12-2-2013

The Art of Leaving Nothing Behind: Feminist Consciousness in the Poetics of Louise Glück, Barbara Guest, and Lisa Robertson

Kaisa Cummings
Lake Forest College

Follow this and additional works at: http://publications.lakeforest.edu/seniortheses

Part of the English Language and Literature Commons

Recommended Citation

This Thesis is brought to you for free and open access by the Student Publications at Lake Forest College Publications. It has been accepted for inclusion in Senior Theses by an authorized administrator of Lake Forest College Publications. For more information, please contact levinson@lakeforest.edu.
The Art of Leaving Nothing Behind: Feminist Consciousness in the Poetics of Louise Glück, Barbara Guest, and Lisa Robertson

Abstract
This thesis aims to locate and critically examine the poetic landscapes that serve to further or negate the role of female subjectivity in selected works by Louise Glück, Barbara Guest, and Lisa Robertson. These “landscapes” are the locations on which each poet builds her critique: for Glück, this place is within the primordial soil of the mythic; for Guest it is part of the urban spectacle; and for Robertson it is the rhetorical foundations of gendered spaces. While these poets came of age in different eras and embody different conceptions of feminism, the issue of women’s agency reoccurs throughout their work. The connecting thread that this thesis aims to isolate among the featured poets is embedded in their investigation of the central question of how women can analyze their own exploitation and inscribe their own demands within an order prescribed by the masculine.

Document Type
Thesis

Distinguished Thesis
yes

Degree Name
Bachelor of Arts (BA)

Department or Program
English

First Advisor
Joshua Corey

Second Advisor
Carla Arnell

Third Advisor
Miguel de Baca

Subject Categories
English Language and Literature

This thesis is available at Lake Forest College Publications: http://publications.lakeforest.edu/seniortheses/90
Lake Forest College Archives

Your thesis will be deposited in the Lake Forest College Archives and the College's online digital repository, Lake Forest College Publications. This agreement grants Lake Forest College the non-exclusive right to distribute your thesis to researchers and over the Internet and make it part of the Lake Forest College Publications site. You warrant:

- that you have the full power and authority to make this agreement;
- that you retain literary property rights (the copyright) to your work. Current U.S. law stipulates that you will retain these rights for your lifetime plus 70 years, at which point your thesis will enter common domain;
- that for as long you as you retain literary property rights, no one may sell your thesis without your permission;
- that the College will catalog, preserve, and provide access to your thesis;
- that the thesis does not infringe any copyright, nor violate any proprietary rights, nor contain any libelous matter, nor invade the privacy of any person or third party;
- If you request that your thesis be placed under embargo, approval from your thesis chairperson is required.

By signing below, you indicate that you have read, understand, and agree to the statements above.

Printed Name: Kaisa Cummings

Thesis Title: The Art of Leaving Nothing Behind: Feminist Consciousness in the Poetics of Louise Glück, Barbara Guest, and Lisa Robertson

This thesis is available at Lake Forest College Publications: http://publications.lakeforest.edu/seniortheses/90
ABSTRACT

This thesis aims to locate and critically examine the poetic landscapes that serve to further or negate the role of female subjectivity in selected works by Louise Glück, Barbara Guest, and Lisa Robertson. These “landscapes” are the locations on which each poet builds her critique: for Glück, this place is within the primordial soil of the mythic; for Guest it is part of the urban spectacle; and for Robertson it is the rhetorical foundations of gendered spaces. While these poets came of age in different eras and embody different conceptions of feminism, the issue of women’s agency reoccurs throughout their work. The connecting thread that this thesis aims to isolate among the featured poets is embedded in their investigation of the central question of how women can analyze their own exploitation and inscribe their own demands within an order prescribed by the masculine.
ACKNOWLEDGMENTS

I would like to thank my family for their unwavering support and infinite encouragement throughout my academic career; my thesis advisor, Professor Corey, for his sage wisdom throughout the writing process; and especially my mother for teaching me from a very young age the importance of cultivating a strong sense of one’s own feminism.
CHAPTER 1: LOUISE GLÜCK

Louise Glück, in the wake of her 1975 collection of poetry, *The House on Marshland*, was received by critic Helen Vendler as a “new species of poet.” In retrospect, this is a fitting title for a poet whose eclectic poems cannot seem to be pigeonholed into a single fashionable paradigm (some writers and critics, such as Mary Kate Azcuys, have tried ecofeminism, while others, such as Ira Sadoff, claim neo-Romanticism). We should consider, however, the significance in Glück’s shapeshifting, her elusive ability to remain just out of grasp, retaining and withholding the power to decide what is lost and what is found in her poetry. It is in this way, by nature of the mysterious new species, that her work lends itself so well to a diverse range of readings that often lead to differing conclusions about how, in her poetics, she addresses fundamental issues such as feminism, patriarchy, motherhood, nature, and language—which, in this case, is a medium that oscillates between candor and disguise, Symbolic and semiotic.

Throughout Marshland, and in much of Glück’s extensive oeuvre, the poet aggressively refuses the autobiographical, only applying personal references in a thin veneer atop a dense foundation of real or imagined experience. Instead, Glück opts for careful presentations (or re-presentations) of the mystical or mythic. Repeatedly presenting speakers—female personae—trapped by cultural roles and feelings of powerlessness, Glück relies on myth, or the primeval matter that has long animated the cultural imagination, to reverse time, to comfort, and to stabilize conflict. However, this use of the thematic device fails to mobilize or reverse the paralysis experienced by Glück’s speakers, as females, mythic or otherwise, remain
passive, without volition, frozen with their arms outstretched ("All Hollows") or marooned in edenic orchards ("The School Children"). The cycle continues: Odysseus travels, Penelope feels abandoned.

Glück's mythology serves most reliably as the obscure trappings of masquerade. For the poet, classical personae function as costumed self-portraits in the way that artist Cindy Sherman gestures to women of the classical past, posing a feminist critique of the role of women in art and society. Glück’s characters dredge up the past and use it as a lens for shedding light on the present. This is where Glück’s curious brand of feminism begins to emerge. In this recursive method of representing mythic women as versions of herself or the oppressed female, Glück calls attention to the problems of female difference, or that which, for the poet, undermines the very idea of identity, as perpetuated by patriarchal systems. Glück’s work explores the mythic landscape, a place that hosts some of the first and most enduring representations of the oppressed or silent woman, in order to repossess the space of her exploitation within the discourse itself. In the early 1970s, American feminists, situated in the wake of second-wave feminism, posed questions of self-definition, asking, “Who or what is a woman? Who or what am I?” Theorist Teresa de Lauretis comments on this historical moment, writing that feminism, “as a social movement of and for women,” discovered the “nonbeing of woman,” characterized as:

...the paradox of a being that is at once captive and absent in discourse, constantly spoken of but of itself inaudible or inexpressible, displayed as spectacle and still unrepresented or unrepresentable,
invisible yet constituted as the object and the guarantee of vision; a being whose existence and specificity are simultaneously asserted and denied, negated and controlled. (115)

This moment in feminism culminated in the “personal is political” movement, realizing that a true feminist theory must begin with and centrally engage that paradox of captivity and absence, as de Lauretis goes on to explain:

If the constitution of the social subject depends on the nexus of languagesubjectivity/consciousness—if, in other words the personal is political because the political becomes personal by way of its subjective effects through the subject’s experience—then the theoretical object or field of knowledge of feminism and the modes of knowledge we want to claim as feminist ... are themselves caught in the paradox of woman. They are excluded from the established discourse of theory and yet imprisoned within it or else assigned a corner of their own but denied a specificity. (115)

In other words, the paradox de Lauretis describes is where the particular discursive and epistemological character of feminism resided at this time; where women are at once inside their own social and discursive determinations and yet also removed from and excessive to them.

Glück, actively working within this cultural milieu, attributes women’s selflessness—her characters’ constant thwarted attempts to claim what is desired and transcend the limitations imposed upon the female body—on a lack of mobility that is congruent, either consciously or unconsciously, with this paradox of woman.
Critic Ira Sadoff suggests that Glück’s speakers “maintain their compensatory longing for the ascendancy of the powerful individual, mythic or otherwise; she envies the power of men, and . . . covets their capacity for departure” (87). In the poem “Gretel in Darkness,” the despondent speaker, Gretel, who is “far from women’s arms / And memory of women,” says, “My father bars the door, bars harm / from this house.” The patriarch protects by stifling, by holding the female prisoner in the domestic world of “darkness.” The speaker is again overpowered by male agency, expressing that “even you, my brother / . . . look at me as though / you meant to leave.” Despite her efforts (“I killed for you”), our speaker is caught in a contradictory bind in which she is both trapped by and fearing abandonment by the men in this poem.

Given the opportunity to mobilize this character, Glück does so only partially. She eliminates the innocence of Gretel in the traditional folktale, allowing her to kill, but this action is located distantly in the past and is performed in the name of the brother as a type of sacrifice. However, it is important that we also acknowledge a possible alternate reading of “Gretel in Darkness” which considers the opposite: complete mobility of the character and her act of matricide. In recalling the folktale of Hansel and Gretel, the children kill the witch who lures them into her cottage by pushing her into the oven, but in the poem, it is only Gretel who does the killing. The poem begins:

This is the world we wanted.
All who would have seen us dead
are dead. I hear the witch’s cry
break in the moonlight through a sheet
of sugar: God rewards.

Her tongue shrivels into gas....

The opening of the poem suggests a victorious conquer, a hard-earned and heroic ("God rewards") assertion of power over the enemy, or those "who would have seen us dead," but it is a victory haunted by the witch. In this reading, Gretel has actively disassociated herself from women both physically ("far from women’s arms") and emotionally ("memory of women"), withdrawing into her "father's hut." Considering that the witch has been associated with the "mother goddess" or Mother Earth in Pagan traditions, Gretel's slaying of the witch appears an act of matricide or refusal of the maternal.

The speaker, and presumably the poet, is willfully, sacrificially, in agreement with psychoanalyst Jacques Lacan's theory of the paternal Symbolic, in that "language and culture depend on the death or absence of the mother" (Bonds qtd. Homans 60). As such, Gretel is in compliance with the same patriarchal order that asserts its dominance over her. But it is not a successful initiation, as demonstrated by Gretel's tangible anxiety: "Am I alone?" "Spies / hiss in the stillness." The speaker's participation in the paternal order has only brought her further alienation, which brings the alternate readings of the poem into contact with each other as they both ultimately position female difference as a condition unable to be overcome.

Literary critic Lee Upton summarizes Glück's contradictory feminisms, writing that the poet "tries to alienate the body from the earth, rejects traditional female qualities and clichés, and focuses on alienation for contemporary females
versus inclusion by ‘Other’/males” (125). Glück’s juxtapositions help to disarticulate these sentiments from the familiar narratives they are opposing. The poet’s ambition throughout her work, but most apparently in her poems using myth as a vehicle for modern feminine experience, is to move beyond the earthly abyss, the exile and punishment of the paternal order, where the suffering female-tragic image remains trapped, into a new ideal, one that does not require returning but transcending.

