expressed as reliant on dominance. Rather, the speakers in my poems guide the reader towards a sense of hope, with a streak of humor, that the lives of outsiders are a narrative on their own worth reading—are spectacular and tragic and delicious—and will always be here in the mix of bodies and relations.

For me, Ahmed’s “affect alien” is someone who goes outside dominant discourse through repetitive, lived realities that are observable by others, shifting our stories to have relevance with broader audiences, over time--in a sense reimagining within dominance, rather than resisting it altogether. Frantz Fanon, when writing about Black futures, said this futurity required invention and imagination, which he referred to as a “real leap” and stated: “In the world through which I travel, I am endlessly creating myself. I am a part of Being to the degree that I go beyond it” (229). Our lived realities, are in a sense, building beyond, through repetition, a queer future.

I tried to reflect some of the tension of the outlier in forging new paths or knowledge in my poems. For example, the speaker in my poem “Hot Girl Summer” is aware that she does not see happiness in the pregnancy pact her straight friends made

⁴ Reference to Herman Melville’s 1853 story, and its most famous line, commonly seen on tote-bags across the literary scene.

with one another and lives a life that slowly cuts away at the expectation of happiness through childbearing. The speaker in “For Babes Who Kiss Wet...” learns that queer relations offers more joy than online dating with cis men; in the poem she is sexually assaulted by her date on the same lawn she had previously met her queer community for a picnic. Both speakers have agency to be either happy or disappointed about the possibilities that may come beyond heteropatriarchy, as they explore these possibilities in the text.

The poems also speculate that queer people’s more conventional friends may learn through example and shift their own ideas of fulfillment through the presence of these bold actions in their lives. The poem “Ash Weed” toward the end of the book, is a deliverance on some of the promises of this building, and a symbol of the future and visibility that can be won, through boldly lived actions, as reflected on in my poems. The speaker is afforded vengeance against patriarchal violence, as she burns down the valley where her assault took place.

The collective experience of building a future relies not only on bold actions, but also sometimes, negotiation with dominance. Three poems in the book, “Robie House,” “Fallingwater,” and “For Peggy,” recall a trip to the Midwest to attend a wedding, and set in motion the struggle of both existing in reverse of dominance (in this case marriage) and still feeling the need to participate or collaborate with others who align with dominance.

For example, the poem “Robie House” references the “death of kink” which is a comment on members of the LGBT community calling for a removal of kink and leather

culture from family-centered pride events.⁵ The line between resistance and ultimately collaboration, in building a queer future, is an integral part of these poems. Further, the titles of “Robie House,” “Fallingwater,” and “Palmer House” refer to structures built by Frank Lloyd Wright that were visited on this road trip. The poems are not in homage to the architect, but rather the idea of someone being able to physically build their dream, and then live inside of it. These titles are further symbols of future in the work.

The challenge to a queer future that relies on the homo/heterosexual binary for discursive relevance was an inability to reproduce sexually, but trends in queer families having and raising children have expanded over the last decade, related to the fight for marriage equity. Rather, the anxiety that comes to mind for me, over and over, is that of an uncertain economic future for queer people under forty, or millennials and generation-z. To this end, I wanted the speakers in my poems to reflect on downward mobility, loss of wages, and a recession that caused many of us a decade of under employment, limiting our ability to financially invest in the future, and creating a tone of irreverence and subversion. It would be funny to even think of wanting a family when you are 200K in student debt! I find recognizing these cultural shifts in concerns is important work towards the expanding of queer sensibilities over time.

In the poems “Failson” and “The Best Minds” we find references to those that have done worse than their parents, for example, highly educated queers becoming sex workers. In “Primarie\$” a loyalty to democratic-socialism, a Green New Deal, and Bernie Sanders, punctuates the work, and the poem acts as an anthem for survival from the

⁵ In May and June of 2019, many publications wrote about pride festivals across the nation, such as Oakland Pride, that were declining access to kink and leather communities to the parades, stating the events were to be “family friendly.”

progress and then crisis of neoliberal-capitalist societies. The last poem of the collection “After” indicates that no matter what tries to limit the speaker, queer people will continue to take up space, and write themselves into the future, despite the systemic barriers. Their lives are actually a blueprint for others on how to survive beyond hierarchal binaries and the failings of neoliberal and capitalist promises.

Being aware of both the melancholy and barriers that hierarchical binary systems, neoliberalism, and economic uncertainty produce for queer discourse, has also caused me to want to bring the “magical defiance” of Sedgwick as a tone in my book. Judith Butler speaks in *Gender Trouble* of the unconscious melancholy of performing binary gender roles in order to stay out of “trouble” with dominance.⁶ There is a buildup of missed opportunity, or rather possibility, for queerness, that is erased by homo/heterosexual binaries. My poems are working in that possibility, and aware of that which threatens it, expressed both in content and language.

Not far from the way my friends and I text message one another, there is a flippant, troublemaker tone in the poems. Phrases such as “thank you for voting for Biden” (“Boomerland”) and “gay-as-fuck” (“Primarie\$) point to a vibrant, magical embodiment of trouble, pronounced by the queer speakers in my poems. There is also a constant awareness that dominance sees us as “already dead”(“Too Late”) and having “nothing to live for”(“Failson”) but these phrases are uttered in irreverence by the speaker, rather than a total nihilism. In “Verona” the speaker proudly announces: “Now

⁶ Judith Butler discusses in the introduction to *Gender Trouble* the ruse of power and authority that threatens consequence to gender outsiders in order to keep them within a gender-binary system (vii, 1990).

that Jesus is dead / we can be as gay as we want together” knowing this to be both true and not true at the same time.

In the 2004 book *No Future: Queer Theory and the Death Drive*, Lee Edelman writes to encourage queer people not to embrace “reproductive futurism” by fighting for gay marriage and gay parenting rights, but rather, by resisting child reproduction altogether, thus embracing the narrative of queerness as the death of humankind.

Edelman ultimately interrogates the homo/heterosexual binary and writes towards a more varied queerness. He states in an interrogation of reverse discourse:

“Rather than rejecting, with liberal discourse, thus ascription of the negativity to the queer, we might, as I argue, do better to consider accepting and even embracing it. Not in the hope of forging thereby some more perfect social order—such a hope, after all, would only reproduce the constraining mandate of futurism, just as any such order would equally occasion the negativity of the queer— but rather to refuse the insistence of hope itself as affirmation.” (4)

Here Edelman states that the concept of hope belongs to a resistance that re-stabilizes the homo/heterosexual binary, i.e. that reproduction is “good” and therefore it is something queer people should fight for. Instead, he suggests an embrace of negativity would give more agency to the subjugated queer people.

I would argue that this embrace, however, still is a reverse discourse, as it acknowledges the power of the binary, and also, it is important to think of those within queer groups of people who must negotiate with power for survival. I would add that putting energy as writers only into refusal could reinforce the significance of the homo/heterosexual binary, even within these discourses of resistance. This negotiation is not a giving in to power, but rather, recognizing our own power as a major player in discourse—that we can have kids or not have kids, we are still queer and our experiences are different because of this i.e. we aren’t building families the way that is prescribed by

heteropatriarchy, but rather through a wider queer lens. Of course the concerns of millennial-aged queer people have shifted in that, the act of “having a family” is often not possibility; not because we are queer – but because many of us are under employed and crushed by student debt.

A total refusal, for example, of capital or patriarchy is not always safe for subjugated people, especially queer people of color, who face greater economic and systemic racism as a result of their duality. In my poems “Marshmallow,” “Blue Valentine,” “Ancestors,” “Wide Resurrection,” and “Verona” I do my best to recognize my own privilege as a white person, and to think about how collaboration with power might be necessary for queer people of color and working class people to survive.

For example, in the poem “Marshmallow” the line “that pop hipped would have him killed on Fire Sunday/ so he just calls it fashion” refers to the queer person of color who might face violence in expressing their queerness in a macho-aligned space, and so they rely on the universal language of fashion to “pass” for survival. As fashion has continued to challenge the fem/masc binary in recent years, especially for men who are wearing more feminine aligned garments, it can act as a bridge for queer people who otherwise may face more oppression.

This also refers to the idea that within its multiplicity, not all queer people were conditioned to experience hope to begin with, and less so as time continues on in the twenty-first century. Many queer people are in constant survival mode. They cannot reject something they never experience. Related to this, in her 2011 book *Cruel Optimism*, author Lauren Berlant argues in some ways also for a negotiation for survival, rather than a reverse discourse, as economic and social crisis become ordinary in the

twenty-first century, and expectations for opportunity or success from neoliberal-capitalist societies have been significantly lowered or are non-existent to most people. Perhaps an expanded view of queerness must also exit from the idea of hope altogether, as it is tied up with systems that are not equitable, and optimism as a neoliberal construct can be a barrier to happiness (18). The lived realities of subjugated people are more a testament to survival and resilience than hope.

In *Queer Optimism: Lyric Personhood and Other Felicitous Persuasions*, Michael Sneedker, a poet and literary scholar, writes in 2009 that queerness as a lens of literary critique must distance itself from associations with melancholy and shame and utilize optimism as a tool for critical engagement in literature in the present, which suggests as I have said, building a presence of lived realities that produce an exit discourse. Sneedker challenges homo/heterosexual binary, as well as reverse discourse, by suggesting that optimism would exit from a queer studies so very reliant on shame and negativity, as a result of the binary, for relevance. He writes of the “durability of positive affects” in poets such as Emily Dickinson, whom the homo/heterosexual binary has often viewed through a fixed lens of negativity and death. His work is more focused on the feeling of happiness, than his interlocutor Sarah Ahmed, who sees happiness situated from binaries as a source for disappointment for queer people and finds more satisfaction in the feelings of grumpiness and melancholy.

