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Marxism for Single Mothers: Anne Boyer's *Garments Against Women*

Abstract: In this reading of Anne Boyer's *Garments Against Women* I argue that the poet's 2015 collection of prose poetry positions literary and intellectual labor as both historically and currently oppressive to women through its figurative engagement with early capitalist textile production. I further demonstrate that despite Boyer's overt engagement with a narrative of modern labor rooted in eighteenth-century industrialization, her writing is indebted to the work of a contemporary American Avant-garde. I show that the poets Alice Notley and Bernadette Mayer, whose works have culled material from spheres of life traditionally understood as both feminine and anti-poetic, have served as precursors for Boyer's overtly Marxist and feminist works.

Keywords: Anne Boyer, New York School, Feminism, American avant-gardes, Language Poetry

I am typing this sentence in America at the end of the first week of the Trump regime. The journalist Jonathan M. Katz, in a tweet from the fifth day of the new "presidency," aptly captured the current chaotic political atmosphere: "First they came for the Latinos, Muslims, women, gays, poor people, intellectuals, and scientists, and then it was Wednesday." In the whirlwind of political strikes from the Right, everyone I know feels like a boxer on the ropes, taking swipes to the jaw, our country seemingly redefined in a matter of days by a narcissist obsessed with the number of attendees at his inauguration, whose closest adviser, a self-proclaimed Leninist and white nationalist, has infiltrated the White House absent of congressional approval. In this situation, it is hard to reflect on poetry, to turn away from the endless news cycle for any reason, though, at least in my circle of friends, artists and academics and such, it is affecting our sleep cycles negatively. The Trump regime has already promised to come after poetry and the other arts, too. It will dismantle the National Endowment for the Arts, a federal organization that has supported many small poetry presses and their not-for-profit distributor, Small Press Distribution, though in the light of the Muslim ban that went into effect this morning, which will force refugees back into the terror zones at least partially if not largely created by the U.S.'s failed interventions in the Middle East, federal support for poetry seems a meager loss.

This fall as I planned my talk for the conference in Lodz I chose to discuss the work of Anne Boyer because her 2015 book *Garments Against Women* adapts the

aesthetic strategies of previous American avant-gardes to interrogate Literature itself as a capitalist institution, thus revealing the assumptions of literary aesthetics as a history of modernity grounded in a Lockean conception of property in person. For Boyer, literature, like most cultural production in the modern-era, universalizes the forms of bourgeois experience as a ruse for democratic inclusion: “As if the language of poets is the language of property owners. As if the language of poets is the language of professors. As if the language of poets is not the language of machines” (14). The trope of “garments” first appears in Boyer’s title, but mutates in figurative purpose throughout the collection, eventually signifying all political, social, economic, and aesthetic institutions, including literature, institutions all conceived and grounded in abstract assumptions and thus largely unable to “accommodate a grown woman’s torso” (25). With the prose poems’ evocations of Wollstonecraft, Mary Shelley, and Rousseau, these “garments” never shed their echoes of early capitalist textile production that relied upon women and children for cheap labor, thus continually reminding the reader that this Enlightenment institution of liberal democracy was never quite liberal or democratic. As I return my thoughts to Boyer’s work this week, it is hard for me not to fear that our current regime’s attempts to tighten our democratic “garments” towards a less inclusionary fit is simply the natural progression of historical logic.

What I would identify as the “innovation” in Boyer’s work is its ability to theorize literature’s relationship to the personal in a way that calls into question Language Poetry’s privileging of literary works that simply forefront language as artifice. Suspicious of the conventions of lyric poetry, the “honest feeling” expressed as the voice of the poet through the pronoun “I,” Language Poetry in practice favored works staged as a field of linguistic play, abstracted and removed from the poet’s experiences as a social and political animal in the world. Though Charles Bernstein’s critique of the formulaic transparency of twentieth-century official verse culture rightfully diagnosed that when poetry cops a “natural look” the reader forgets she is in a highly ideological space through the staging of “[p]ersonal subject matter and flowing syntax,” the question Boyer wrestles with centers on the problem of abstraction in literature (40). That Boyer’s writing is conspicuously informed by theory and philosophy and never achieves the transparency of the “natural look” Bernstein calls into question suggests an affinity with Language Poetry, yet her essay on Louis Althusser, “Kill the Philosopher in Your Head,” calls for a theoretical orientation incapable of enabling an abstract relationship to human flesh. Boyer makes this argument through a reading that implicates Althusser’s murder of his wife as the result of a philosophical error:

In being unaware even if the person whose neck he is ‘massaging’ from the front is alive or dead, Althusser inadvertently describes philosophy’s fatal level of abstraction. As the wife-killer treats human as object, a passive material to be formed or unformed by more powerful hands,

so too, the kind of philosophy Althusser describes makes objects of the masses, much to their own risk.