Rupturing of the hierarchical landscape, in other words suspending or eliminating the hierarchies of gender and language, is essential to Glück’s work. By favoring abstraction rather than particularity in order to disconcert figure/ground distinction as it is aligned with gender, Glück blurs the lines that have been drawn to set the universalized human figure apart from the landscape, making the latter a passive backdrop and the former a coherent subject uniquely capable of meaningful action, as demonstrated by the female speakers of “All Hallows” and “Messengers” Glück approaches traditional figure/ground distinction with suspicion, having seen the feminine too often aligned with the passive side of this hierarchical dichotomy.

“All Hallows,” the opening poem in the first section of the same name in The House on Marshland, positions the reader in darkness, dislocating both speaker and landscape, displacing them from the realm of the topographic to that of the linguistic, reappropriating the literal to that of the figurative:

> Even now the landscape is assembling.
> The hills darken. The oxen
> sleep in their blue yoke,
the fields having been
picked clean, the sheaves
bound evenly and piled at the roadside
among cinquefoil, as the toothed moon rises:
This is barrenness
of harvest or pestilence.
And the wife leaning out the window
with her hand extended, as in payment,
and the seeds
distinct, gold, calling
Come Here
Come here, little one
And the soul creeps out of the tree.

The poem itself is without location, the landscape that is assembling instantaneously lacks any notion of place, as if the landscape were of a dream, or as critic Diane S. Bonds writes, of “enduring symbolic or archetypal images arising from the collective unconscious” (59). However, this is not a naturalistic, painterly landscape; instead it is one that is assembled linguistically. In a nearly ritualistic way that is reflective of the wife in the poem calling forth “the soul” from the tree, her hand extended with the seeds as if in offering or “payment,” the landscape is evoked through the deliberate conjuring of each distinct image within the poem.

Critics such as Helen Vendler and Diane S. Bonds have speculated that “All Hallows” is a poem about motherhood and the poet’s sense of her own “self-birth”
as a poet or a “soul;” in other words, the possibility of becoming a speaking/writing subject, rather than remaining a silent object confined to the body alone (59). The poem’s description of seeds and its definition of the female as “wife,” another critic, Daniel Morris, suggests, can be a “veiled account of the author’s ambivalent response to motherhood” (157). The wife, who gently tempts the child/self can also be seen as a midwife, rather than a mother; as Glück herself wrote in the essay, “Education of the Poet,” the poet’s role is “to utilize the metaphor of childbirth which seems never to die: the writer is the one who attends, who facilitates: the doctor, the midwife, not the mother” (qtd. in Upton 130). The gold seeds, it can be argued, introduce the issue of exchange. With this in mind, Bonds asks: “What is the cost of extending the female self beyond the realm of the physical, beyond the realm of ‘nature’ and the literal to which women have been consigned by the dominant myths of patriarchal culture?” (59). The poem implies not merely the cost of motherhood or becoming a poet but the status of women as objects in the systems of exchange governed by men.

Here we must digress into the inescapable discussion of the cultural myth of language that situates women as the silent objects of representation. This theory can be traced back to the work of psychoanalyst Jacques Lacan, particularly his theory of the Symbolic, sometimes referred to as the “Symbolic order.” According to Jacques-Alain Miller, the Lacanian Symbolic involves the formation of signifiers and language and is considered to be the “determining order of the subject” (279). The Symbolic is made possible by the routine acceptance of the “name of the father,” or the cultural constructs which govern both desire and the rules of language: “It is in the name of
the father that we must recognize the support of the symbolic function which, from
the dawn of history, has identified his person with the figure of the law” (Lacan 67).
Judith Butler summarizes Lacan’s theory of the linguistic representation of women
as follows: “paternal law structures all linguistic signification, termed ‘the Symbolic,’
and so becomes a universal organizing principle of culture itself. . .Hence, the
Symbolic becomes possible by repudiating the primary relationship to the maternal
body” (107). The French feminist theorist Julia Kristeva challenges the Lacanian
narrative of the Symbolic which “assumes cultural meaning requires the repression
of that primary relationship to the maternal body” by arguing instead for the
“semiotic,” or that which reclaims the maternal body within culture and poetic
language. Poetic language, in this case, relies on the “recovery of the maternal body
within the terms of language, one that has the potential to disrupt, subvert, and
displace the paternal law” (108). In The House on Marshland, it is precisely this
subversion of the Symbolic through a reimagining of the literal (that which is
traditionally the realm of woman and nature) and figurative (the realm of men and
culture) at the level of language that destabilizes the androcentric myth—that which
is entrenched in the implicitly patriarchal Symbolic order—with the renewed force
of that which is aligned with the gynocentric. While the blurring of the literal and
figurative is a common technique in literature, it is the degree to which this takes
place that makes Glück’s poetry unusual; rather it is “not so much the literal,” in
Glück’s poetics, as the “fluidity of the categories ‘literal’ and ‘figurative’ that is an
important resource for undermining the androcentric myth of language, with its
privileging of the figurative” (Bonds 61). In The House on Marshland, the fluidity
between categories is most profound in the poems embodying themes related to motherhood and feminine experience.

The multiple currents of interpretation that move throughout the poem “All Hallows” undercuts androcentric distinctions between the literal and figurative, which casts the literal to the side of feminine associations and figurative with that of the masculine. The first stanza contains images associated with harvest and cultivation: yoked oxen, sheaves, cinquefoil, moon. The harvest has already taken place, the bounty gathered by unknown hands and the field “picked clean.” This description of the final stages of the growing cycle, the “barrenness” that is the result of the earth’s retreat into autumn’s slow death after a season devoted to creating new life, can be related to the experience of giving birth to a child. In this case, the soil, or womb, has given all it had and been reduced to nothing. The fatal “pestilence” of harvest has left the earth sterile and dry. Here the metaphorical childbirth is cast negatively, as a “fatal” disease that leaves the body weakened, or as an event shrouded in the gloom of postpartum depression. All the while the “toothed moon,” another uterine symbol, presides over the scene. Such figurative cues for the theme of motherhood are more literally illustrated with the subsequent introduction of “the wife” calling from the window for the “little one,” presumably her child. Of the “distinct, gold” seeds the wife/mother offers “as in payment,” Helen Vendler suggests: “A mother has paid some unspeakable price into an invisible hand, has enabled the gold seeds, and the child victim is sold into bondage, enticing into the world” (303). The child, in this case, has joined the Symbolic order,
abandoned the womb, and is no longer receptive of the pre-symbolic communication said to exist between mother and unborn child.

The poem, with its agricultural imagery and the "barren" state of nature, can also serve as an allegory for the myth of Demeter and Persephone. In the myth, Persephone, Demeter's virgin daughter, is abducted by Hades and taken to the live in the underworld. Demeter, goddess of harvest, grains, and fertility of the earth, searches endlessly for her daughter, but in the meantime the seasons halt and living things ceased to grow. If the wife in the poem is cast in the guise of Demeter, her outstretched hand holds the object of exchange with which she hopes to gain her daughter's freedom from the underworld. Ultimately, this image is tangled with various scenes of abandonment or estrangement from the mother.

It is unclear whether "the soul" that "creeps out of the tree" is a figurative reference to a child or a relatively more literal term designating the actual soul of the woman. If the image of the soul is interpreted fundamentally as a metaphor for a child, the poem functions in accordance with the figurative realm of language, or that which is related to the realm of the phallocentric. In Lacan's phallocentric theory, Emily Zakin summarizes, “the phallus instates the signifier into the subject regardless of any anatomical distinction between the sexes . . . [it] is responsible for the child’s passage from immersion in perceptual immediacy to a representational domain in which the world takes on meaning” (n. pag). By luring the child with the seeds, the woman can be read as coaxing her child into the phallocentric realm where he/she will be cut off from her forever, therefore repudiating the relationship with the maternal body.
To expand upon the second reading of the soul in the tree as the soul of the woman/wife/poet, we must explore the significance of the soul being within the natural symbol of the tree. In one respect, Glück’s character is resisting the negative or passive equation of women with nature, which would reconfigure readings of the poem’s harvest imagery into a Pagan-esque celebration of the productive and sustainable maternal force of Gaia. This interpretation or reclamation of the natural acts as a counterforce to the Symbolic ‘law of the father’ and is closely aligned with the semiotic realm of language. But Glück is also asserting the soul of the woman—the animated subject that occupies the body—as signifier without the intervention of the phallus. With entry into “the reign of law and language, subjects are cut off from the immediacy of bodily experience; relations to things, and to oneself and others, are now mediated by words and representations” (Zakin n.pag), but by resisting representation and negating the image of the child, Glück is enabling a provisional sense of separate selfhood and self-knowledge that is free from the ubiquitous ‘other.’

Theorist Helene Cixous writes that “if woman has always functioned ‘within’ the discourse of man . . . it is time for her to dislocate this ‘within,’ to explode it, turn it around, and seize it . . . You’ll see with what ease she will spring from that ‘within’—the ‘within’ where once she so drowsily crouched” (qtd. in Stanton 171). The image of the soul emerging from the tree can be read as a metaphor for the poet releasing herself from androcentric captivity and calling, coaxing, herself from the rigid associations of the feminine with the pre-symbolic realm of nature. In yet another layer of associations, if we put emphasis on the soul’s cautious liberation
from inside the tree, it is as if the mythological figure of Daphne were to be freed from the bark that encases her and that allowed her to repulse Apollo's advances. However, the ambiguities of the poem are never resolved; the soul is suspended mid-creep and never quite released, as if the desire for the ejection of the feminine from the self ultimately does not free or acquit.

Let us return to the image of the gold seeds offered by the wife. For one, despite the presence of the woman actively calling forth the little one, the image is undercut by a syntactical peculiarity that leaves it unclear whether the wife (whom we have associated with the images of the poem so far) or the seeds are doing the "calling," thus testing the tangibility of the image of the woman and disembodying the voice—perhaps a metaphor for the female poetic voice. Another point is that it is ambiguous whether this ceremonial gesture of offering the seeds is one of complicity, as the woman offers up the price of admission into the androcentric system of linguistic exchange; or does the offering of the seeds—embodying simultaneously Pagan-esque earth ritual and traditional connotations of male reproduction—interrogate the level of sacrifice required for the poet/speaker to extend the female self beyond the domains of the physical, natural, and literal to which women have been consigned by patriarchal structures of power?