The work of Jose Esteban Munoz suggests queer futurity through the critical lens of queer people of color. In his 1999 book *Disidentifications: Queers of Color and the Performance of Politics*, Munoz argues throughout the book that queer people of color do not stand solidly within or against binary systems, but rather, transform the dominant

culture to reflect their own purposes and survival. As people of color, they are already outside much of the cultural framework that is rooted in European discourse and colonialism (xi). His work also makes me think about John Fiske's work *Understanding Popular Culture*, where Fiske describes the consumer's role in transforming products, trends, and music, into a popular culture that has personal purpose to its users--writing their own meaning and turning objects into personal subjects, as a way to subvert capitalism. In 2009, in his book *Cruising Utopia: The Then and There of Queer Futurity*, Muñoz writes that queerness be imagined as a "futurity-bound phenomena" (3) which he examines the arrival of through performance, poetry and visual art. What is really important about Muñoz's work is that it considers the way the phenomena of queer futures are constantly being imagined and built around us by writers and artists, presently, towards a collective and collaborative future. His emphasis on the multiplicity and intersectionality within queerness itself is very important towards not only new discourse, but continued equity in queer spaces. However, he ultimately views the present as a prison we are building out of, which I believe, differs from my view.

I think my poems, and the collection overall, recognize solidarity in suffering and continued downward mobility of twenty-first century queers, but also leaves room for nuanced moments and plenty of joy, and the tone falls somewhere in between all these thinkers. Considering themes of trouble, hope, defiance, joy, and the intersectional experiences of queer people, the task for me, was to write a queer narrative strong enough to reflect as much of my diverse and *real* community as I could in the work. I wanted to take the materials of our lives and use them to write a book that represents the experience of queer life *right now* and into the future.

WRITING BEYOND THE BINARY

The exploration of queerness is culturally significant at this moment, as language, public discourse, legality, economy, medicine, and culture are increasingly concerned with its meaning. In 2019, *they*, referring to the preferred pronoun of non-binary people was the word of the year.⁷ With this newly recognized cultural relevance, comes resistance, and also profiteering. While writing, I think of exit discourse as a portal or opening for queer writers, through negotiation and transgression, to author and benefit from their narratives, and write beyond hierarchal social binaries.

To deconstruct the dominant discourse is to recognize the heavy proliferation of hierarchal binary language and rhetorical practices in our writing. This includes reliance on binaries such as homo/heterosexual, but also, POC/white, resistance/capital, ugly/ pretty, fat/thin, and so forth. It also means as a reader recognizing when the queer voice has been co-opted for profit without agency by a corporate voice. Once you become aware of the many fixed views you have as a writer, as well as the many ways the subjugated voice can be appropriated, you can begin to dismantle these views, and write towards an exit discourse, beyond binary thinking.

Sedgwick's framing on an expansive view beyond hierarchal binaries reminds me of work done by Malea Powell and her analysis of the trickster in Native American writing. Powell points out in her 2002 essay "Rhetorics of Survivance: How American Indians Use Writing" that stories are not just for entertainment, but for many cultures, "vital layers of transformative process" to the construction of "new histories and

⁷ Merriam-Webster declared "they" as the 2019 word of the year, which was written about in the New York Times on January 19, 2020. The article discussed the expansion of the meaning of the word to refer to non-binary people.

theories” (396). This unrestricted view of what theory can be, includes a wider scope of rhetoric, and gives a space for poetry as theory in writing practice, and in the way we teach both writing and critical theory to our students.

When speaking about the production of the Native American “other” in Western writing, and the discursive project to go beyond the white/native binary, Powell refers to the term “survivance” (survival + resistance) and its use in the reimagining of the “Indian” beyond the fixed binary. She states: “It is this use, I argue, that transforms their object-status within colonial discourse into a subject-status i.e. a presence instead of an absence.

I apply this idea in my own writing, when thinking about not only how to break hierarchal binaries in the imagination of readers about the speakers in my poems, but also, focus on the idea of presence through survival, joy, and agency that the speakers make explicit. Another important part of the theory of “survivance” is the concept of the trickster in Native American writing, as originally written about by Gerald Vizenor.

Powell writes:

“Vizenor anchors his articulations of the trickster and of Native survivance in two European theoretical constructs: the Barthesian deconstructive sense of the striptease, where the excessive hiding of the thing is removed and the absence of the thing being hidden is demonstrated, and the Baudrillardian notion of simulation as the absence of the real. He does so not to pay homage to European postmodern theory and theorists but to tease the very manners through which "the Indian" was created.” (400)

A teasing of the “queer” person out from the homo/heterosexual binary, as well as contemporary productions of queerness that are not authored by queer people, is to make visible, I believe, the possibilities for an expansive queer narrative in literature. To move queerness from representation to reality involves agency and authorship by queer people, telling their own stories, as a way to record our history and theory. This can also be

applied to an expanded view of beauty, of race, of class, and so forth, breaking expectations of readers, and expanding the view of culture to reflect the twenty-first century and its specific concerns. The expanding view is what leads to exit discourse.

In her essay “Disciplinary Landscaping, or Contemporary Challenges in the History of Rhetoric” Jacqueline Jones Royster points out that Western cis-male rhetorics, and binary thinking is so prevalent it is a massive challenge for those who seek to shift viewpoints and paradigms, and extend the boundaries of inquiry to include diverse focal points, genres and forms as legitimate in scholarship, education and literature (4). She points out that as they were practiced for so long, our rhetorical practices might seem “natural” but they are constructed, and whether we wish for them to or not, hold up the very systems of power we hope to resist. This is why so many writers get caught up in reverse-discourse.

The frame of De Certeau builds in *The Practice of Everyday Life* is also useful in understanding the way hierarchal binaries can hide or shadow the narratives of many groups. He argues that “we must determine the procedures, bases, effects, and possibilities of this collective activity” if we are to understand how the making of culture occurs through everyday practice instead of through official, sanctioned dominant acts of cultural installation”(xiv). Our practice as queer writers is always-already there, and it is recording our lived experiences. However, the homo/heterosexual and other hierarchal binaries that create dominant discursive frameworks, as well the practice of appropriation by corporate voices, can erase the agency and authorship of the work. Getting around this sometimes involves negotiation along with subversion, to expose the conceit that we are aware erasure is happening and still writing anyway.

Understanding the weight of heteropatriarchy and binary systems, the thought process behind my practice is to be aware of the binaries that inform my writing, and to try through this practice of awareness, to exit from binary-thinking. As language for referring to non-binary people expands, definitions of beauty expand, and gender expression expands, so must the way we write about the world, as it is also expanding, or exiting, from the binary. Our writing should not only be speculative towards a queer future, but also reflective of queer life as we know it now, from our own stories.

In my poems, binaries are challenged through a “trickster” approach of teasing, and queer speakers negotiate with power, creating portals for readers to see within and beyond the typical organizing principles of discourse and language. In “Opening Ceremony” the subject Gabby, once referred to as “she” is then referred to as “they.” In “On Grief” the speaker recognizes the presence of internalized homophobia in the first stanza, when a boy leaves a theater upon seeing two men kiss. In the last stanza, however, the speaker recognizes that even when internal homophobia is resolved, melancholia can persist for a queer person, as they are human after all!

In “Hot Girl Summer” the speaker realizes that being conventionally attractive in heteropatriarchy will give one money and access, but at the same time, it might be better to be ugly and queer than have to give up one’s agency. Ultimately, body modification, makeup, Instagram filters, and beauty routines only bring happiness to the speakers in my poems when they participate in these practices in spite of the patriarch, not because of it. In “Palmer House” the speaker resolves that even when she dresses for a queer audience, she still brings out misogyny in cis men.

In “Vince Guaraldi Trio” the speakers negotiate together that queer futurity can both exit from heteropatriarchy and also afford them its material luxuries: i.e. designer handbags, delectable foods, and fashion brand clothes. This wish fulfillment points to a kind of luxury communism in a queer future. In “Waterdeath” the speaker realizes how these trappings of capitalism can still harm them, even when they are aware of the harm. As one engages with the poems, they will hopefully notice my effort to challenge binary thinking, and center expansive queer experiences and thought.

Overall, none of the speakers in my poems are monolithic in their expressions of queerness. They are both cis and trans, non-binary and femme. They are fluid in their sexualities, their tastes, and their origins. Their lovers are of many genders. They are various and each of them is an exit from homo/heterosexual binaries and an opening to queer knowledge for the reader. In her essay “To(o) Queer the Writer” Gloria Anzaldua states that identity can never be reduced to a “bunch of little cubbyholes.” She states that identity “flows between, over, aspects of a person. Identity is a river, a process (252-53).

What is particularly revealing for me in *Opening Ceremony*, is that though the speakers are reflective of many different people and places I have encountered in my own life, they also seem to be the multifaceted reflection of myself, and an homage to the complexities, contradictions, and beautiful variations of a queer life. From the way we speak and write, to the way we dress and show love, we break expectations constantly.

When taking on the massive task of thinking beyond binding historical frameworks that limit fluidity, it is important to consider negotiation with what we already know. When writing towards a queer future, we should not throw out the baby with the proverbial bathwater. As queer people have always altered and influenced

culture, both directly and through relation to others, being more aware of this influence, historically and personally, may give us confidence in writing central texts. The exit, or portal, may not be onto to something totally new, but rather, the realization of our centering to begin with, and to be aware of both past and present challenges to our expression. We aren't writing about being queer because it is trendy or to profit- even though the cultural moment calls for that, too. We are writing about our lived experiences, and the knowledge of that experience is now finally expanding beyond our communities.

Audre Lorde constantly participated in an excavation and reframing of her work according to the demands of the times, witnessed in her 1984 work *Sister Outsider*. In her essay "Poetry is not a Luxury" Lorde encourages the marginalized to not disregard feelings as just emotions, but as knowledge that combats the alienation brought to our bodies through capitalism, patriarchy, and white supremacy. She supports poetry as theory, as a space of recalling one's history. She states: "For within living structures defined by profit, by linear power, by institutionalized dehumanization, our feelings were not meant to survive." (76). In a sense, our narratives are the power we have to survive into the future- as Lorde says, our poems "give names to the nameless." When we accept our ability and strength to subvert, transgress and exit from dominance, we create ground for the most radical and beautiful possibilities in rhetoric, literature, and beyond.

Kare Keeling describes Lorde's poems as portals for making queerness communicable (xii). She writes: "Language is a vehicle through which sensory knowledge is parsed into common senses, and poetry has the capacity to deterritorialize language, making uncommon, queer sense available to thought." (xii).