Boyer's point here is that Althusser, as the thinking man, cannot incorporate the very real political and personal conditions of his own life into his theoretical practice and it is the woman who does not survive the philosophical impasse. This essay read against Boyer's work in *Garments Against Women* suggests that this Marxist philosophy becomes lethal due to the exclusion of "inadmissible information," what we might understand as generic constraints, which are also restraints upon content, or as she writes in her piece "The Innocent Question":

Inadmissible information is often information that has something to do with biology (illness, sex, reproduction) or money (poverty) or violence (how money and bodies meet). Inadmissible information might also have to do with being defanged by power (courts, bosses, fathers, editors, and other authorities) or behaving against power in such a way that one soon will be defanged (crime). (9)

Arguably by including the "inadmissible" personal information of Althusser's violent murder of his wife into the genre of philosophical critique, Boyer expands the capacities of the genre to include the very real repercussions of the history of philosophy upon the female body. By otherwise preserving the conventions of the genre, Boyer seamlessly (pun intended) alters the shape of the genre (garment) to include the corpse of a woman. The otherwise "inadmissible" biographical fact enters as evidentiary material to debunk a philosopher's position regarding the relationship between philosophy and politics. Boyer's delineation and inclusion of the "inadmissible" as necessary to the development of a practical Marxist feminist philosophy and poetics reveals her debt to poets like Alice Notley and Bernadette Mayer, second-generation New York School poets, who likely would express little interest in rehearsing the kind of fluency in philosophy or theory Boyer is drawn to, but who redefined Frank O'Hara's earlier notion of "Personism" from a poetry so personal that it becomes "true abstraction for the first time, really, in the history of poetry" (O'Hara xiv) to a poetry that includes what Boyer calls "not writing" (44), all those experiences of living often exceeding the parameters of accepted material for poetry, especially the kind of living that is definitively female. Here I am thinking particularly of Notley's early piece, "Homer's Art," where she also considers what might happen to literature, if women entered it as something other than extensions of a patriarchal discourse: "Another service would be to write a long poem, a story poem, with a female narrator/hero. Perhaps this time she wouldn't call herself something like Helen; perhaps instead there might be recovered some sense of what mind was like before Homer, before the world went haywire & women were denied participation in the design & making of it" (114). Notley argues that to allow a woman to write the poetry of a nation would alter both the poetry and the nation, that our

nation is a garment ill in its “design,” a design replicated in the fabric of politics by the continual exclusion of women’s thoughts, women’s experiences. The exclusion of women, Notley suggests, alters all human thought, not just women’s thoughts. To write a long poem from the perspective of a woman would “recover” something. The practice capable of occurring in the present could potentially retrieve an occulted human past buried by patriarchal tradition.

A project like Bernadette Mayer’s *Midwinter Day* approaches the problem of “inadmissible information” and poetry from a more mundane angle. Mayer’s piece attempts to record in writing all events domestic and otherwise occurring within the purview of her consciousness upon a single day, the winter solstice, December 22, 1978. In doing so Mayer creates a literary form that necessarily preserves those events of domestic life normally considered to be of little significance:

My absorption in your clothes is only sensible, why bother to toast the bread but I’m willing, it’s to make the bread warm, here’s a royal blue shirt and red pants put into the words of your eyes not as dark as mine but darker than his whose eyes are impatient for a moment to see more than that you still need so much to be done in detail for you we can never seem to get out of the house. (30)

Despite its focus on the personal (making breakfast, getting oneself and the kids out of the house, etc.), the writing never attains the “natural look” Bernstein rejects. The demands of Mayer’s project—to record the material and immaterial (passing thoughts, feelings, etc.)—call for a flexible and unconventional syntax. This in turn results in an artifice lacking in transparency, so that the reader is kept aware of being placed within a consciously constructed aesthetic space, a garment, but one capacious enough to record much of one woman’s life as it unfolds over the course of a single day.

Mayer’s project reveals the possibility of expanding generic innovation to include forms of life not traditionally considered literary, but Boyer’s penchant for the manifesto-like prose poem, for genres of diagnostic opposition, suggest that when she critiques the narrowness of literary tradition, she is more interested in delineating the absurdity of modernity and the economic relationships that define it than seeking out, like Mayer, some sort of literary mode that might carry personal experience. Her piece “What Is ‘Not Writing?’” through its exhaustive delineation of everything that comes between a single mother and literary production verges on the comic, as the excerpt below shows:

There are years, days, hours, minutes, weeks, moments, and other measures of time spent in the production of ‘not writing.’ Not writing is working, and when not working at paid work like caring for others, and when not at unpaid work like caring, caring also for a human body, and when not caring for a human body many hours, weeks, years, and

other measures of time spent caring for the mind in a way like reading or learning and when not reading and learning also making things (like garments, food, plants, artworks, decorative items) and when not reading and learning and working and making and caring and worrying also politics, and when not politics also the kind of medication which is consumption, of sex mostly or drunkenness, cigarettes, drugs, passionate love affairs, cultural products, the internet also, then time spent staring into space that is not a screen, also all the time spent driving, particularly here where it is very long to get anywhere, and then to work and back, to take her to school and back, too. (44)

“Not writing” here operates as a kind of negated table of contents for a work like Mayer's *Midwinter Day*, suggesting that Boyer's project is to create a poetic language capable of diagnosing the socio-economic borders of female life, literary and otherwise. If *Garments Against Women* has a thesis it, crassly put, might be something like, “everything in history and life exists to stop me from writing,” but the fact is that the reader comes upon this notion by reading through a published book with Boyer's name on the cover. The author, through virtue of publication, undermines her own argument—and this is the joke. Mid-way, when the reader happens upon the following sentences, she can only take it as meta-textual jest: “But who would publish this book and who, also, would shop for it? And how could it be literature if it is not coyly against literature, but sincerely against it, as it is also against ourselves?” (48)

Boyer's question *is coy*, but the politics of her entire endeavor suggests possibility. These poems show that to articulate and resist the limitation of any form of life is already to alter that very form. In our push against that which is *against* us, we inevitably begin to make it *for* us.

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