The blurred lines between the spiritual and corporeal, presence and absence, bounty and barrenness in "All Hallows" establish that Glück is a poet who looks beyond the brute facts of physical existence for foundations on which to build transcendent meaning. In the poem "Messengers," Glück uses the external world as a means to describe an internal world, one that is enriched with the fluidity of
metaphor established in the previously discussed poem. In this case, Glück skillfully implores the use of myth to reposition the maternal body, cutting its ties to the earth and locating its agency as a creative force charged with ancient impetus in an act of reclamation. Glück, faced with yet another crisis of female disavowal of patriarchal constructs, knows that sacrifice is required to establish a new paradigm.

In the opening of the poem “Messengers,” the poet establishes a hieratic and unearthly tone, as if coming from an oracle, beginning:

You have only to wait, they will find you
The geese flying low over the marsh,
Glittering in black water.
They find you.

The disembodied voice of the narrator addresses the reader directly, in the present tense. “You” are stranded in a yet unassembled landscape; its only potential for location is in the generalized “marsh,” only characterized by its supernatural black water. The first line is instructive, as if aimed at an accomplice. Particulars are nonexistent, neither the reader nor the subject knows to whom “they” refers, shrouding the moment in anxiety and darkness. In reference to the title, “they” could imply a mobilized group of people of “messengers” en route to the subject to deliver some kind of information. The sparse, concise language of this stanza imbues it with a sense of urgency: “They will find you,” “They find you.” This clipped, assured pace with which the poem opens suggests the subject’s willingness to participate in something secret or perhaps ritualistic.
The scope of the poem pans away from the personalized “you” subject to another manifestation in the landscape, deer:

And the deer—

How beautiful they are,

as though their bodies did not impede them.

Slowly they drift into the open

through bronze panels of sunlight.

The animals are ethereal apparitions, tame and languid. The narrator/poet looks at their apparent transcendence of their bodies with envy, as if she is frustrated with her physical body that somehow “impede[s]” her. In this way, the deer—gentle creatures traditionally hunted by men, emblematic of the wilderness—can be read as allegory for the embodied feminine experience, starting at the level of a woman’s gendered body and its consumption by men. The deer are looked at as both objects of envy, in that they seem (the speaker’s subjectivity is evident in the qualifying “as thought”) to express a transcendence that the narrator cannot find in her own body, and an ignorance, as they are animals and not aware of their impediment. Here the natural world is edenic, blissfully unaware of its performed role in the masculine scheme. In the following stanza, the speaker asks incredulously of the deer, “Why would they stand so still / if they were not waiting?” suggesting a willingness but inability to participate, a sense of being trapped in their “cages” so long that they “rust.” No longer are the deer drifting in the “open.” Nature-as-construct has become overgrown, rendering the deer, the feminine, “motionless.”
If the middle stanzas are to set the allegorical scene, the final stanzas function as a journey inward to the crux of the matter of female transcendence of nature. This achievement is not clear-cut and accessible, instead Glück positions the feminine simultaneously within and without its usual associations, juxtaposing contradictory images as if trying to challenge the very idea of non-fluid dichotomies existing between the poles of masculine and feminine, literal and symbolic, myth and reality. It culminates in a powerful scene that can be interpreted as the moment of childbirth:

You have only to let it happen:
that cry — release, release — like the moon
wrenched out of the earth and rising
full in its circle of arrows

until they come before you
like dead things, saddled in flesh,
and you above them, wounded and dominant.

It is significant to note that the use of the pronoun “you” in this interpretation implies that the subject/reader is female, a device which destabilizes the androcentric vision of language and readership in favor of one that is confidently gynocentric. A kind of coven is established between the female poet/narrator and embodied subject (You) that bears witness to the ritualistic “release” and “wrenching out” taking place beside the ever mystical “full / rising” moon.
The first line in the penultimate stanza is instructive in tone, as if the narrator were a midwife, spiritual or otherwise, coaching the subject to trust the tremendous intelligence of the female body as it naturally releases itself from the restricting, governing constructs and taps into the primal, instinctual maternal in preparation for the birth by simply “[letting] it happen.” The “cry” and “release” of the action which takes place next, evokes the pain and euphoria of natural labor. The visceral is spiritualized in the following simile: “like the moon / wrenched out of the earth,” illuminating the moment of birth as a powerful act of creation as the child transitions, rather forcefully, from the womb into the world. The external imagery stands as translations of the internal.

The image of the “rising” “full” moon, often associated with women’s biological cycles, leaving the earth, a site of fertility and cyclical renewal also associated with women, in favor of an atmospheric vantage point in the abstractness of space can also be interpreted as an act of reclaiming the natural symbols and reappropriating them within a context that is charged with both the masculine and feminine. Being “wrenched from the earth” connotes women’s transcendence of that which has tied them to the grounded plain of the feminine realm for too long, asserting themselves instead, wreathed in a “circle of arrows,” in the male Symbolic atmosphere. The narrator does not suggest, as in other instances in Glück’s poetry, that, to liberate the self, one must relinquish ties to the natural, feminine realm completely. Instead, in the allusions to Diana the Huntress, the earth as site of creation, and the moon, a type of essentialism is established in a reversion back to the original feminine symbols.
Diana the Huntress, Greek goddess of woodlands, animals, the moon, women, and birth, is alluded to throughout “Messengers,” but she is most tangible in the image of the moon “full in its circle of arrows,” signifying a legacy of female protectors. The act of shooting a bow, of positioning the phallic arrow in the quiver, defining its trajectory, and firing can be seen as masculine, but asserting Diana, goddess of the hunt, as the site of this force and juxtaposing the phallic arrow with the pregnant, “full” moon is to undermine androcentric predictions of gendered language. It is also significant to note that Diana herself is emphatically not a mother figure; instead her celestial character is reflected in her connection with inaccessibility and virginity and reflects the heavenly world in its sovereignty, impassibility, and indifference. Through allusions to Diana and the process of self-birth, rather than childbirth, Glück is repelling and refusing the cultural role of womanhood.

While the majority of the poem functions through a series of contending images representative of female experience, the poem closes with a final severing. The “dead things, saddled with flesh” that “come before you” are photonegatives of the previously mentioned deer. The speaker’s perspective on them has changed now that the ritual is complete: instead of envying the woodland creatures for their ignorance, the subject, now separate from the deer having undergone the birth and asserted herself as the ruling maternal, descendent of Diana, looks down from “above” at them with what can be perceived as a confusing embodiment of the female gaze. The subject objectifies the deer, calling attention only to their “meat”
and lack of agency. Incapable of extending themselves beyond their fate as prey, the
deer are already “dead things.”

This stanza echoes the image of birth by calling upon associations with the
uterine void or “wound,” and the subject’s process of overcoming this perceived
flaw in her gender through reclaiming the most essential part of it: the power of the
maternal body to create life. Presenting the maternal as metaphor for “dominant”
control over nature through a deeply personal, ritualistic process of repossessing
the body, inverts traditional male dominance, assigning this role instead to the
victorious creator, the Mother. However, the inherent dialectic in the pairing of
“wounded” and “dominant” in the final line suggests a kind of immanent
transcendence; the speaker is “above” and “dominant” but also “wounded” and
implicitly embodied, inescapably female, as she hovers above the natural landscape.
Just as the female speakers in “All Hallows” and “Gretel” are left yearning even after
they’ve paid their price of admission into the perceived paternal order, the speaker
in “Messengers”, while having successfully abandoned nature, has ceased to be
whole.

It is difficult to determine Glück’s particular breed of feminism. Glück herself
has written, “I hardly know what ‘feminism’ means . . . As the term has tended to be
used (at least in my hearing) it has seemed to me constricting and tyrannical”
(Morris 31). The poet’s self-imposed outsider status allows her to retain an aura of
iconoclasm or in-betweenness. Some criticize her immobilized woman, labeling her
an antifeminist poet who “raises crucial, disturbing issues about women’s complicity
in their own oppression,” as noted by Lynn Keller (123). While others champion her
work as a feminist statement that, as suggested in literary scholar Daniel Morris’s book The Poetry of Louise Glück: A Thematic Introduction, enacts a dialogue between “identity as a biological essence . . . and identity as an usable social construction, a postmodern notion of self-fashioning, in which identity is subject to the constant flux of verbal recasting of self in different disguises” (32).

It is true that Glück's poetry often expresses an extremely negative sense of womanhood as both a biological and socially determined experience. Other poems in The House on Marshland uphold the themes of imprisonment and bitterness toward the shortcomings of the Essentially female as perceived by the poet. In “The School Children” mothers “scour the orchards for a way out / drawing to themselves the gray limbs of the fruit trees” when their children leave them in favor of the paternal order of the educational system (19). “I wait to see how he will leave me” mourns the speaker talking about her infant son in the final poem of the volume, “The Apple Trees,” envisioning in his palm “the dead fields” and “women rooted to the river” (42).

For Glück, being a woman (let alone a wife or mother) continues to seem like an impediment to being a poet. In the poems discussed thus far, Glück establishes a type of exchange between the female speaker and the looming paternal order as a gesture through which the woman can break out of her isolation and claim her own mobility. In “All Hallows,” this is manifested in the wife’s offering of the seeds in exchange for the “little soul;” in “Gretel in Darkness,” the murder/sacrifice in the name of the brother; and in “Messengers” the speaker’s wounded dominance. However, in each of these poems, the woman’s desire for advancement and
disavowal of her patriarchally sanctioned status as female Other, repeatedly fail. Glück’s characters are caught in the space of their own exploitation, a place where their own femaleness is the ultimate cause of their abandonment by children and men, and where the manipulation of discourse always manages to leave discourse intact. But, perhaps, this is not a sign of Glück’s own antifeminist sentiments, perhaps by refusing to idealize her characters and inscribe upon them a sense of mobility that Glück felt was not accessible to herself as a woman/poet/mother/lover she is boldly asking this question: how can women analyze their own exploitation and inscribe their own demands within an order prescribed by the masculine?

Feminist theorist Luce Irigaray contemplated this question during an interview titled “The Power of Discourse and the Subordination of the Feminine” which was first published in French in 1975, the same year as Marshland, and later included in her seminal text This Sex Which is Not One. To find the potential answer, she maintains that one must interpret the “specular make-up of discourse,” that is, “the self-reflecting organization of the subject” within discourse that “maintains the submission, subordination, and exploitation of the ‘feminine’” (80). For Glück, the act of returning to the primordial landscape of the mythic, even if Daphne is still a laurel tree and Persephone remains underground is in itself an act of reclamation.