Keeling reflects on Lorde's poems as a way to make what was once incomprehensible or unacceptable, available and possible to the reader. This tradition of building portals and exits to a queer future, and breaking binaries through poetry, is what I aim to in my poems as well.

This attention to boundary breaking is not only something I have been practicing in my writing, but also in my teaching. I am interested in how exit discourse and queer futurity as concepts can be utilized in the writing classroom. I want students to be able to not only bring their whole selves to the classroom, but write their whole selves, beyond assumed rhetorical, grammatical, and cultural benchmarks. Being a queer student meant that not only what I wrote, but how I wrote it, was sometimes unintelligible to my teachers. I hope to bridge this gap in my classroom and approach each student through a queer or expansive understanding of their work. Engaging with queer theory in the writing classroom encourages students to understand how their voice can be heard beyond the binary and recognize the limitations of a repressively produced internal editor on their work.

Building a rhetorical framework for my students in both composition and creative writing courses through my writing practice, has helped me to demonstrate ways of deconstructing and dismantling the hierarchical binary systems that silence, dictate or fix their writing practice. To export the lessons I have learned through writing *Opening Ceremony* to my students is to practically apply a foundation for queer futurity and extend my responsibility as an educator toward building and maintaining inclusive rhetorical practices.

I once had a writing teacher tell me I was inventing a “queer form” and I found that naming to be liberating in my writing process, and closer to my practice overall. The voice of that teacher healed me from other teachers who had tried to limit my unusual forms in writing. Being seen was important to the development of this book. I hope to see my students enough to allow them to write with confidence.

TOWARDS A QUEER FORM IN POETRY

As a poet interested in the aesthetics of queer futurity, the thought that informs the content of my poems must also be reflected in the form the poems take on the page, as well as how the work is presented to an audience. For just as queerness expands the narrative, so should it expand the mechanism to which the narrative is received.

William Carlos Williams stated in “Poem as Field of Action” which again was a lecture he gave in 1948, that actual form in poetry at the time did not reflect innovation, even if the subjects of the poems referred to cultural progression. He argued that even though “poets had expanded the imagery in their poems to include industrial landscapes, and other new subjects, the poet’s use of measure had not undergone the same revolutionary change.” (1)

At the time he was writing this essay, he was engaged in writing his experimental, cubo-surrealist epic, *Paterson*, which was published in distinct sections. He made sure that both the content and the form of his poems were reflective of his innovations and developed the “variable foot” in measuring space on the page. Charles Olson expanded this notion later in the mid-century to be referred to as “composition by field” which focuses on “the motion between elements in a poem, or between multiple poetic texts” (1). For example, the “composition by field” of my imprint as an author spans the rhetorical progress made between my first book *Mall Brat* and my second book *Opening Ceremony*.

As a writer interested in queer futurity, I was also interested in the ways form in *Opening Ceremony* will be received; the ways in which the actual measure or mechanisms of my poems are queering the expected form and pointing towards futurity.

In order to make possible a writing practice that broke from hierarchal binaries not only in content, but also in form, I decided to study under poets and thinkers engaged in genre-bending work. In August 2009, I was enrolled in *Home School*, a series of low-cost workshops in Hudson, New York for emerging writers. This return to fundamentals proved significant. It also was significant to engage with poets outside of a university setting, and it reminded me of Sarah Schulman's *The Gentrification of the Mind: Witness to a Lost Imagination*, which recalls how the queer, downtown arts scene vanished as a result of the AIDS crisis, and that gay culture was co-opted by corporate conservative language, and solutions on how to bring it back. Schulman states:

“One hundred radical students in low-income writing classes in New York City could actually have an impact on our literature. And, it can help those of us who are good teachers and need to work for a living, to realize that while we need jobs to survive, we don't always need institutions in order to teach.”

I began the week engaging in somatic poetry rituals under the guidance of queer author and MacDowell Fellow C.A. Conrad. The somatic rituals were developed so Conrad could find ways to write beyond the trauma they experienced after their boyfriend was murdered in an act of homophobic rage. They have since expanded the rituals to help people of all professions find time to use their imagination and was monumental in building the form my poems would ultimately take. Conrad asked their students to break down our internal editors and write outside of any expectations. The practice involved daily rituals such as staring in another student's eyes for ten minutes, while tracing their aura; it involved speaking in a seemingly nonsensical language to each other; and it involved writing without attention to the lines on the page. They asked us to consider the possibility that a poem could be present anywhere. This practice helped me to feel comfortable with large areas of space on the page, and deletion of commas for space, and

much of this is reflected in the poems in this collection. Though these forms are not necessarily “new” in terms of invention, I felt that my practice toward them was aligned with my thoughtfulness around the concepts of queer futures and discursive portals.

Additionally, I completed a workshop with poet Ariana Reines, whose collection of poetry *A Sand Book*, was selected as a finalist for the 2019 National Book Award and was also the recipient of the Kingsley Tufts Poetry Award for \$100,000 this year. Of all of the “Alt-Lit” community poets, those who are writing in an experimental aesthetic, Reines has been quite successful in marketing and promoting our school of poets to a mainstream audience, replacing a simulating queerness by corporations with an actual queer voice. *A Sand Book* is a collection of poems that aims to make meaning during what feels like an ending in our culture. Working with Reines reminded me of not only the responsibility we have to write into the future, but the importance of writing from the past and present, as outliers.

I also was able to study under poet and philosopher Fred Moten, professor of Performance Studies at NYU, who asked us to consider what the physical form and language of a poem looked like beyond postmodernism. We mused as a class about the possibility that we were collectively writing in the end of a postmodern era (similar to the concept in *A Sand Book*) or had already begun to create forms for an era yet to be theoretically named. Moten’s approach to open discussion of ideas, while listening to music, and possibly dancing, is an anecdote to what he considers a flawed system of credit and debt in the academy and higher education for black, queer, and outsider student. This approach was well received by the poets meeting with him last summer.

The twenty-first century might be characterized by an increase in telecommunication, and thus far, an unstable global economy. These cultural markers contribute not only to the content of contemporary poetry, but also the form. Yet even though these realities have been discussed by poetry scholars, from Charles Bernstein to Marjorie Perloff, a theoretical frame for these writing practices has not been fully developed.

For a queer community of writers, a digital sphere opens up the possibility for global correspondence and a fast exchange of new aesthetics that reflect both the way language is written and received. In her book, *Uncreative Genius*, Marjorie Perloff directly speaks of a shift in relation to a digital space, which not only alters our communication and textual correspondence, but also, alters the definition of community altogether. She writes of the digital space: “Under these circumstances, communication is likely to shift from a specific geographic location (for example, the New York of Frank O’Hara) or one’s particular local circle (e.g. the Beats) to those, wherever and whoever they are, who share a particular set of interests and allegiances.” (4).

In the essay “Messy Rhetoric: Identity Performance as Rhetorical Agency in Online Public Forums” researchers Stacey Pigg and Jeffrey Grabill speak directly to the idea and practice of “identity building” in digital environments that have much to do with agency and influence in conversations. They believe the agency comes through correspondence, in developed relationships, in communities, over time. “...agency does not lie in the hands of any one person at the proposed (digital) writing table, but rather lies in the interaction among them” (104). Interestingly, many poets engage with digital

persona building on Instagram and Twitter, which contribute greatly to their overall perception and audiences.

The idea then that poetics are being transformed, shifted, and subtly changed through the emergence of online discourse and community forming points to a shift in the genre that was not possible before the onset of more widespread digital communication among poets. Additionally, poets who may feel isolated by their physical location or marginalized by their embodiment, have the opportunity to develop agency and identity by finding digital communities.

The idea of collaborative writing within a community is drawn for me from the multi-authored article “Our Story Begins Here: Constellating Cultural Rhetorics” which is written as a three act play between various writing and rhetoric professionals and educators, including Malea Powell whom I referred to before. I think of my writing as a practice the authors refer to as “relational and constellating” a non-linear concept that all thought and writing and theory is produced relationally, and also that theory is creative work. It also reminds us that not every reader to our work comes at it from the same space. They stated:

“All practices are built, shaped, and dismantled based on the encounters people have with one another within and across particular systems of shared belief. In other words, people make things (texts, baskets, performances), people make relationships, people make culture...Relationships do not merely shape reality, they are reality. The writing practice of constellating gives us a visual metaphor for those relationships that honor all possible realities.” (2)

The shape and form my poems take on the page, as well as the syntax and language, point to the constellating rhetorics of my online poetry community, a queer space I have been a part of for nearly a decade. It feels almost as if we are constantly

writing together, a ten-year collaborative writing project. In fact, not a day has gone by since 2010 in which I have not engaged with my online writing community, whether through digital publishing, exchanging digital poems, or even sharing memes and selfies. In 2014, I expanded my own platform to include *gemstone readings*, a media collective that publishes video poems by queer writers. This decade long exchange of language is reflected in the jump-cut, image based, and “text-speak,” or language typically used in sending text messages, lexicon found in my poems in *Opening Ceremony*.

Another hallmark of the twenty-first century, especially for millennial-aged and generation-z writers, is an extremely uncertain economic future, and the ugly rise of late-stage capitalism. Not only does this affect the content of contemporary poems, but also their form.

Consider the work of theorists Celia Lury and Scott Lash and their book *Global Industry Culture: The Mediation of Things*. Their book points out the collapse of Karl Marx’s “superstructure” into the “base” through a continuous mediation of commodities and material objects. This lack of boundary between the commercial and domestic sector affects both the problem with, and the necessity to, collaborate with symbols of capitalism in poetry.

The book argues that up to that point in a post-industrial climate in 1975, the way individuals encountered the superstructure was through objects (goods). But in contemporary culture “ cultural objects are everywhere: as information, as communication, as branded products, as media products,”(4). Brands and “cultural objects” dominate both the economy and the experience of everyday life.