Morris rightly observes that “[Glück’s] allusiveness enables her to be elusive; to at once reveal and hide the speaker’s vulnerabilities through the distance afforded by referring to myths and sources” (31). The multifarious dialogues at play between the mythic/mother/poet-selves create the understanding that, as Alicia
Ostriker maintains, “divided voices evoke divided selves: the rational and the passionate, the active and the suffering, the conscious life and the dream life, animus and anima, analyst and analysand” (88). As such, Glück constructs a mythic landscape that is at once a function of and against Symbolic order, an expression of both literal and figurative space. On one hand, the mythic landscape is the primordial location of women’s entrapment, abduction, and abandonment, but at the same time it is a place that can be returned to, from the vantage point of modernity, for the purpose of reassessing the possibility of feminine subjectivity. It is here that Glück interrogates her speaker’s evolving sense of self as well as the authorial self. In this place, fixed identity ceases to exist and positions function as figurative spaces, where Glück eschews associations of herself with nature and the female body in order to become what the feminist scholar Margaret Homans describes as a “bearer of the word.”

In the chapter to come, I will move from Glück’s highly controlled mythic landscapes and often impenetrable expressions of interiority, identity and womanhood to the work of another poet, Barbara Guest, whose sense of the feminine self and its development within her work rely on the liberation of objects, identity, and language. As I will demonstrate, Guest’s poetry functions as a feminist statement in its commitment to mobility, particularly the mobility of the female gaze, in which nothing is left behind or considered stranded on the wrong side of an impassable, structuring binary. I will also continue investigating the ways in which poetic landscapes complicate gendered divisions, calling upon Guest’s destruction of
essentialized notions of physical reality through painterly language as an example of feminist subversion of rigid, patriarchal notions of geometrical space.

CHAPTER 2: BARBARA GUEST

One of the problems for the woman as writer . . . is to face whole traditions of depictions of female figures and to get some tread on what to do with them. A characteristic of that cultural figure is her stasis as icon and her quality as receiver of the gaze—a semi-frozen, singular figure whose spiritual responsibility is often already to ‘be there’ so that, with great sweetness and intensity, she can induce the male follower to ‘get there.’ (Du Plessis, n.pag)

Rachel Blau DuPlessis, in her essay “The Gendered Marvelous,” raises the issue of how women writers are haunted by their own legacy of representation, constantly hauling around the metaphorical baggage of history’s “rooted women,” to borrow Glück’s phrase.

Barbara Guest, a poet who rose to prominence in the late 1950s as the sole female member of the first generation of writers known as the New York School whose membership included Frank O’Hara, John Ashbery, and James Shuyler, was familiar with the political climate surrounding women’s writing. Guest was present as an influential art critic who contributed essays to Partisan Review and helped edit Art News, but, as a poet, she has remained strangely elusive. Her name is almost invariably linked to her male contemporaries, yet her poetry has not been given the
attention paid to the others by academic critics; a curious statement of disregard since Guest, as noted by Sara Lundquist, “fit so securely” among her fellow poets and “engaged like them in beginnings, celebrations, *le marveilleux*” (261), and her poetry, like theirs derives significant inspiration from paintings and the experience of urban life. Lundquist goes on to note that, of the two anthologies that responded to the popularity of avant-garde poetry in New York, only one, John Myers’ *The Poets of the New York School* (1969), includes Guest (262). The impression of presence/absence created by the secure inclusion by one anthology and the careless (or careful) exclusion by the other could indicate that Guest’s reception and reputation as a poet in the 1950s and going forward was double sided: she was both there and not there.

While the act of writing is inherently gendered, Guest takes on the task of rebuilding the vocabulary and linguistic tropes commonly thought of as female. Kristeva notes, “Writing is an act of differentiation and of participation with respect to reality; it is a language without a beyond, without transcendence” (24), a statement contrary to the mission of our earlier poet, Louise Glück, whose vision of the bodily and linguistic is imbued with a sense of the spiritual beyond. Kristeva’s contemporary, Luce Irigaray, suggests that for a woman to “play with mimesis” is thus to try to “recover the place of her exploitation by discourse, without allowing herself to be simply reduced to it” (76). Similar to Glück’s sense of the mythic location, Guest introduces the notion of the sovereignty of female space, a notion situated in language itself. By returning to this space of exploitation through
metaphors of place ranging from the domestic to urban to abstract and pictorial, Guest seeks to liberate herself from traditional modes of female exclusion.

In 1962, Guest, at the age of forty, published her first volume of poetry, titled *Poems: The Location of Things, Archaics, The Open Skies*. Having been both entrenched in the burgeoning New York avant-garde scene and faced with the dilemmas of the mid-twentieth century’s patriarchal/heteronormative conventions, she likely experienced what scholar Daniel Belasco, refers to as the “‘dark age’” narrative of feminist art in the United States in the 1940s and 50s. He goes on to define this period as a time in which:

Women artists were isolated from one another, defined by their relationships with men, and passive in the face of sex discrimination, before the feminist ‘enlightenment’ in the 1960s and 70s. The narrative has created a historical division between before and after, linking the women of the 1950s to a particular past and the women of the 1970s to a feminist future. (1)

This period was not, by any means, ancient history from Guest’s vantage point of 1962. However, Guest writes from both outside and within this division theorized by Belasco. She establishes in Poems, through a kind of proto-feminism that alludes to but is not defined by her experience as a woman of the 1950s, that it is possible to reclaim gendered space in both physical reality and on the page.

The first part of the title of Guest’s collection, *The Location of Things*, asserts a strong sense of authority over the inanimate, suggesting that the “things” in their
location are absolute and constant as established by the poet. There is also a sense of the domestic in the mental image evoked by the title; one’s home is often defined by the collection of possessions inhabiting that space. This image is reinforced by the opening poem, “The Location of Things,” in which Guest immediately launches into a relentless deconstruction and reconstruction of the domestic.

Why from this window am I watching leaves?
Why do halls and steps seem narrower?
Why at this desk am I listening for the sound of the fall of color, the pitch of the wooden floor and feet going faster?
Am I to understand change, whether remarkable or hidden, am I to find a lake under the table or a mountain beside my chair and will I know the minute water produces lilies or a family of mountaineers scales the peak? (11)

The poem begins with a repetition of “why,” an interrogative adverb. Rather than setting the scene through description, Guest constructs the poem’s landscape by questioning or deconstructing it linguistically, devoid of associations with emotions or feelings. Charles Bernstein interprets this reoccurring objective detachment to insinuate that much of Guest’s work is “not an extension of herself—herself expressed—that is, not a direct expression of her feelings of subjectivity, but it is rather defined by the textual composition of an aesthetic space—herself (itself) defined” (n. pag). Neither does Guest literally place her speaker inside a house,
preferring instead to allow the reader to explore the architecture of the space and take note of the “window,” “halls,” “desk,” and “wooden floor,” as if building a record through engaging with language. Anna Rabinowitz refers to this invitation for inhabitation as a demonstration of how Guest’s language “seeks to become that which it sets out to name . . . where the page functions as pictorial space” (97). The rhythmic undulation and assonantal repetition that takes place between the line break after “fall” and the sound of “feet going faster” enlivens the poem. This mobility of language colors our vision of the house and maintains its distance from abstraction; it is a location full of potential action.

In the following stanza, the poet no longer speaks from within a house; instead, she is “On Madison Avenue,” and states coolly, “I am having a drink.” The cosmopolitan poet is public, participatory, and an agent of her own mobility through urban space—a flâneuse, the elusive female counterpart to the flâneur, which translates from French as the “stroller,” a literary type from 19th century France essential to any picture of the modernized streets of post-Haussmanization Paris. In 1863, Charles Baudelaire published an essay entitled “The painter of modern life” in which the figure of the flâneur is modified to embody the modern artist, a pretext for Baudelaire to present an image of the ideal wanderer as an artist and a delightfully anonymous man of the crowd. For Baudelaire, the “perfect flâneur” is one who desires “to be away from home and yet to feel oneself everywhere at home; to see the world, to be at the center of the world, and yet to remain hidden from the world
... The spectator is a prince and everywhere rejoices in his incognito” (9). The flâneur, an exclusively masculine type, embodies the public experience of modernity.

Griselda Pollock’s vision of the flâneur symbolizes the privilege or freedom to move about the public arenas of the city “observing but never interacting, consuming the sights through a controlling but rarely acknowledged gaze, directed as much at other people as at the goods for sale” (67). Therefore, the masculine gaze of the flâneur, as Pollock later notes, “articulates and produces a masculine sexuality which in the modern sexual economy enjoys the freedom to look, appraise and possess,” qualities that make the idea of the female flâneuse even more impossible (79). As the Baudelairean text goes on to show, women do not look, instead they are positioned as the object of the flâneur’s gaze: “a glittering conglomeration of all the graces of nature, condensed into a single being; an object of keenest admiration . . . She is idol, stupid perhaps, but dazzling and bewitching” (30). Women could not partake in Baudelaire’s flânerie for they did not enjoy the freedom of being “incognito” in the crowd or hold the right to look, stare, or scrutinize.

Analysis of the female flâneuse has only recently entered scholarship thanks to feminist theorists such as Pollock, as women have traditionally been denied the luxuries of mobility and ocular practice provided to men, rendering the flâneuse largely invisible. Guest’s female embodiment of urban experience in the 1960s is both an empowered gesture and an indication of just how deeply entrenched she was within the overwhelmingly male roster of the New York School poets and painters. Along with specifically Ashbery and O'Hara, Guest uses her poems about
the urban landscape and the experience of viewing contemporary art as means to explore (or “privilege”) aesthetic perception of the visual through the signification of words. In “The Location of Things,” the city takes on the characteristics of the poet/speaker, transcribing the vision of the wandering flâneuse onto the urban landscape itself:

The street, the street bears light
and shade on its shoulders, walks without crying,
turns itself into another and continues, even
cantilevers this barroom atmosphere into a forest
and sheds its leaves on my table . . .

The personified landscape functions on a number of levels. It is emblematic of what Du Plessis, in her essay “The other window is the lark,” considers one of Guest’s “enormously mobile subject positions;” a direct expression of the poet's ability to “turn [herself] into another and continue;” and a successful recovery of the site of her exploitation through discourse as women do not have the luxury of occupying space in the same way that men do. Elizabeth Wilson, one of the leading scholars on the ‘invisible flâneuse’ of the 19th century, has also pointed out that, while women were sometimes present in urban public spaces, they were often wearing some sort of disguise since there was no role of flâneuse available for women. This brings back into the conversation ideas of masquerade (“turning itself into another”) and Judith Butler’s theories of performance in which gender identity is constituted as “a compelling illusion, an object of belief” (357).
Furthermore, the behaviors (bearing, walking, not crying) assigned to the street create an anthropomorphic effect. In anthropomorphism, human characteristics are bestowed upon the nonhuman. But when the poet gives the nonhuman human traits, those very traits appear strange; they are singled out, examined, distorted, and made uncanny by their attachment to the nonhuman. Jane Bennett aptly quotes W. J. T. Mitchell in her analysis of the vital and active role of nonhuman materials in active life:

Objects are the way things appear to a subject—that is, with a name, an identity, a gestalt or stereotypical template . . . Things, on the other hand [signal] the moment when the object becomes the Other, when the sardine looks back, when the mute idol speaks, when the subject experiences the object as uncanny. . . (2)

Mitchell’s theory would suggest that Guest’s anthropomorphism and investigation of the “location of things” is her attempt to enable the nonhuman to “look back” and “speak.” By liberating the objectified, the otherwise disabled and looked-at things, Guest is confronting the patriarchal biases that designate which bodies, nonhuman and human alike, are considered passive and active within language and culture.