The practice of mediating brand names and cultural objects is a trend that leaks

into contemporary poetry and it is reflected in the work of twenty-first century poets who mention Netflix, Google, McDonalds, and other brands in the landscapes of their poems, as well as the presence of a nihilistic tone brought on by shared memories of 9/11 and economic recessions. It's as if these brands are Bourdieu's cultural capital for millennial poets. Where Frank O'Hara may have mentioned the Frick, an "Alt-Lit" poet might mention an i-Pad. This practice is discussed in the introduction of *Postmodern American Poetry: A Norton Anthology* by Paul Hoover, but not widely theorized on as of late. Yet, this is certainly a practice in the language of my poems and is noticeable in *Opening Ceremony*, and in the poems of my peers as well.

For example in "House of Ferrari Avorio" when I mention "Moschino loungewear" this points not only to a desire or wish for material security for my queer family, or class-passing through cultural capital as Adorno wrote about in "On Lyric Poetry and Society"; it also reflects the ways in which the objectivity of late capital have collapsed into the subjective language of twenty-first century poets, and echoes back to the title of my book, named after a popular boutique.

The use of a branded language and aesthetics in contemporary art and writing may be a way to dismantle the resistance/capital binary; subverting the language and imagery of capitalism to tease and attract audiences living within our increasingly mediated reality. We see this done by queer artists on social media each day. For example, even though the social media platform Instagram profits off of its users' content, the queer user is in aesthetic control of their image and can shift definitions of beauty and gender for their wide user base. Artists and activists on Instagram, such as non-binary poet and author of "Beyond the Binary" Alok Vaid-Menon, or fat activist and

fashion model La'Shaunae, negotiate with corporate aesthetics, publications and brands, to expand and question queer definitions of beauty across the digital sphere, and interrogate the resistance/capitalist, as well as fem/masc, thin/fat, and pretty/ugly binaries.

Theorist Amanda Harris Williams, who works through her Instagram page @IdealBlackFemale, challenges the community/institution and POC/white binaries, as well as anti-blackness narratives in popular media. She also encourages the use of corporate and popular aesthetics to promote more expanded ideas on beauty, knowledge, and theory, that can compete with the shininess of the corporate aesthetic, a contemporary culture jam, and a sexy expose of the resistance/capitalist binary. Williams stated on her Instagram page in April 2020, teasing through rapper Meghan the Stallion's "Hot Girl Summer" anthem, on how to transgress the pretty/ugly binary of an image obsessed culture: "We need *Hot Girl Office Hours*" – a way to make poets or theorists as sexy to the public as pop music stars, negotiating with corporate aesthetics to share important information. This kind of work is certainly an exciting expansion from the Marxist informed spectacle art of the post-war avant-garde.

There are also examples of artists who negotiate with corporate power, while still remaining in full control of their narrative. For example, Leilah Weintraub, whose film *Shakedown* documented a lesbian strip club and party in L.A. from 2002-2015, was released in partnership with mega website Pornhub in 2019. Also, photographer June Canedo, who collaborates with Nike, celebrating queer immigrant narratives and anti-blackness with the wide reach of a corporate platform. I recall once seeing a fashion model, with a symbol of resistance painted on their bare chests as an act of rebellion

during a show, but still taking the corporate money back to their families for sustenance. The trick here is that the queer author has full agency of the message, and also receives profit for their work and ideas. This is I believe a good example of an exit discourse from the typical resistance/capital narrative. This kind of negotiation with capitalism, for many queer people, especially people of color and the working class, is a means of economic survival. We can't all be occupying Wall Street forever, but we'll vote for Bernie to work towards a future that breaks from survival mode for our communities.

This idea of collaboration, image-making, and even profit, is an important part of expanding a queer form broadly, and something I will consider in marketing *Opening Ceremony*, when the time comes. It also makes up for the painful ways queer narratives and aesthetics were stolen, with no benefit or profit to their original authors, for example, the “voguing” dance move that Madonna appropriated from downtown black queer culture. The 2019 FX series *Pose* has now rightfully given homage to those originators and brought self-authored queer narratives to a broader audience, without cultural erasure.

I also often consider how poems perform off the digital page. In 2017 and 2018, for example, I curated a series of text, visual and performance events at MoMA PS1, to situate poetry beyond the page, and consider influences of twentieth century art movements, such as Dada and Situationists International,⁸ in thinking about the historical emphasis on artistic innovation by outlier or anarchist communities. These kinds of “happenings” that harken back to the emergence of performance art in 1950s and 1960s

⁸ “Dadaism” refers to the post-WW1 avant-garde art movement in Europe characterized by a rejection of formality and capitalism, and a plethora of new forms. “Situationists International” were a group of avant-garde artists and thinkers in Europe from 1957-1972. I studied all very intensely while a student of performance art at Brooklyn College between 2009-2011.

New York,⁹ are expanded upon by our narratives, our bodies, and the centering of marginalized voices that has happened in the twenty-first century. For example, this past winter, my partner and I were dressed for Rachel Rabbit White's book party in Brooklyn. The event was named after the book itself: *Porn Carnival* published by Wonder Press. Upon entering the night club, we found ourselves surrounded by a digital community of writers that had now come out for Rachel, a poet *The Cut* would describe soon as "The Hooker Laureate of the Dirtbag Left."¹⁰

The space was filled with femmes, sex workers, leftists, failsons, and people of various genders. Hot dogs and fries were served, poems were read, and the night ended with a fetish cake-sitting for all to see. Rachel's book, that explores both her queer identity, and her life as a high-end sex worker, was written up in *Vogue*, *Vice*, and everything in between. Afterwards, she held a private sex party at her apartment.

The form of the poems in *Porn Carnival* suggest an Instagram-mirrored diaristic look into a hidden world, recorded in group text messages, and the discursive hype around the book demonstrates the way in which queer poetry, and queer aesthetics, can gain traction, and agency, within dominant publications.

I am concerned with twenty- first century poetry that directly inhabits the space of the oblique, and those that build outside a traditional formality in poetry, in essence, shaping a queer form for the future. I am also interested in works that collaborate with power, desirability, and even capital, as Rachel Rabbit White does, to achieve influence

⁹"Happenings" were interdisciplinary live performances that punctuated the downtown NYC art scene in the 1950s and 1960s. They are outlined in Roselee Goldberg's book *Performance Art: From Futurism to the Present*.

¹⁰ On November 12, 2019, *The Cut* published an article "The 'Hooker Laureate' of the Dirtbag Left" that reviewed the event *Porn Carnival* and was met with much discourse around the authenticity of socialism across the social media sphere.

for queer narratives across a broader audience, and consider the intersections of poetry and popular culture, digital communication, and a universal queerness. I have considered also the idea of my poems as portals to a queer future by making them aesthetically attractive and digitally accessible to all readers.

Rachel Rabbit White is a member of the “Alt-Lit” community that I first came to be a part of 2011, and whose voices have grown and changed the way that queer narratives are written, published, and received by a broader audience. This is the community I will publish this book within, but there are many other influences that have shaped the way I build on a queer form.

One of my strongest aesthetic influences is Frank O’Hara, and specifically his 1965 collection *Lunch Poems*. O’Hara was the center of the New York School of Poets¹¹ and a pioneer in confessional poetry in the mid-century. His work sometimes seems to mock surrealism, and he drew strong distinctions between himself and the more earthy poets of the time, most notoriously in his mock-manifesto “Personism” which as a cosmopolitan poet, was a crack at the more serious and self-important tone of his contemporaries¹². Overall, his work brought gay narratives to a broad audience, speaking about same-sex desire, and trips to corner cafes, in the same breath, and his form influenced poets for years after. Though perhaps fixed by the homo/heterosexual binary in content at times, it is the expansive form of O’Hara’s poems that I believe make them queer.

¹¹ The New York School of poets wrote and lived in downtown Manhattan in the 1950s and 1960s. Their work is characterized by a witty, urban and conversational style. Their work influences my own greatly.

¹² “Personism: A Manifesto” was published in *Yugen* magazine in September 1959. Though it had a mocking tone to it, it also expresses the genius of O’Hara in writing poems as if they were “between two people, not two pages.”

The lyric imagery and colloquial language in his poems allow for a general audience to be invited into an extremely gay reality, without apology or restraint. His descriptions of cultural institutions and landmarks give the reader a queer narrator to cosmopolitan life, not in response to dominance, but as a center. Who wouldn't want to be a part of O'Hara's world? We are all gay as far as he is concerned! Similarly, when I talk of dainty creams, and the color lavender, I am hoping to take not only a reader's mind, but also their senses, through queer discourse, and not shy away from hedonism but embrace it as something queer people deserve.

The technique of using strong lyric and sensory imagery is something I have adapted from many poets, but none have had more direct influence on me, or dare I say the entire "Alt-Lit" community, than O'Hara. He referred to this confessional lyric as his "I do this, I do that" poems, and this personal, tossed-off diaristic technique, is mirrored in the work of many twentieth and twenty-first century poets. The specificity and colloquial nature of O'Hara's writing taught me that my voice was enough for poetry.

O'Hara also inspires a broad stroke in using the page for language, and his words are often written in earnest, without punctuation, which I have always read as a queer aesthetic. For example, in his poem "Having a Coke with You" O'Hara pens an urgent love letter to his beloved, with no stopping for punctuation or formal conventions in grammar. In *Opening Ceremony*, I take a lot of liberty with space and punctuation, and a variety of forms, and I find this to be a physical way of writing towards a queer future.

Another poet who's narrative and form builds exit discourse, and inspires my work, is Claudia Rankine. In her celebrated 2014 work *Citizen: An American Lyric*, Rankine considers the possibility of Black and Brown bodies in the future, despite state

violence, overt and covert racism, and corporate representation without universal equity. To me, this work is unique in three ways.

First, Rankine writes in a hybrid, multi-disciplined (text, image, film) form to aesthetically represent change- both in form, and metaphorically, in our culture. Secondly, she utilizes nuanced examples of racial discourse to deepen an important cultural conversation beyond what already exists, not just in reverse of it. Finally, she collaborates with popular media through desirable, contemporary design, as a tactic to bring a broader audience for her work. Rankine's creation of new form and writing bold narratives, strongly informs my impulses.

Other poets who have worked to innovate form and introduce queer narratives are Joe Brainard, Raul Zurita, Diane di Prima, Lyn Hejinian, and Ocean Vuong, all who have greatly influenced my thinking around a queer form.