This is no one-way exchange as the figure works both ways: the human takes on urban qualities and vice versa. Laurel Peacock addresses this exchange in her dissertation, writing “Anthropomorphism can be thought of as a becoming-with others that challenges the ontological status of all parties involved, a co-constitution of figure and ground that blurs their boundaries” (111). To this effect, Guest’s poetic landscape complicates structured hierarchies of gendered including the
public/private, figure/ground, and self/other as indicated in the third stanza’s introduction of the male character ("That head against the window / how many times one has seen it . . . the perilous make-up on her face and his") and the final stanza’s shift to the pronoun “you,” who “demands your old clown’s paint.”

Furthermore, Guest’s female gaze, her sensually-charged “wandering,” is the agent of liberation that produces the active, anthropomorphic environment. If the male gaze objectifies and relies on commodification, the female gaze, in this instance, sets things free in their difference.

The poem concludes with the lines, “wandering as I am into clouds and air / rushing into darkness as corridors / who do not fear the melancholy of the stair.” Guest places her poly-subjective speaker simultaneously inside the house and within an atmospheric space not limited by walls. The ontological instability of the clouds and air, both elementally feminine, are juxtaposed with the “darkness” and “melancholy” of the structurally sound house. Again, the speaker is mobilized, “wandering,” between the landscapes in a statement of fearlessness. In Du Plessis’s words, “everything that enters [the] work is speaking its own words, from its own worlds, with its own justifications (n.pag). Guest’s personification of the corridors “who do not fear” and the melancholic stairs are key to her strategy of liberation for all things.

This is not to say that Guest was somehow outside of or exempt from the tension forming within the housewife paradigm of the 1950s. While “The Location of Things” is buoyant and full of agency, one of the poems directly following, “All Grey-haired My Sisters,” opens up a space of doubt within Guest’s discourse. The
poem is addressed from a devoted speaker to a group of mythic women using classical Western roles—sisters, relatives, adventuresses, darlings, ancestresses, mermaids, girls. These women are in concert with nature, characterized as “guided by the form and scent / of tree and flower blooming” and are imbued with the historical legacy of female characters that have learned to endure or “walked into wars / with wreaths of pine cones.” There is a sense of being controlled and a desire for freedom boiling beneath the surface of this poem. The speaker questions, “Why should I count you more equinoctal, sun?” in a statement that is implicitly gendered, as the sun or solar deities are often thought of as male counterparts of the usually female lunar deities. For the solar male to be counted as more “equinoctal,” as defined by being of or related to the equinox, implies that “he” has held a superior rule over a moment that is supposed to be of equal parts sun and moon, male and female, considering that the vernal and autumnal equinoxes are the only times of the year when day and night are of equal length.

This poem also contains what critic and poet Arielle Greenberg considers one of Guest’s earliest uses of “levity” or “a breezy use of irony that doesn’t betray femininity” and, as Guest uses it, “allows a person to make light of herself while still retaining her dignity” (113). This instance occurs in an italicized section where a third-person narrative emerges, prefacing the stanza with “From your journals,” and continuing with a snippet of dialogue quoted from an unknown man and woman:

He said: “In nymphic barque”
She replied: “A porcupine”.
And later,
“Reason selects our otherness.” (16)

First the male speaker is musing on a woman. His comic soliloquizing positions her in “nymphic barque” using “barque” ambiguously as an antiquated version of “bark,” perhaps in reference to Daphne in the laurel tree. The retort from the female speaker is a pointed, sharp animal. Greenberg’s perception of Guest’s effortless levity is illustrated by the ironic quip in the final line; a calculated agitation of the patriarchal systems that claim “reason” as strictly male and relegates women to “otherness.”

A similar struggle for liberty and liberation from the primacy of binary gender formations is evident in the poem “The First of May,” which appears later in the “Open Skies” section of Poems. The poem begins, “My eye cannot turn toward you / Night / because it has Day watching” (73); establishing a sense of captivity. The speaker eloquently states her demands for autonomy and freedom:

I would like to go for a walk
in the dark
without moonbeams
down that path of mushrooms
in my nightdress
without shoes. (73)

The short, image-laden lines enrich the speaker’s highly motivated desire for increased agency and independence. I am reminded of a quotation from Sylvia Plath, found in one of her earliest recorded journal entries from around 1950: “I want to
be able to sleep in an open field, to travel west, to walk freely at night” (77). Plath and the speaker of Guest’s poem, presumably the poet herself, express similar fantasies of abandoning the safety and stifling orderliness of the domestic world in favor of a wild, wide-open frontier in which night and darkness will no longer be a space of predation and fear, but one that is made available to the empowered female. Natural imagery (“moonbeams,” “mushrooms,” “open field”) suggests a Thoreauvian return to nature: a desire to live deliberately. Both poets strain against the conventions of gender-bound spaces and seek the role of the flâneur, who “possesses a power . . . walks at will, freely and seemingly without purpose, but simultaneously with an inquisitive wonder” (Jenks 146). Instead, social reality restricts women from participating in the simple act of walking in the public arena without becoming prey to male sexual violence or the harassment of male optical gratification.

As briefly mentioned earlier, analysis of the flâneuse has only recently emerged within scholarship. As Janet Wolff explains, “there was no role as flâneuse available to women: They could be prostitutes, widows, lesbians or murder victims but the ‘respectable’ woman could not stroll alone in the city” (41). Granted, Wolff was speaking in terms of the 19th century Parisian, and while the present day’s flâneur does not hold such a gendered role, it has remained that the city (particularly after dark) is not a place equated with the lone woman.

The poem continues with the speaker's desire for dominance, sexual pleasure, and rebellion: “I would like to steal / and take it to you,” “I would like to go to a hotel / with you.” Meanwhile, Day, the controlling force that seems to keep the
speaker’s longings in the future rather than present tense, is “watching me / from over the transom.” Guest’s clever play on the word “transom” gives this line a double meaning. Figuratively, “over the transom” is a phrase that indicates something given without being solicited, though “transom” could also mean a literal piece of carpentry, in particular a beam or crossbar that reinforces a window or door, that serves as an architectural barrier between the speaker and the watcher, suggestive of the dichotomy between inside (the domestic) and outside (culture and freedom).

The end of the poem sees a shift in tone, a retreat from the fantasy of claiming the night into a mindset of reason where the options are carefully weighed:

I must not be caught out
in the night
unless I am willing
to give you up Day forever,
when I join the guerrillas
[...]
who would roast my bird
and eat it.

The ambiguous language of the final stanzas allows for two different outcomes: one of stasis and one of action. On one hand, freedom is seen as bringing treacherous consequences of loss and domination. The word “caught” alludes to the presence of an authority that can only be appeased if the speaker is “willing” (an active verb full of self-awareness) to “give up Day forever.” On the other hand, buried in the
speaker’s sense of doubt is an inkling of temptation. The inclusion of the conjunction “unless” is significant, as it presents an opportunity. The end of the poem remains open, foreshadowing the speaker’s possible willingness—it’s not if but “when I join the guerrillas”—and reinterpreting the subject/object relationship between the guerrillas and the bird; the final lines become a cryptic question (“who would roast my bird / and eat it?”), challenging those audacious enough to interfere.

Guest stages again, and more explicitly, the opportunity for interference in the poem “Atalanta in Arcadia,” appearing in the middle section, “Archaics,” inspired by Virgil’s Aeneid. This poem recasts the Greek myth of Atalanta, the virgin huntress, remembered for her unwillingness to marry and feats of athletic strength, in a way that seems comfortable within the legacy that lead up to Glück’s interrogation of the role of women in the mythic landscape twenty years later. It is not the story of the Calydonian boar hunt, in which Atalanta is the only female participant and the first to hit the boar, but instead that of the footrace, in which the goddess is tricked into marriage by Hippomenes who uses golden apples to distract her from winning the race, that Guest reimagines in this poem. The omniscient narrator calls the goddess “Careless Atalanta” for not noticing that “the ritualistic grass uncovers his apples . . . / in your sacred pasture” (55). Rather than rewrite the myth to reassert Atalanta’s lost agency, the narrator inquires as to the lack of interference with the goddess’s fate, why no one warned Atalanta, and allows the myth to contain her fall from virgin huntress to wife:

Who is there to warn Atalanta

that her huntress days are over?
Who will tell her
of the famous youth pursuing her?
And the speed with which her girlhood
will be consumed?
The sweetness of the capture?
If one kind god hiding in the thicket
would change that last strophe! (56)

Guest, like Glück, does not use mythic trappings as means to re-conceptualize the historical image of the tragic woman; both poets let their characters suffer their fates with dignity.

A feminist reading would suggest that the poets’ refusal to embody the silenced women of mythic legend is a way to reappropriate the exploitation of the female that has forever pervaded the discourse of myth. Indeed, in the final line, the poet/narrator’s metaphysical reference to the strophe in the poem itself is evidence of her command over language, as defined by the poetic form itself, as well as discourse, or the broader context of the creative work.

Poems like “Atalanta in Arcadia,” as well as others in the “Archaics” section of Poems, concern strong women who surrender their power in marriage: the hunter and undefeated runner Atalanta losing to her future husband in a race, and the queen Dido martyring herself on her husband’s funeral pyre in the poem “Dido to Aeneas” (58). In particular, the image of Atalanta, who combines strength, beauty, and endurance, seems especially relevant and contemporary to women resisting Betty Friedan's diagnosed “feminine mystique” in the 1950s and early 60s. Feminist
responses to Guest’s myth poems characterize her to be “musing on the tense, awkward, and impossible situation of middle class educated women in the early 1960s” and interrogating the “the impossibility of female heroism in the given cultural and social context of postwar America” (Belasco 94), a notion particularly related to the Abstract Expressionist rhetoric of masculine heroism that Guest likely observed within the New York art scene. For women, buffeted by change in the postwar period, Guest’s sense of what it meant to be a “classical” woman joined the past with the present moment in an arc of female legacy. The dream was to be solid, strong, enduring; to sound the alarm to other women of the risks, such as is called for by the narrator in “Atalanta in Arcadia.”

However, my interpretation of Guest’s absent-yet-present signs of feminism in her early work might contradict other readings by feminist critics. As Lundquist points out, “In an era when the poetry of women and feminist theories richly sustain each other, Guest appears less than ardently feminist, difficult to place on a literary map whose coordinates are gender-based” (263). Her work has been said have a “stylistic inaccessibility” and an “inveterate chill . . . a cosmopolitan refinement that supersedes anything truly personal” (Lundquist 263), attributes which leave little room for the feminist agenda.