Brainard used form to metaphorically queer an American mid-western 1940s childhood in his book *I Remember*.

Lyn Hejinian used nonlinear techniques in poetry to represent the dismantling of gender binaries in her 1970s work *My Life*, as to evoke that there was not just one way to live or behave as a woman.

Raul Zurita included visual imagery and drawing, as well as skywriting his poems with airplanes, to represent, through image, the pain of political oppression in his mid-2000s series, and the 2009 book *Purgatory*.

Ocean Vuong has worked to queer the "next great American novel" in his 2019 work *On Earth We are Briefly Gorgeous*, by centering immigrant, queer, and working-class voices in Hartford, Connecticut, situated in a meditation on multilingual discourse

and a very queer coming of age. Vuong, who was most known for his poetry, uses the lyric form to expand the way prose might be received by broad, best-selling seeking, audiences. I spent my first Fall as a visiting professor at Lehigh University teaching this novel, and asking my students to consider *what does an American novel look like?*

I ask myself what does a queer poem look like – today? Tomorrow?

Besides those I have read in books, the form, language and content in my poems have also been greatly inspired by my community of queer writers and thinkers. I believe greatly in the collective power of imagination to radically shift narratives and transform society. In a sense, this has been a collaborative writing project, a many-authored exploration of queer cultural rhetoric. O'Hara's "I do this, I do that" poems, are perhaps "we do this, we do that" poems in my collection; each "I" written is perhaps actually a collective "we".

As my friend and colleague, the actor Bobby Salvor Muenz has said, "collaborating forces you to be on a carousel of ego death - you have to face the reality that nothing is your invention alone." To be in community, to work in collaboration with other writers and practitioners, is to forgo some of the trappings of capitalism that reward extreme individualism. Nothing I have ever written, or created, was done in a vacuum. I would like to mention some of the dreamers who personally write with me here and now in the building of our future, lest they be erased by the violent force of history:

I am inspired by the diaristic and queer-centered Instagram posts of Rachel Rabbit White and Sachi Flower. I am pushed further by the focus on lesbian narratives in the work of film critic Annie Rose Malamet. I am in collaboration with filmmakers Omega and Bunny Michael, with whom I spent hours designing a queer aesthetic in production

design. I am happily challenged by the digitally shared theory on Black futures and desirability politics of Amanda Harris Williams.

I am in awe of the queer dinner parties (guests and food, both queer!) of the *Spiral Theory Test Kitchen*. I am supported by the tenacity of Holiday Black, who founded *gemstone readings* with me. I am tickled by the fashions of queer designers *Women's History Museum*, who are designing my doctoral tam. I am in endless theory making through text message with poet Monica McClure. I am impressed with the tenacity of Joselia Hughes, who defies the binary of sick/health. I remember all the changing names and pronouns of my friends, the ways they have shifted their bodies in this world, and how they are asking to be seen. As Sedgwick called us to do, I want to see them; I want us all to see them.

Finally, I want to thank all of my queer and queer-aligned teachers, who taught me how vital it is that queer students have queer mentors, and yes, that we are seen in academic spaces where we can sometimes become invisible.

Opening Ceremony is a writing practice towards a queer future, and breaking of hierarchal binaries, in both content and form. I hope that your experience of reading my work will welcome you to a greater possibility within your own writing, and your lives beyond the page.

OPENING CEREMONY

+ + +

Laura Marie Marciano

For Omega

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OPENING CEREMONY

Where we removed our track pants in the summer-soaked garden

Women, have I loved you enough?

Put tangerine and eggs on ice, bluegrass and tortilla

Anti-aging face cream, lip and cheek filler,

Vaginal rejuvenation like a picnic for a queer life unlived

Outside agony immortality

Marry yourself

Marry all of your friends

Here in late afternoon, ugly as sin

Bad Bunny

Bad Bunny

On repeat

We find this blue jay to be a sign from Baba Dass

A path off the timeline

A gust of sexy baby tigers approach

Then slow rain, complex affiliations, Instagram filters

I wish the way we used words was the way my face looked

Too much pain around appearances then suddenly I can not fit

This chilled apricot in my tiny mouth

Basil is biting tangled tongues

Without finding a mate or having a child you put yourself in
uncharted waters

Soft lavender satin boots in tow, nowhere to go and no one cares,

Not even on Christmas

Should we do whatever or should you just, like, disappear

What if you have killed all the feminine?

What if you are trying to live forever but have no children

Death drive down Rodeo

In sparkling sun imagine a time before abusers lit us up

Miss Gabby and our girl gang meeting outside museums

With tempered ideals to discuss porn and theory

Now Gabby goes by Sachi Flower, does Reiki out of their apartment

And I keep asking them: *when do I stop surviving and start thriving?*

And why have we already seen every park in L.A. in a commercial

In this future, what is the definition of resolve

We wonder if absence will be noticed, continuous stomach pain

An entire generation whose votes are held in contempt

By their own party

But here we have gathered our own guest list!

We are an imposition as well as a becoming!

I ask, tenderly now:

Where were you when 45 was Impeached?

I was laying on a Wayfair rug in my studio apartment a day after FedEx almost fired my boyfriend for no reason. I think I was working on my dissertation and having major F.O.M.O about all my tech friends on tropical holiday vacations. I wonder if we could do like Virginia Woolf and just get managerial jobs at FedEx or whatever? Paid sick leave for all! Change the rules from the inside out! Our government is worth shit, and you know they are going to seriously screw over Bernie, once again! Fuck these dickheads!

Let us open over purple nylon grass in Spring,
a Cardinal sign as officiant

Let younger poets publish us, punish us,

tell us what the fuck to do

Let us burn the film *White Girl* in all fires for eternity

make ridged brains smooth

Occupy the long-haul in any instant-whatever

Endogenous to time

lay luxuriously on our sleeper couch from Ikea
blow-up plastic footrest filled with flakes of glitter

We find the sherbet in between teeth like a bright, cold treat

broken milk glass tangerine

Nothing answered, but at least we were together wrapped in silk and Fortuna

Lace and a dainty whipped cream splashing on high grass

a perfect end to our scene

POOL BLUE

This leaf in pool blue water

is a kind of mercy

A spring in recess

What have I done to be noticed

by local news - In the ring light

I kneel on paled bruises and the air is

ok in my house bladder full cherry bowl and roach clips

My neighbors buy a bigger T.V.; it takes both of them to
bring it through the elevator door I am having
thoughts about the racoon outside the window

About colors, government checks that seem to never arrive

If you ask me what I am hopeful for I will pause or say

I think lime green will be in again this summer, my milky
cheeks filled with a kind of pride to talk of summer as if

we still remember what sun feels like

QUANTUM ENTANGLEMENT

I know you wanted a mirrored room
But this ain't no disco

Like proximity to a Sagittarius
Should be easy and fun

But we are actually kind of tight,
Except, now, at this strip club

Every dancer an angel and
All our money is gone

FAILSON

It's true I ask for extra Adderall

To give to other drones

I couldn't possibly use

Sixty pills a month

I am charming before

The doctor notices

I ignore his sexist quips

Anything to fuel

My sad little family

The downwardly mobile

Are kind of sexy

Nothing to live for

Nothing to die for

ON GRIEF

It is daylight savings in LA again
and porn won't load
on phone or in the heavy cheat of
Spring I see a boy
leave the theater when two men kiss

My fashion icon teaches me to sniff
directly up my nose, *tiny beads she says*
and in the orange head-rush I find
a conceit for cream

for erotica

plush

this melancholia of a queer life unlived *and* lived

In Monterosso
I didn't expect so many pastels

A woman weeps over a marble statue
in her mint cotton joggers

Now I'm the one to go when
I see my own self in another

ROBIE HOUSE

We are two bodies likely to never touch again
Red wax on pearls, three days before a wedding
I listen quietly on ear pod to Reich "For 18 Musicians"
To keep from telling you again about how we ought
To move from that shit city to this shit city

The trees are lush near steel, bluegrass
A photo of brother and sister in 1994
Now hangs in an office near Lake Michigan
My hair is up, cheeks pink, teeth are Vaseline
Is this where the World Fair went to make use
Of our broken libido and give us a mid 70s
Soundtrack of Xylophones instead of synth

At the Indiana Dunes the colors are pale blue or
Dark bend and two transwomen cake on
Too-Faced sheer cover-up and wear synthetic
Lace slips and only smile when I enter
Full and befogged by their kindness near sand
Near the Devil's Slide and modern houses
On hills owned by men with guns who tell us to leave
After the silent touch of dead photos and

The silent death of our names and wardrobes
Into Normcore we will say goodbye to
Silk forever and for that matter silkworms
Yet what is victory but to comply and
What is marriage but sexual reassignment

I always did like how Wright got to live
Inside his dreams - what a total waste
Of mine to exist in fatal texts that lament
A lack of identifiers or romantic gestures
That separate mystic love from erection
But I am hopeful about the future still and

Even left a poem for a poor old soul
At the record store and left you a letter
Asking you to reconsider the death of kink
But if you must I would support that and
Marriage too and learn to walk on Lake Michigan
Instead of just slowly drown at its hurried edge

VINCE GUARALDI TRIO

I feel like rage

And nostalgia

Keep me up

Visions of Verona

Leonardo and Judas

Famous Countrymen

Or my 45-inch bust

In a sample size

Angels swell, burst

The touch of Atlantic

Soaks through

My Fiorucci T-shirt

I flood the grass

Fiori di Napoli

Bloom in the driveway or

What if the binary

Is broken

And I tried to tell you?

We are parked

On Graham Avenue

“Greensleeves”

Plays on Bluetooth

Purring Hitachi Wand

Softly over

Bell bottoms, oversized

Hair clips, black velvet

Frustrated but hopeful

You, a man, are asleep

What if we pluck fat loins

Like violins

Sew satin details

On handmade skirts

Instead of doing

What we do

A friend suggests

Conscious Uncoupling!

Queer Futurity!

I am into it

A new way to relate

A new thing to aspire toward

A cake-sitting legend

A pansexual god

And so much more!

But all we have now?

Crowded invite lists to

Purge or wait on

No shows

A temple

To impulse buys

How I wanted

Holographic headlights

Net-a-Porter handbag

False lashes

Yellow diamond

Jacuzzi light

Oysters and Wine

White press on nails

White rug, tan legs

Pasta for dinner

I am imitating men

How they write, never

Look at me square

She went back

To an abuser

Not ok, but ok

I throw a pool party

For fat women only

Should we all just

Stop trying

The patriarch is kind of

Strong but also

I wish I could flirt

With women

Tell them about

Vince Guaraldi Trio

In the late summer office

At the year-end party

MARSHMALLOW

is fluid

thin bodied and lush

a captured Fiorucci angel in our queer
love

We exchange money for attention touch
tongues with beauty bloggers in full beat
as if it's how we learned to breathe

Where he came from they'd have killed
him for that popped hip on
Fire Sunday so he calls
it fashion an aesthetic language
and just nods at the man behind
the dumpster in Prospect Park
who thought he was cruising, too

FOR BABES WHO KISS WET ON FIRST MEETING, ESPECIALLY LIANA

A persistent dry spell

no wet

for two months mollycoddle

He was like a musician and all like had a music video

Orange leaves on window dresser drawer by drawer or asking

Will you meet me in the park

and wake with grass stains on lips a pastoral in new sincerity

He texts and I texted

something about legs being fine as hell

The prophet suggested that bee saving was better than dick pics

sent me enough so many - enough to fill a whole room

traveling in my pocket for three weeks like a down payment

And this empty whip-it canister like a fish that saved me

in empty empty waters

I met you in the park first fucked on knees from behind

told to be quieter when I screamed through green

and grey light

ambient city nature buzz and cool spit off small but plump mouth watched your
pleasure twisted face below me

It was the best sex I had in three years Or some shit

But then you

got up and asked me if I always kissed men that passionately when

I first met them when I first allowed them to stretch my adidas track pants off in the
summer suss garden

shame or

near home

No longer at the picnic with my family I could not build a family here

Said if you knew I had a car you would have made me drive you

I don't know what a prayer is but Mary I do know how to bend on my knees for 15 hot minutes
and repent

I asked all my friends to text bomb you when you ghosted

I asked Solange to stop letting you perform in her show

I asked the whatever to tell your girl about your habits

I just wish for the culture

sunflower seed stuck in teeth pretending not to weep into brown

leather seats

I just wish

This could be different or

I asked for Ana the slayer of hot dead boys to save me

What did I expect perpetuating rape culture with my wet pussy

in your fuckboi hands way after bedtime for

girls who don't kiss as passionately when they first meet anyway

ever

they never Quazz

your name? is that your name I swear those other girls

they never do that

PALMER HOUSE

The filmmaker asks what Monica and I
Wish to capture and I say a porn because
The flirtation of platonic bonds imploding
Still excited a boy like him- all neon energy
When we pretend to watch the Super Bowl

The body is the silver lining of nothing sent across
Wavelengths, science, class, politics- or I am
Most delicate when caught suddenly in your gaze
The male-gaze, the filmmaker gaze - slow touch past
Judeo-Christian cart in midtown and we all laugh, take selfies

Weather grows warm and I am obsessed with data
The days post discard are hardest and then again
I did not think you looked as hot when you begged
But now ten days after no contact I remember how
Sexy you are and how I have become unsexed

Spending days speaking with Angie Atkinson,
a YouTube life-coach, about the emotive abuse
Someone is going to tell me that they never thought
A woman so intelligent could be so dumb as if
I am still playing that childhood game *fuck/marry/kill*

The leisure and pleasure of poetry is minimal
Take for instance the bag that incriminates me
When I walk by your new place of work on a Tuesday
Light blue and faux fur and at the same time the ocean
Somewhere in California just touched a spot of skin

On a body, on salt, on the marina and coral reefs
I masturbated at work for the first time today and
Thought of stocks and bonds and Katy who asked me
If our freak president suffered from N.P.D like you do
And I love you anyway, write love letters to you

This entropy of womanhood, of fat bodies, and
Chubby girl porn you searched on my brother's computer
And the anger of separation like how much can I love you
I think of your sister, and I want to ask if she knows

If your mother is longing for you and the other Laura
And Emily and Jenny and Katy and Camonghne
Until we all burst into shattering glass as victims
Of your perfect, Turbo-Tax, Nike.com, E-Trade, CBD
Wifey Wakes to Creampie addicted to boyhood body

Not like the filmmaker, but not dissimilar either

The tired hetero metaphor is crossed with debility
I bring out misogyny in even the most woke of men
In my tight thing near the restaurant, in my wet bottoms
 And I am getting F.O.M.O that my girlfriends
 Are having an orgy in Detroit without me
The pierce of nothing in ear is a real sound and I can prove it

MILLENNIAL PINK

You say: *There's no ethical consumption under capitalism.*

I say: *There's no consumption at all.
My loans are too steep!*

You say: *But the snake emojis! The Bernie Bros!*

I say: *Medicare for All, asshole!*

FALLINGWATER

This is Pennsylvania or Paradise Lost
Or the country we did not expect to find
Driving for 14 hours and finally reach
The Amish when we follow Siri towards
Violet-blue, orange-pink, lined cloud

Over red barns and grass and texts
From a girl waiting in New York to
Spank my ass 1,000 times while I am
Admiring her king crown of hair and
Trying not to hate myself more again

In Pennsylvania we watch a family
Leave the Mama Dutch restaurant
When we mention abortion and PrEp
HIV stigma still ripe like hot wax or a
White House legacy botched red --

1,000 bodies Ruth Coker Burkes buried
When none of the morgues would take them
On her mother's estate in Hot Springs

The girl comes on top of me without
Warning and I am vulnerable but ok
She comes across my chest and kisses
My body for thirty minutes before
Peeing and I am free and ok and hoping
This isn't just an escape from America

What if we had driven by Fallingwater or
Catholicism was not so mundane

I tell all the gay men in the Italian bar
That if I ever get married it will be a cathedral
And it will be in Rome with the Pope officiating and
A veil that starts at the crown of my head and falls
To the three doors of Christ, Father and Holy Ghost

Mozart's "Requiem for a Funeral" performed
A full cast of swan and the crooning voice of
Klaus Nomi and Freddie Mercury on altar

When his date came to your wedding, a man

In a tie-dye purple gown, the bride's father objected

But someone told him this is the New Church

And I concur I am too am the New Church

And so ride me when you are sleeping and ride me
when we are dead and

Please baby king turn each white spot red

TOO LATE

When Fred Moten suggests poets
are in their late work, collectively

I am blue faced and half-asleep, transfixed
and delusion, at the same damn time

Like church bells accidently rung on Friday
We are all already dead, so yes, I agree

The things we write about are experienced
in second life, how queer to be queer or

At the state-fair a playful domme in purple velvet
her bosom mused about in your Instagram story

What to do now that I am dripping blood orange
on this cultural table, allergic to most perfumes

Fred, each wish I ever had is just a copy
of something wished before - like a cherub

fighting with father ad infinitum

My work was never early, *really* -

a stream of consciousness and
half-assed plagiarism when I felt like it

meditating on maroon moons just as earnest
as whomever came next

THE BEST MINDS

Incels on floor mattresses

Across Long Island

Under- employed Nike-owned kiosk

Cultural Capital as payment Four roommates in a three-bedroom apartment, famous on

Tik-Tok Re-watching *The Sopranos* for the fifth time

Coddled little babies of baby boomers

A legacy of fools

A room of sad clowns surrealist landscapes

and on K or even H always at the sex dungeon, in submission

My most wealthy friends are techies but turn tricks on the side and everyone

goes by they

AT MIDNIGHT WHAT BODY DOES THIS OCEAN NOT DESERVE

In this bed I am anxious, covered in coconut oil

No poet nor mother has ever been straight

COMMODITY

This was bad for me
To be so close to this

Turning down \$300
To turn eggshells with tongue

We suffer so much for our art

My sisters all have vaginal infections
Who knew we could be so dumb
The ones who carry lavender
In between shoulder blades

Everyone was crying this week
 I am a wilted dove
 An orchid in bulb
A failed market strategy

My skin won't respond
To Juvéderm injection

I've lived my whole life on the brim
Of commercial deceit
The way we liked holidays
Whole families gathered with
Pumpkins the dead
of public space
I wanted to build grand teal chapels when
All I was offered were bereavement clauses

What can we learn from our peers?

Monica says:
All Drake does is suffer
Sings about women
Having fun
Without him

ANCESTORS

My boyfriend is wearing a royal purple do-rag
In vain for vanity
ashamed of the day his hair fell out

Sampson have we cut
Rosenberg have we loved

I am not convinced until he holds
laptop above head so I can
view *Tangerine* more clearly; hear Sin-Dee's
Vocal fry

I wish all of you could see

portraits June took of my grandmother
proclaiming and ornamenting the inner wall
of Croatia and Albania where

my mother's blood runs

into my blood too it's cool
some of it came out on a condom after my
colposcopy and we tossed it

Out

BLUE VALENTINE

Love in the time of Covid-19
is like a lecture series on
why platitudes are not poetry

At night in the moonshine
I pray on my knees, coal
river air is all consuming

White dudes trading mad
wealth I have never known
and money is health, honey

Your blood is rare and on my hands,
body covered in sport team tattoos

Who will die? What does slumming
mean now -I mean now - in the time
of bio warfare and the timeless phrase:

God Bless us; God Forbid them

Blue Valentine remember when we
are too old and things become circular
rub of macho girl and slight man

We will eat Easter bread and forget
our dead, those my ancestors killed
and those buried by prison labor on Hart Island