The issues of difficulty, the personal urgency, and feminist vision of Guest’s poetry can be reevaluated by looking at her numerous ekphrastic poems, that is, her poems about painting. In this underlying discourse one finds a tinge of the poet’s inner life, the erotic life, the conflict, and the intellectual demands of Guest’s occluded poetic personality. Avenues of accessibility open up and engulf what was
once the critically disabused notion of Guest’s poetry’s haughty refinement. As Lundquist remarks: Guest’s “stylistic choices also come to seem less dauntingly difficult if they are read as precise and passionate expressions of feeling, thought, vision, and commitment experienced in the presence of a particularly compelling painting” (264). In fact, Guest herself becomes more visible and less elusive when one acknowledges that the act of seeing is crucial to her craft, as it acts as an infusion of the personal through the holistic experience of viewing art, and much can be learned by assessing the nature and quality of ‘the Gaze’—particularly that of the female.

Ekphrasis, defined by Mitchell, is “the verbal representation of visual representation” (109). Writers of ekphrastic poetry seek to “construct a text as an evocation, incorporation, or substitute for a visual object or experience” (Mitchell 109), or in the words of Lundquist, “investigate the arena of conflict or seduction that a poet enters when she or he re-presents in words what has already been presented in images” (265). Guest’s work goes a step further by offering the rare perspective of a woman in the position of viewer, respondent, and maker of meaning, a feminist gesture that complicates art historical theories of the gendered ‘male gaze’ that have pervaded Western culture for centuries.

I turn again to Pollock to establish what is at stake in considering the female spectator. She writes that, without that possibility for women to create texts that offer different positions within the gendered act of looking, “women are both denied a representation of their desire and pleasure and are constantly erased so that to look at and enjoy the sites of patriarchal culture we women must become nominal
transvestites. We must assume a masculine position or masochistically enjoy the sight of woman’s humiliation” (85). What Pollock later refers to as the “sexual politics of looking,” defined as “a regime which divides into binary positions, activity/passivity, looking/being seen, voyeur/exhibitionist, subject/object,” is a politics at the heart of modernist art and modernist art history. Since the early 1970s, feminists have sought to critically challenge the feminine position of the passive muse through strategies of re-imagining or refusing the literal figuration of the woman’s body.

The ekphrastic poem I would like to discuss is titled “The Poetess,” from the collection *Moscow Mansions* (1973). Short and compressed, with erratic punctuation, the poem describes an abstract gouache and oil painting full of geometric shapes and angles by the Spanish modernist/surrealist painter Joan Miró titled *La Poetesse* from 1940 (see fig. 1). It is true that Guest has many ekphrastic poems within her oeuvre, many of which are concerned with or dedicated to artists who are women, such as Grace Hartigan, Mary Abbott, and Helen Frankenthaler, who were working to establish the female voice within the overwhelming masculinity of Abstract Expressionism in the 1950s and 60s. However, I turn to “The Poetess” for the reason that it’s a poem about a painting of a woman as presented by a female poet in dialogue with a male artist. This encourages the reading of Guest’s ekphrastic poems as not merely aesthetic, but also, when contextualized, relevant examples of her understanding of cultural and social issues central to women and women writers.
“The Poetess,” stating “after Miró” in the epigraph, claims outright its ekphrastic nature, but the poem also functions implicitly as an autobiographical project. In “The Poetess” and other ekphrastic work, Guest crafts a “portrait” of self-as-artist, an often strange and open-ended statement of identity and agency, in which the assertion of a female gaze opens up the possibility to see beyond the hierarchy established by patriarchal systems of visual objectification. Both the painting and the poem are abstract and unconventional portraits of the poetess. Miró’s composition features geometrical and calligraphic shapes splayed against a luminous brown-grey background. Although the female figure is indistinct and the distinction between the figure and her constellational surroundings is minimized, a human shape can be discerned after an elaborate visual game of connect-the-dots. The lines and contours of the poetess’s body fluidly undulate across the surface, animating her upraised arms, elongated (almost phallic shaped) forehead, multiple sets of breasts, and mouth with three sharp teeth. The flowing movement of the composition reveals that the colors (black, white, brown, and green, with bursts of primary yellow, red, and blue) and shapes “inside” the defining line of the poetess’s body are similar to that which is “outside,” further offsetting the sense of space and destabilizing any figure/ground relationships.

The title of the poem and that of Miró’s painting use the historically problematic designation of female poets. This gesture, while inviting a closer look into how Guest defines herself within the poetic tradition, begs the question of why a woman poet would align herself with such a troublesomely gendered term as “poetess.” In literary tradition, writes Svetlana Boym in her book *Death in Quotation*
*Marks: Cultural Myths of the Modern Poet*, the poetess has been rendered as "an unconscious parody of the poet . . . lack[ing] precisely the authentic artistic subjectivity that would enable her to turn upon the poetic tradition and critically comment on it" (194). This is why most women poets, haunted by the ghost of the poetess, sought to drastically dissociate themselves from her inferior status. Boym goes on to eloquently locate the female poet in the ongoing struggle against her objectification and reduction:

In the European and American traditions, women in poetry, by nature, or rather perhaps by culture, play the role of muses, addressees, or beautiful love objects, but almost never that of speaking subjects. To paraphrase Edgar Allen Poe, the most poetic subject in the world is the death of a beautiful woman, and any woman-poet is forever haunted by the beautiful corpse of a female heroine, over whom she often has to step in order to write (194).

Guest’s invocation of the poetess in the title of her poem, however, returns to the site of the fallen woman, to the location of her exploitation. She interprets in Miró’s painting a favorable portrait of a woman poet and a more satisfactory representation of her than the stereotypical poetess that lingers in the popular imagination.

As the only woman included in the first-generation of New York School poets, Lundquist posits that Guest might have seen in Miró’s painting “a visual validation of the inventive, humorous, fluid, elusive, urbane, whimsical, postsurrealist work she and [her contemporaries] were doing and rejoiced to find it labeled feminine” (268).
Still, to the painter, having completed the work forty years before Guest penned her poem, the title was certainly not as charged with the same currents of contemporary commentary that the poet found so delightful. About the poem, Guest wrote: “‘Miró, being ignorant of the pejorative attitude toward the word Poetess, I believe, in his genuine educative ignorance shows the word as the correct word for a woman who was a poet. I took him at his word, and fearlessly had my own hijinks with the painting’” (quoted in Lundquist 270). Guest’s fearless and playful approach to the painting, the artistic liberties (“hijinks”) expressed through her subjective and powerful position of viewer, confer a sense of entitlement and opportunity to articulate. The result is a refreshing translation of the female gaze in which Guest is able to construct a new position of feminist intentionality within the composition.

The poem itself is compact and concrete, meandering elegantly and freely from line to line and “joyously frontal” (Lundquist 271) in its persistent present tense:

A dollop is dolloping
her scoop is pursuing
flee vain ignots    Ho
coriander darks   thimble blues
red okays adorn her
buzz green circles in flight
or submergence?    Giddy
mishaps of blackness make
stinging clouds what!
Guest treats the poem like pictorial space, emulating the painting’s sensual surface and mimicking its oscillating rhythms. She interprets the poetess, rendering her in sharper definition than the abstract woman of the painting and acknowledging the difference she makes in occupying her space in the canvas, the ripples of line and shape radiating out of her, the sensations she inspires. The first line, in which a “dollop is dolloping” and “her scoop is pursuing,” sets a scene of courtship between the creature-like shapes and the poetess, as they float around and through her scoop-like body.

In its construction, the words and phrases shift indeterminately—parts of speech, syntactical relationships, and symbolic importance remain unobtainable. Poet and theorist Lyn Hejinian, though writing twenty years later, would likely characterize this poem as an “open” text where “all elements of the work are maximally excited” (n. pag). To “open” a text, Hejinian suggests thinking carefully about arrangement and rearrangement, repetition, and compositional techniques resulting in ‘gaps’ in the text which must be filled in by the reader—methods that quite obviously inform the work at hand. There are percussive interjections, such as “Ho” and “what!” There are curious reversals of nouns, verbs, and adjectives in
which “thimble” modifies “blues,” or perhaps “thimble blues” is an animation of the thimble itself. The phrase “natural c/o abnormal” forms a “verbal labyrinth” (Lundquist 272), a paradox describing the “loquaciousness” of the poetess. Lundquist reads this short phrase as Guest’s attempt to question of “how fluency and readiness of speech in women can be ‘natural’ and ‘abnormal’” at the same time (272). But it is in this realm of paradox that the poetess exists; at once a riddler and “riddled,” shot through with the cosmology of the whole objective world that seeps through her permeable boundaries.

The open-ended final line allows the language of the poem to trail off endlessly both “as space” and into space. Hélène Cixous regards this kind of open-endedness or lack of closure in women’s writing, as opposed to the rigidity of the paternal order, to be indicative of “a feminine textual body” that is “recognized by the fact that it is always endless, without ending: there’s no closure, it doesn’t stop, and it’s this that very often makes the feminine text difficult to read” (53). Similarly, Hejinian reminds us that, in an “open” text, “the implication is that the words and ideas continue beyond the work . . . One has simply stopped because one has run out of units or minutes, and not because a conclusion has been reached nor ‘everything’ said” (n. pag). Both poem and painting deny the notion of static essence in lieu of motion, change, multiplicity, and dynamism. But while the chaotic interior and ambiguous figure/ground relationship of the painting is enlivened with this sense of continuous space, it is inherently contained by the physical barrier of its frame.

Guest’s poem responds to the art work through linguistic imitation, but more effectively achieves semiotic openness; the final word, “space,” and lack of end
punctuation indicates a willful stop within a discourse of endless, exponential potential. In such, the difficulty, or “inveterate chill,” of Guest’s poetry serve the larger purpose of forging new relationships between language, objects, and locations, serving as a tool in the process of knowing, or redefining, what we constitute as visual and embodied reality.

Guest locates the vitality of the female gaze through her own experience as the enabled art viewer/creator and uses it to transform traditional systems of language into the “fraught climate” of pictorial space, where the physical feminine body and the feminine textual body exist simultaneously. Mary Kelly, in her article, “Desiring images/imagining desire,” addresses the dilemma in which “the woman who is an artist sees her experience in terms of the feminine position, that is as object of the look, while she must also account for the feelings she experiences as an artist occupying the masculine position as subject of the look” (qtd. in Pollock 86). Guest, while the poet and not the artist, faces a similar dilemma in her ekphrastic poems. To negotiate this fundamental contradiction, Guest applies a certain feminist construction to her reading of Miró’s painting in which she apprehends a different position from which femininity can be appraised, experienced, and represented. By focusing her gaze on a depiction of another woman, La Poetesse, a painting tied to the hand of the male artist, Guest is rupturing the hierarchy of power traditionally embedded in the phallocentric act of painting, and applying agency to the object at which she is looking, thus liberating the poetess and all of her troubling definitions.