I wanted this to be an easy love --
remembering is too much of a burden

THIS IS WIDE RESURRECTION

This is someone else's good fortune

4th of July in Bed-Stuy, oil slick rainbows, joy and through rear view mirror

I see you, bright orange shirt, blue mouth, walk confidently

Then handcuffed, put in car

One officer makes a comment about how neatly you rolled the spliff, tells you
there is a warrant for your arrest (unpaid bike ticket)-- you spend Independence Day
in a holding cell and when released

your eyes peel upon entering the charcoal thick air of morning

A month earlier when we returned from a road trip to Virginia you called up to your sister
as we reached the corner of Gates and Marcus Garvey -- said we were still in Baltimore,
would be there in a few hours, smirking through the phone like a fourth-grade boy, knowing
she'd be tickled when you came up the stairs

right then

home safely

FOR PEGGY

In Monterosso plenty of Italians float in neon tubes
And it was me who said buy the fifty-dollar red-lensed
Sunglasses in my cotton shorts, near statuary of dead deities,
Full chest like the name Ionata which is a family name but also
What we called our sister to mean of the mountain

And we are back on our bullshit, how many times in bed with
The working class, literally screaming out on Valentine's Day
That he will buy him whatever Nikes he wants as long as
Tight rubs against flaccid dicks cause an anointing O over
Tired wrought tradition- if sticks and stones break bones

Cement carries on irreversible damage of slum fantasies
In the American imagination and all I have now is to tell
These interns to turn up and twerk and comb through
Brain cells to make something beautiful for the man who
Is still a man and we weep sideways finally after lunch

On a Saturday at Segue his working-class man has
Played a video game through the entirety of a poet's
Reading which I will admit was boring and someone
Is going to say kill the rich for causing such tension
But maybe my tastes are changing again like summer

Changes and misses me when it is Fall or like a
Man who tells you that your hands taste like
Horseradish vodka and canned salmon and then
That he'd love you like a love song, baby, and then
He leaves- I am sure being a beta or alpha had

Nothing to do with his last will and testament to
Selena Gomez; I'd have given her my kidney too
In the dark midnight office of Buffalo I am on a winter
Road-trip and no longer ogling Samantha's tears
At that wedding near Cinque Terre, crying for her mother

Whom by February would be dead from cancer --

All of us in a car driving to the funeral

Even though that rocky beach swallowed our

Friendships whole and left us like stray kittens

Along the marbled roads of our ancestries

I try to move on, consider the risk of grief, but

We are living in the strangest times and because

Of this I am becoming a “flat-earther” and writing

To no audience but the flesh touched by inflatables

ASH WEED

I am so done with feeling
Xmas Amaryllis grow
in places where thralls go free
I am not quite enough
for the woodland; promoting myself again
after all accused men have been named

In Casablanca I wait for livestock
to come through luxe doors
for thighs to grow less through absorption
My killer is not going to be invited to this
Ornamenting party and I am blue daisies

casting O's wide in anointment
Now that he's gone I am free to torch down the
Valley la spiaggia of pure
Purple small neck in hand

RED MOON ECLIPSE WITH MARS VISIBLE

I missed the Adrian Piper retrospective at MoMA
And the red moon is surfacing too much for a kid
with my salary to manage

Look I know I promised I would not collect
the mortals from the gutter but I just can't
help myself

On a Tuesday I wake up a daughter
And a mother in a childless garden
Is this a sick joke?

I lay down

I feel grateful

I do that now

To my sweetheart son, Leonardo,

This is our gap year

This is our gap decade

This is our gap life

A sinkhole

HOUSE OF FERRARI AVORIO

Language became fractured to me

At thirty-three when you refused

To speak to our sewing teacher and all

The other students said all the same things

Like parrots dressed as birds of prey

It is preferable to speak less and *acquista di più*

Collect Ferrari Avorios, like farm eggshells

And not just one, an entire house filled!

Without words, though meaningless,

I am alone, a child left in the tide, *nudo*

A cold plum chilled with mint

In the hot Ligurian air, uneaten

My stomach is always burning around you

Or I am the lady in the Alitalia

uniform, *rosso brillante*, who steps

From a bathroom stall, screams

And *sta urlando*, surveillance video shared

Virally, until osmosis occurs

And we are *tutta questa donna*, too

You could turn white blouses pink and

When you wore Carhartt overalls on Sunday

Sophia blushed and laughed at the thought

Of her girl wearing the same thing

Alok says beauty is expanding, and I believe them

We remove our uniforms instinctually

When we enter a hotel room at 11AM

A whole mood communicated in silence

As a child I noticed a Ferrari Bianco with

Wine-colored interior in the driveway of a

Townhouse in Portofino -- I was away from

La mama and craftsmanship was sinful,

Delicious --what I wanted was this car - or to be seen as I was inside

No words for desire, burning a small

Body from the inside out, like my

45-inch bust ripping the

Seams of a favored blouse

What I know now at thirty-three is you can
Learn new language, to sew or roller skate,
Watch old men who split on wooden floor promise boys in their twenties they won't
Allow them to fall, pay tuition, *vieni vicino alla povertà*

Watch Italian women with lip fillers, Chanel tassels,
Whip shit men into husbands
Mediate violence

Women who know better, and those who don't care to

~ ~ ~

In "Poem as Field of Action" Williams says we are reaching for aristocracy, class-passing
Poor souls who list luxury items in poems like dream fulfillment, language as shopping
Guilty as charged, hedonistic or in *sole and grigio chiaro*

I realize your wardrobe is based

On proximity to the hospital

Soft hues and soft pants offset

A Sickle Cell flare-up; I want to bring you, les miserable

To my dream house of yellow, pink, creme Ferrari

To heel peculiar infractions of God with

Luxurious and impractical monuments silk robes from Sunset Blvd.

grand teal chapels, *acqua di rosa*

the House of Ferrari Avorio

tea sipped from glassware in Moschino loungewear near *Giardini di Boboli*

As a poor girl I can only offer poetry -- words,
locked ankles, hand-sewn lace tablecloths on plastic card tables like
Fiori di Napoli blooming in the North

COMING IN

1. I dress you in a top from my first dance recital. I notice immediately it fits you better at twenty-seven than it fit me at five-years-old. The film I am directing comments on the infantilization of women, but I'm doing the devil's work today, I'm sure. We are working with two others, framing the scene with artifacts of girlhood and Internet feminism. You sparkle, are radiant on camera, lying on the double bed of your tiny apartment bedroom, drinking Hennessy from a baby bottle I bought from the Bodega thirty minutes before arriving. The heavy sigh of all four bodies in the room goes in sync with Selena's *I'll Be Dreaming of You* which is playing off my laptop.
2. I scroll through Instagram "shops" in search of a gift for an expecting mother; velvet sun suits, with wide and bold ruffles, rosy pink, burnt orange, a deluded mint green. Why do we infantilize women from birth? I test out my own sense of gender and queerness: Would I buy this for my nephew, too? I want the answer to be yes. I come up short. Actually, what I want is to wear it myself, to work, at a party, in the ocean in late September- shredded and ripped by rocks and covered in salt and leaking oil. Ruffles are a weapon in the captivity of women, costumes required for societal participation, to be seen at all. But this is how I understand cuteness, and like anyone else, I want to be seen.
3. You are an invited reader at Ada Books. Six months after we shoot the film, I drive you to Providence from Brooklyn for the reading. It is only two months into my PhD program, and I am still living between two places. *The night before the reading was Halloween. The night before that I was beaten nearly senseless, while dressed as a sexy Mime.* I had only returned to retrieve more of my belongings from my old apartment. A man who stopped loving me when I went away to pursue my doctoral degree, my partner of the last three years, violently kicked me, over and over and over, knocking my body to the floor, until the whole room became a gray fog. In the morning, you notice the bruises everywhere, but strategically, not on my face. We stop on the way at a burger joint in Connecticut. Members of the soccer team at the school I have taught for years are inside. One is my student. He recognizes me and says hello with a hearty smile. You cover the bruise on my exposed arm as I engage in small talk before ordering food. After that I ask you to drive the rest of the way; I lay in the backseat, like a baby.

4. The courage I have to possess any feminine privilege at all comes from the photos of me in that recital costume, smiling like a maniac, with perfect jazz hands. When my colleague in the graduate program, a transwoman who works in the office, becomes sick with terminal cancer, I know what to do. I give her one of the ruffled, pink arm bands. I hug her and say, *this means more to me than most things; I want you to have this.*
5. For years after I am beat nearly dead, you ask me to come with my car to your apartment in Queens and get all of your stuff out. We meet near my open truck, trip after trip, and dance to contemporary hip-hop. You are wearing a black two-piece set covered in red cherries. We muse about public hearings for our domestic abusers, for the little men who tried to snuff us out. When he finally gets home, none of your stuff will be there.
6. My colleague told me it takes a person seven times to leave an abuser, and that she admired me so much for my courage – it would help her to flee, too. When she passes away, less than two months after her diagnosis, I think of my duty towards the after. I imagine her with those pink ruffles, somewhere beyond here. I wonder what it would be like to walk outside without a body – to not have to kill everything feminine about myself to survive at all.
7. We drive from Queens to Brooklyn, and you move into my apartment. You decorate it with fresh flowers, re-arrange the furniture, and buy \$75 candles that burn on Monday. We hold hands, go to events where men in white dresses ring bells. You take photos of me, and I forget for a moment, that my hands are the only thing worth photographing. You come home late, while I am sleeping, having done MDMA, and you roll your body into me like a tornado that comes in the night and leaves the whole town empty by morning. Weeks later you yell at me for sleeping on your clean sheets. I tell you that I had not. I tell you that you don't have to kiss all of your friends.
8. In the 1940s, my great-aunt falls in love with a country music star who convinces her to move to Texas. She writes her brother of the terrible abuse and he sends her a train ticket back home. In the 1970s, my mother's sister never finishes her major at URI because of an emotionally abusive relationship that takes her energy and time. In the 1990s, my other aunt is in the ER with a bloody nose, her husband has another woman at home. In 2014, my colleague traces a car on Google Maps during class and tells me not to trust any motherfuckers.
9. I wonder why queer lives must be tied to something spiritual, the occult, theory of the flesh. I wonder why my partner wanted me dead. I wonder why even women want me dead. I question patriarchy in contradiction, gripping my rose-quartz face roller. I wonder for all my trouble at breaking this generational curse will I finally be seen whole – will I be let in?
10. I will be the first doctor in my family -- queer futurity? Something like it. Though they are all around me, getting jobs before me, there are no killers in sight.

WATERDEATH

A dry body will not

Decompose

Or in July

Violet Sedum bloom

In the driveway

Pool water

Soaks through

My Balenciaga

Knitted- Skirt

My mother

Whose shame I share

Once too loved pools

In New Jersey

Emerged

No echo

Of taunts from

Summer boys and

What body

Does not deserve

To feel air

On all limbs

In air
The body decays
Three times faster
When I need
A dream fulfilled
I eat
Yellow tomato
Figs and pears
Tortellini in pesto
What preserves
Raw material
Of memory
My mother
Pearly in sun
Has not swum
In twenty years
If not dreaming
Then searching
Amazon
For a swimsuit
That covers
Head to toe

Bacteria in-gut
Chest cavity
Balloons with gas
The body now
Floats, decays
A Viking funeral
Before death
But I remember you
On the beach, I am five
Illuminating sounds in
White-pink shells
Green apples in palm
We peed in sand holes
While Nonna
Called you fat
Cold water
Encourages
Adipocere
The more flesh
The more foam
We are intact
Recognizable skeletons
After we drown

Though once great

Swimmers

The pool now covered in

Ice, Christmas fish in our

Bellies

If I could have

Maimed summer boys, winterized

Amalfi and Long Beach Island for you

I would or

Take you to water anoint you different

As I am queer as I am my bust through wet
Fiorucci t-shirt, Atlantic surge

At midnight

What body does this ocean not deserve

VERONA

After Monica

Sounds like Oz

Sounds like someone's dream home
Buried under Bronx fires and high-rise
government housing

Where grandmothers die
Each day, rose water in caldron

Where mirrors stretch rooms wide,
Pineapple ham and Sazón

Where the sky burns as if in pain
Where your irises pale
From contact with dusty tiles

To be the Italian wife of a Taino Indian,
Cattle trades broken like straw needles
Near ancient columns and wet grass

Ancestry.com has you at 75%

The rest is the blood of my own,
Washed in porcelain tubs on Long Island

In 1992 we celebrated 500 years of bloodlust
The Santa Maria painted on my milky cheek

But we share the rose water, the sign of the cross

Your grandmother prays for me each night
Despite my guilt and my cowardice

When they met you the first thing they said
Was you sounded poor, as if poverty was
Just something overheard

I was taught to cover up class position
With education, pretty-ass language

And you were taught to survive me

In ninth grade you met friends
In the bedding department of Macy's
On 34th Street to kiss, touch without trouble

I was enrolled in a camp at Harvard

My parents thought all this education
Might teach me to *marry-up*

We could have stayed at a boutique hotel
For \$200 a night but instead

We slept on the same couch your mother
Gave birth to you, though you claim it
Was the bathtub

The summer of 1988 where she wore a bubble coat
To cover a growing stomach, ate Doritos

What does it do to future capital if your
Conception is a secret, if your teen mother
Is not ready to kill anything but herself

Abortion is the deadliest sin a poor person
Can commit, as if every abortion is equal

You are the first person who has held me whole,
Bought me a yellow diamond on lay-away

A prayer is the first name I say on my knees
I wrap our bed in expensive linens
Money is a garden, poverty a genetic disease

Our daughter Leonardo, Our son Verona, how gay
We can be together now that Jesus is dead

I haven't any roses, but I buy them
For our table on Tuesdays, and though I speak well,
I too, am sick

BOOMERLAND

Today I woke up detained
A dainty house-arrest

Skin melted in gratitude
Or what I mean is

This spray tan won't
Last the pandemic, nor will these acrylics

But you will still call me Carmela
Or Tony when I get red

I am really going to
Need someone to make good
On these loans

Can you imagine, not even thirty-five
and lived through two recessions?

Our queer families are thriving, Judith, can't you see?

Thanks for voting for Biden, my lips curl

Like wilted roses in a thirsty garden

And to think I spent all that time
Occupying Wall Street

Getting older is a return on someone's
Bad investment,
and that investment was me

PRIMARIES

I want to go to the booth

Self-conscious as I am, but the truth is

I have this clown make-up or I have you

Say Maple Tree Say Not Enough

Say *Quiet Laura* Say Chaperone Required

At the Clinic

The next day, woman, I bring you soup and momos

The message said California was burning

In a casual voice My grandmother is dying

In a casual way Death is a part of life

Born to Die or the Green New Deal, boomer

When I wear tea tree, you say it reminds you of roaches or

you know god is the ring light we use to put on false eyelashes

Say Public Housing, Say Bernie Sanders

Say Have you Eaten and How Much

I greet your god so I can enter the home

Where clutter does not mean dirty, you remind me

Our lives now etched together, but they can't get over

How different we are — our skin, our education level

And which one of us is a patient in this queer family

I have eaten the sun, Precious I have swallowed emails

From famous poets warning against imitation

As if poetry was currency As if anything means anything at all

I am fighting semantics, Medicare for All, for all

I am fighting for orgies cancelled due to evictions

Say A Tree Grows in Brooklyn, Say Cuomo Cut Medicaid during Covid-19

Say his name, the brother of my student, slain in a rusted pipe

On his 14th birthday

I am your eternal bottom feeder, your surrogate mother

Your rainbow dartboard Your professor

I see that you want me so much and also

Not at all

I think we can forget this self-evaluation

Choose someone else, before you

Choose yourself The first shall finish

Last Say cake sitting whores

Say Sanctuary City

Say closet bedroom Say We are Going to Win!

With words and no swords, dirt in our mouths

Our dishes A clean water supply

Say eat from the oily bottom!

Say I love you beautifulangelprincess!

Say corn hair and milk jelly as a password to enter

In the private party room for all, for all

In the orange waste management dome, we danced for MoMA

In the dirty reservoir I coddled a queer you kept from the party

Say demon-be-gone, Say lightworker, Say gay-as-fuck

On our gay-as-fuck sets, in our gay-as-fuck films

Say Sex Worker Say Rent Strike!

Say Nico will live forever

With a switchblade in a rhinestone vest

I am your savior girl

My own golden ranch, gay cowboy

I am an American victor, a Go-Fund me fraud

I am I am What we all waited for

Split in two in Texas or Rhode Island

Like a voting comrade without a wet cloth

To wipe the booth after use

AFTER

This dead bird was moving for hours like

God himself thrown it to earth in a fitful rage

Fortuna, take me to Rodeo Drive

Bring me safely to the conservatory Leonardo's passion project,
the children of a single gay man speculative literature runs faster than violence

Warm air is west of us roll grapes on flesh to feel something

Let no one forsake me Wrap me in dainty cream

What thy bless, no man can curse

A purple light from the toilet stares up at me I piss on the floor

NOTES

In the order they appear in the book

Opening Ceremony is a direct reference to the clothing boutique of the same name, which promotes the work of queer and marginalized designers.

Baba Dass refers to Ram Dass, American psychologist and healer who died in 2019.

The term “**sexy baby tiger**” is a reference to the description of Instagram beauty written by Jia Tolentino in the New Yorker article “The Age of Instagram Face.” The idea of body modification is a common theme in many of the poems, as it is a beauty tool that I believe belongs to queer culture. It is a way for us to be seen as we want to be seen.

In **Virginia Woolf’s** book *Three Guineas*, she suggests outsiders working on change from the inside out. The speaker who is laying on the Wayfair rug, is channeling Woolf, suggesting their friends get jobs at FedEx to change the policies in favor of the worker, from the inside out.

The term “**girl gang**” is a reference to the Alt-Lit journal *Illuminati Girl Gang* that was edited by Gabby Bess between 2011-2013 and gave voice to many young and emerging writers of today. Gabby now goes by Sachi Flower and gives Reiki healing to myself and my partner, regularly.

The “**Fiorucci Angel**” is the brand icon of the Italian jean company Fiorucci. As a teenager, my Fiorucci Angel t-shirt was my favorite piece of clothing.

Robie House, Palmer House, and Falling Water are all names of houses designed by Frank Lloyd Wright. During a road trip with members of my community, on our way to a wedding, I passed these structures. The idea that he was able to “build his dreams to live within” aligned for me with the idea of queer futurity, against patriarchy. The poem **For Peggy** previously was named for a Frank Lloyd Wright structure but was changed in dedication to the mother of a friend who passed away. The poems are not in homage to the architect, but rather, to the work of building one’s dream within reality.

Ruth Coker Burkes buried over 1,000 people who had died from HIV related illness on land she inherited when funeral homes refused her because of misinformation and stigma.

The phrase “**the death of kink**” refers to a societal push in 2019 for the LGBTQ pride parade to exclude any representation of kink or leather communities. This, and the constant reference to

“**marriage**” demonstrates the tension between a corporate-voiced queerness and the queer community.

Vince Guaraldi Trio are the group responsible for my favorite Christmas album, *A Charlie Brown Christmas*. This, and other references to Christmas in the manuscript, are tied to the weight of capitalism and heteropatriarchy in a queer person’s life, and how they build from these materials.

Continuous references to “**Leonardo**” refer to the renaissance artist, as a major queer figure, central to my writing, and whom I consider the father of all queer Italians. In the book I refer to him as a child, or a baby, indicating his rebirth in queer futures. The idea of him being queer is certainly written about, but I have stayed from the scholarship to keep the idea pure in my mind.

“**1992**” in the poem **Verona** refers to the 500th anniversary of Christopher Columbus’ voyage, but in this work, it is a marker of the blood of my own lover that is on my hands, as I am Italian-American, and he is Taino Indian. The complicated nature of my Italian heritage plays, including family guilt and familial love, play throughout the book.

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“**Commodity**” and “**On Grief**” were published in *Blush Lit* online.

“**For Girls Who Kiss Wet On First Meeting**” was published in *Luna Luna Mag.*

“**For Peggy**” and “**Palmer House**” were published by *Black Ocean* formally *Gamma Press*.

“**Vince Guaraldi Trio**” was published in *Wonder* online.

~

ABOUT THE AUTHOR

Laura Marie Marciano is a Visiting Professor in the English Department at Lehigh University. She is the founder of *gemstone readings*, a media collective that promotes the narratives of queer poets. Her work has been presented with MoMA PS1, NPR, Poetry Foundation, RISD Museum, and Brown University. She lives in Brooklyn, New York.

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