Both in terms of Guest’s ekphrastic writing and her general poetics, aesthetic vision and a wide-ranging exploration of unconventional spatial images work
together to take on the “abstract’ project of transforming the viewer’s awareness,” as noted by Robert Bennett, a concept that was central to the work being produced by New York School artists and poets (44). Guest’s unique ability to translate visual sensibilities into words comes from her experience with Abstract Expressionist art in particular. The depictive thrust of paintings by artists such as Helen Frankenthaler, Grace Hartigan, Joan Mitchell, and Robert Motherwell (all of whom Guest socialized and collaborated with), often relies on re-presentations of observed, remembered, and imagined phenomena created by ‘abstract’ means—a vocabulary which feels closely related to Guest’s poetic process. A metaphor for Guest’s interdisciplinary aesthetic is well expressed in a comment she made on Frankenthaler’s artistic process: “The moment the brush touches down, the painter is free to explore. The brush carries the momentum as the artist explores the moment—moment and momentum are the springboard . . . The moment now becomes the distance” (quoted in Bernstein n. pag).

The “precarious architecture” (Poems 20) of Guest’s explorative and mobile spatial imagination serves to transform how we perceive the world. The spatial images and metaphors pervading The Location of Things suggest a kind of physical, aesthetic, and personal distance that must somehow be confronted. In an essay on Frankenthaler, Guest comments on the artist’s process, Barbara Hillman characterizes the “tension” of Guest’s poetry as that which occurs “between different types of reality, different types of location” (210-11). The titles of Guest’s poems reveal her interest in spatial imagery and kinds of architectural spaces, as seen in “The Location of Things,” “In the Middle of the Easel,” and “The Open Skies.” In
addition, the reader encounters numerous doors, windows, stairs, roofs, rooms, houses, city streets, art studios, museum galleries and a wide range of other spatial images that serve to block all avenues of easy access into the poems. Through the inherent difficulty of her work, Guest enables a truly feminine textual body—one that opens and closes at will and continues infinitely.

Metaphysical explorations of unconventional spatial images resist the simple mimetic treatment of representations of physical places; instead Guest prefers to examine how we construct spatial locations, particularly spaces/places which are gendered, and how we might (re)imagine alternative kinds of spatial treatment by deconstructing the “essentialized notions” (Bennett 50) of place. From Guest's alternative spatial practices, honed through flânerie and investigations of spatial navigation, visual perception and the female gaze, and deliberate deconstruction of traditional spaces in favor of a more provocative sense of spatial reality, emerges a new inhabitable feminist landscape in which hierarchical boundaries do not exist.
Fig. 1 Joan Miró, *La Poetesse*, 1940
Before transitioning into the work of the contemporary Canadian poet, Lisa Robertson, I would like to call attention to Guest’s more recent work from 2003, a mere three years before her death in 2006, in which she describes another kind of architecture, an “invisible” kind of scaffolding, that exists beneath the surface of her poems. My hope is to use Guest’s notions of architecture to preface a discussion of Robertson’s poetics, in which she explores issues of space, containment, the energetic circulation that exists in both buildings and texts, and proposes new ‘invisible architectures’ to be built atop the ruins of history and myth in order to reinforce a revolutionized feminine language.

The short essay titled “Invisible Architecture,” published in Guest’s prose collection *Forces of Imagination: Writing on Writing*, engages the productive tension between the “desire of the poet to control” and that elusive “something within poetry that desires the invisible” (19). She conceives of an “invisible architecture [that] upholds the poem while allowing a moment of relaxation for the unconscious,” and she defines this moment as “a period of emotional suggestion, / of lapse, / of reliance on the conscious substitute words pushed toward the bridge of the architecture. An architecture in the period before the poem finds an exact form and vocabulary” (18). This trace of architecture, the scaffold from which the stable poem breaks free, is a ruin, a past structure that exists only slightly within the realms of our own consciousness and existence. The invisibility of which Guest speaks represents the ghost of a familiar history: that of lyrical poetry, the primordial mythic location, and the structures that have kept women excluded. The
poet sifts through the muck of the past and emerges, with the bare materials of her poems, a kind of architect, ready to build a poem into a body positioned in space. Even so, there remain necessarily undefined elements of the poem’s formation, things which simultaneously build up and negate the poem's progress. In the conclusion of the essay, Guest wonders, “By whom or by what agency is the behavior of the poem suggested, by what invisible architecture, we ask, is the poem developed?” (19)

CHAPTER 3: LISA ROBERTSON

For Lisa Robertson, while there is reference to her own kind of ‘invisible architecture,’ as stated in the poem “A Modest Treatise” from her collection of poetry Lisa Robertson's Magenta Soul Whip: “I was invisible / my architecture was also invisible and specific and vast” (63), but the main architecture through which her poetics take shape is explicit. In a correspondence between herself and fellow Canadian poet Steve McCaffery—published online in the seventeenth installment of “PhillyTalks,” a newsletter produced by the University of Pennsylvania's PennSound Center for Programs in Contemporary Writing—Robertson unpacks her conception of the broad, shifting, ever-creeping and ever-crumbling significance of architecture in terms of (gendered) subjectivity. Robertson keeps in mind the complex sense that bodies engage with spaces differently depending upon how they are shaped and constrained. She goes back to the ancient location, noting that perhaps the ancient Greeks had no conception of the subject, but they certainly did “architecturally construct and express their conception of the woman . . . the body was coded female by its enclosure in the oikos . . . But interestingly Athenian women’s sacral-spatial
festival took place over architecture—on rooftops only, not in structures or as a flow among them, in the polis” (38). This image, read negatively, of bodies being constrained to subjectivity and a specific, supra-architectural space encompasses that which Robertson seeks to critically disengage, to enter into dialogue with in order to “untangle the means of constraint” (38). In response, she seeks a provisional name with which to refer to this identified subjectification, and crafts a tactical and explosive personal manifesto that I believe governs the trajectory of her poetics:

I’d like to propose an architecture of arson, of rooftops, clouds, much more than I want to repeat the word ‘woman,’ the word ‘subject.’ I too want an architecture, a poetry, that is both delusional and critical, a ludic zone, precisely because I cannot conceive of a site as innocent. Every site is a form of governance, command. I don’t believe there is an outside, I don’t believe grammar has an exit . . . My outlook is not liberatory except by the most minor means, but these tiny, flickering inflections are the only agency I believe—the inflections complicating the crux of a complicity (38).

Robertson’s 2001 book, *The Weather*, a collection of prose and lyric poems named after the days of the week, gives the world its first formal introduction to the “Office of Soft Architecture” and the mission of the Soft Architect. In the introduction to *The Weather*, a twice folded 8 1/2 by 11 inch sheet of blue paper inserted between the first pages of the book, is an address from “The Office for Soft
Architecture” dated April 2001, Vancouver. It begins: “We think of the design and construction of these weather descriptions as important decorative work. What shall our new ornaments be? How should we adorn mortality now?” And ends with the lingering address: “Dear Reader—a lady speaking to humans from the motion of her own mind is always multiple. Enough of the least. We want to be believed” (n.pag). In an unusual way, weather, too, wants to be believed. In an essay titled “The Weather: A Report on Sincerity,” Robertson offers the following explanation: “I’m interested in weather . . . because cultural displacement has shown me that weather is a rhetoric. Furthermore, it is a rhetoric of sincerity, falling in a soothing, familial vernacular” (28). Through an interrogation of the rhetorical discourse of the weather, Robertson’s poetics achieve a combination of meteorological descriptions and feminist awareness of the subject’s connection with the landscape. Robertson concludes “Weather Report” this way: “Sincerity says that identity is moral. I need it to be a tent, not a cave, a rhetoric, not a value. There’s also the fact that my sex is a problem with sincerity. I want to move on. I want a viable climate. I’ll make it in description” (37). By constantly “describing,” creating (or recreating) in declarative sentences, a more relevant landscape and “viable climate,” Robertson tackles the problems of representation that affect women’s lives and our conception of place.

In the poem “Monday,” from The Weather, “the sky is complicated and flawed and we’re up there in it, floating near the apricot frill, the bias swoop, near the sullen bloated part that dissolves to silver the next instant bronze...” (10). We catch a glimpse of Barbara Guest, “wandering as I am into clouds and air,” in her delineated landscapes. The dress-making terms, “frill” and “bias swoop” and later “the swathe
of fleece,” imply that the environment is adorned with a “seedy” (meaning both shabby and fertile), gendered kind of artifice, but one of which it is fully aware. As in the skyscape described by Robertson, a feminist landscape requires a smudging and blurring of the lines that have been drawn to set the universalized human figure apart from the landscape and traditionally kept the feminine tied to the earth.

For Robertson, the “luscious tropes” of femininity and nature, both which “float as specters of the state imagination,” are largely artificial concepts which rely on certain purposeful and expediently maintained misreadings that have served the specific use of supporting a singular structure of power; in other words, “a defined locale or gendered body is cultivated to produce an image of benign power, discrete abundance, ontological anxiety, and enclosed exchange” (PhillyTalks 23). Yet, by recognizing and mobilizing such ghostly conceits, Robertson succeeds in releasing gendered constructs from their historical boredom, allowing them to float freely through time and the landscapes of modernity. As “Monday” suggests, let’s “begin afresh in the realms of the atmosphere” (10).

The poem “Tuesday” undertakes the challenge to construct a viable climate amidst the refreshing landscapes of the atmosphere where the poet interweaves the rhetoric of feminist history with that of the weather in an equation of ongoingness, of change itself and how it occurs across time. The poet’s feelings of dislocation within the feminist legacy and a critique of the lack of women’s history infiltrating the collective consciousness filter in and out amidst painterly, meteorological description:
All cloudy except a narrow opening at the top of the sky. All cloudy. All cloudy. All cloudy. Except one large opening with others smaller. And once in the clouds. Days heap upon us. Where is our anger. And the shades darker than the plain part and darker at the top than the bottom. But darker at the bottom than top. Days heap upon us. Where is Ti-Grace. But darker at the bottom than the top. Days heap upon us. Where is Christine. Broken on the word culture. But darker at the bottom than the top. Days heap upon us. Where is Valerie. (18)

The poem’s meditative pace and repetitive descriptive language underlies a melancholic ritual lament for twenty-first-century feminism’s loss of righteous anger and radical figures. The repetition of the phrase, “Days heap upon us” conveys a sad sense of time passing, even without staging a particular subject moving through time. The poet seeks long-lost feminists, presumably, in this selection, Ti-Grace Atkins, Christine de Pizan, and Valerie Solanas (all of whom relied on language to mobilize their causes) amidst the weather’s shifting atmospheric conditions. The feminists inquired after, using only their first name are hauntingly figured as both present to mind and absent at the same time. This partial naming resists representation, but also heightens our familiarity with these missing women, urging us to join the search party. The absence of these feminists along with their/our radicalism is significant to Robertson because, while they have clearly helped to shape the landscape of modern feminism, we are left estranged, searching for their successors. Invoking Grace, Christine, Valerie, and others does more than memorialize their contributions; it gives them an honorary place, if only phantom, in
the present moment and in possible futures wherein obsolescence can be reclaimed as a lens or analytic device.

While the poem is embedded with the frustration of losing these women, who were “broken on the word culture,” to the rampant institutional misogyny that structures much public discourse, any sense of what political action is required remains vague. Perhaps by seeking out women’s anger, by asking rhetorical questions, by plunging into forgotten feminist texts Robertson is able to rebuild restrictive structures of language, history, gender, and place into something liberatory. The role of the Soft Architect encompasses this work. By opening the folds we move among, exposing the ductwork, the torn places in the texture of any structure, the Soft Architect is able to return to the origin of exploitation.

Robertson’s collection of essays and poetry, Occasional Work and Seven Walks from the Office for Soft Architecture (2003), serves to blur the distinctions between the public and private sphere, as the former is made domestic and “decorated,” while the latter is invaded by the public properties of history and language. The urban landscape in Robertson’s work becomes ambiguously private (decorative, feminine, domestic) and public (the point of political struggle) in an explicitly gendered challenge aimed at these hierarchical categories and previously essentialized spaces. Robertson’s spatial practices in the collection’s “Seven Walks” series of prose-poems, are propelled by a feminist impetus, as each of the walks (one for every day of the week) are performances of the flâneuse walking in urban spaces, poeticizing the landscape.
Robertson’s series of “Seven Walks” is a performative production of the landscape in the tradition of German literary critic Walter Benjamin’s Arcades Project, an encyclopedic text written between 1927 and 1940 that centers on the city life of Paris during the nineteenth century and the habitats of the flâneur. While the idea of the ‘man of the crowd,’ a term originating from Baudelaire’s seminal essay “The Painter of Modern Life,” was discussed in the previous chapter in terms of the mobilized gaze, Robertson picks up the commodifying nature of the gaze of the flâneur, particularly in terms of the female subject’s potential objectification. She returns to Benjamin’s project in her exploration of the commodity; he explains thus:

Empathy with the commodity is fundamentally empathy with exchange value itself. The flâneur is the virtuoso of this empathy. He takes the concept of marketability itself for a stroll. Just as his final ambit is the department store, his last incarnation is the sandwich-man. (qtd. in Peacock 129)

As he strolls, Benjamin’s flâneur feels enlivened with a strange kind of empathy that allows him to identify with the urban landscape. While empathy usually refers to inter-subjective relations (such as between two people), the empathy to which Benjamin refers can be felt for a thing, a commodity, or even the abstract concept of exchange value. This unsettling empathy condenses the commodity and the subject. Robertson brings gender into the equation and with it other ways to conceive of visual commodification. After all, while the privileged flâneur has the time and agency to stroll as the aimless subject, women might have an easier time empathizing with the commodity.
In her essay, "Women on the Market," Irigaray argues that society is founded on the exchange of women who have been figuratively, and often literally, circulated as commodities in systems between men. In other words:

All the systems of exchange that organize patriarchal societies and all the modalities of productive work that are recognized, valued, and rewarded in these societies are men’s business. The production of women, signs, and commodities is always referred back to men . . . The work force is thus always assumed to be masculine, and ‘products’ are objects to be used, objects of transaction among men alone. (171)

To wander in the city as a flâneuse is to call attention to the imbalance of power over leisure and mobility in the urban landscape and the different ways it directs the movements of gendered bodies. To quote one of Robertson’s earlier works, it’s like “free and not-free went walking” (Palinodes 5). Therefore, taking the concept of commodification for a stroll means both being the subject of, and subject to, the market.

The “Second Walk” experiments with walking through an urban park. Robertson captures the effects of urban design and city planning on the location in a fascinating reversal: “this was the city where the site oozed through its historical carapace to become a paradoxical adornment” (196). In another correspondence with Steve McCaffrey, Robertson refers to her study of the site history of a particular park in East Vancouver called New Brighton Park, the subject of the third essay in
the “Occasional Works” section of *Soft Architecture*. Robertson notes that the park has served a wide span of uses since the mid-nineteenth century, ranging from waterfront spa to Japanese-Canadian internment camp to today’s re-landscaped seaside walk. Its name, New Brighton, is a colonial reference to England’s seaside resort. The overlay of “old world fantasy, leisure and industrial, racial and natural constructions” defines for Robertson the pastoral and the pataphysical Utopia of Vancouver. In “Site Report: New Brighton Park, East Vancouver” she describes the location as such: “The new urbanism began at this site in 1863. It beautifully lacks architecture. This is an inverted Utopia, where *sous le plage, le pave*. Nothing and everything took place here then moved on” (38). Drawing heavily from architect Rem Koolhaas (founder of the Office for Metropolitan Architecture, an actual firm which practices innovative urban planning) and his essay “What Ever Happened to Urbanism,” Robertson tries to represent the fragmented and fluctuating politics of place as they appear in the landscape of the park and as they affect the distinctly feminine pedestrian who strolls between historiographical performances.

This movement backwards into the landscape, into time, creates a perpetual nostalgia where “everything we encountered had become some sort of nineteenth century” (196). This metaphorical excavation of the site dredges up the lyric subject, the location of the *flâneur/flâneuse* who partakes in the “eroticization of a privileged passivity” (197), and the societal order which Robertson deems the “lyric class,” or those whom “pertained to all that was lapsed or enjambed. Even our pathologies were those of a previous century” (197). The figures who are “lapsed” and “enjambed” within the landscape function as literary and historical constructs, but
they are also significantly gendered; they are women seeking to move outside of their cultural milieu, to abandon the idleness of the lyric class. In the recursive “eroticization of a privileged passivity,” they are the ones considered privileged, passive, erotic, drifting in their “puffs of golden dust” (97) like starlets or courtesans. The scene playing out the historicized landscape of the park, in which “we desired fine clothes and freedoms on the patio of late modernism, what our passivity achieved or attracted were the fallen categories of experience” (197), is a manifestation of Robertson’s desire for an architecture that is both imaginal and critical, wherein “those fallen categories, seemingly suspended in some slimy lyric harness, come to animate and rescue our bodies’ role as witness . . . to the teaching and fading cognitions of the park” (198), because, after all, no site is innocent.

Robertson implies that there is no way to become removed from the historical, cultural, and gendered resonance of public spaces. Later in this walk, Robertson describes a picnic in the park in which the scenic turns spectacle:

Here, on the clipped margins of the century, in our regalia of mud-freckled linens, and with our satchel of cold provisions, we needed to prove to ourselves at least that although we had no doubt as to our lyric or suspended status, we were eager to be happy. We wanted to be the charmed recipients of massive energies. Why not? Our naïveté was both shapeless and necessary. We resembled a botched alfresco sketch. Who could say that we were a symmetry; who could say that we were not? (198)
In this passage, the picnickers, antiquated in their diction ("regalia," "satchel," and "provisions") and functioning as scenic accessories, "ooze through [their] historical carapace to become the paradoxical adornment" of the modern landscape. They are at once a component of the park, the subjects of the alfresco sketch, and active viewers of the scene. The mention of a sketch being made in the park conjures images of Impressionist artists working en plein air, or painting from direct observation of real life scenes as they unfold in the out of doors, but calling it "botched" implies error or confusion (the artist’s “shapeless and necessary naïveté); perhaps the lines separating figure from ground were altered to suspend the conventions of realism, as in Édouard Manet’s painting *Dejeuner Sur l’Herbe* (1862), which was notoriously derided for its abstraction of spatial configurations.

The scene in the park is overwhelmed by the historical resonance of the landscape. The picnickers’ “lyric or suspended status” (198) suggests that they belong to the “placeless place” of the utopian or the “timeless time” of the literary, all the while haunted by historical diction (Peacock 137). This also reinforces the gendered undertones of Robertson’s “lyric class” suggesting that they are confined to the limited subjectivity of the lyric vision and prevented from continuation. The figures in the poem find themselves “on the inside of a sultry glass, gazing outwards towards an agency that required us no more than we required the studied redundancy of our own vocabulary” (198), suggesting physical removal or an incommensurability between systems of time, space, and language. Robertson writes that “the park’s real function [is] archival,” meaning that the gendered functions of architecture and landscape are locations of suppressed desires. There is
no outside to the historical or cultural memory of such spaces. Even the failed locations, ruptured utopias, regrow their alienations inside of their contemporary visitors for, as Robertson notes, “no space ever vanishes utterly” (200).

By the end of the “Second Walk,” Robertson returns to the passive flâneurs, caught in the dialectic of the public place: “as we strolled through the park to accomplish our speculations always we wondered—were we inside or outside the diorama?” (203). A diorama is traditionally a flimsy model representing a landscape with three-dimensional figures. The term is also applied to a scenic painting, viewed through a peephole, in which changes in color and direction of light simulate changes in the composition. Much like a diorama, a public park often simulates a natural environment in an otherwise industrial space. Its configuration sets the scene in which we stroll and of which we become a part. The park exists as a simulacrum of cultural memory in which everything flashes at once across the constructed landscape. As Mitchell notes in the essay, “Imperial Landscape,” such indeterminacy is a property of landscape itself as it is “a natural scene mediated by culture . . . both a represented and presented space, both a signifier and a signified, both a frame and what a frame contains, both a real place and its simulacrum, both a package and the commodity inside the package” (5). Like the park, we are a bricolage of cultural construct and materiality; both scene and experience occurring at once.

A marginalized person, such as the flâneuse, walking in the urban landscape might be the able to see it most clearly, to notice and identify with its flawed
surfaces (what Robertson calls “failed sites” or “collapsed nodes), precisely because it is a system that does not provide for her. Robertson notes that she is drawn to “failure as a transformative agency,” especially in terms of urban space. She writes, again in another correspondence with Steve McCaffery:

Part of my own alignment with such ideas came with an earlier dissatisfaction with the abjected notion of gendered otherness I came across in some feminist and psychoanalytic work. The big question was, how could a subject construct temporary agencies, when the social-sexual axis would always have already cast her outside of authority, power, agency. Meanwhile we’re all moving through the city, quoting it wrongly, iterating the city. So the streetwalker’s practice is iterative and makes her up as she moves. The porousness of spatio-subjective nodes in transit becomes a way to think the subject (PhillyTalks 33).

It is important to note Robertson’s use of the term “streetwalker,” a sexualized interpretation of the flâneuse. While the word is used conversationally in Robertson’s dialogue with McCaffery, it is highly charged with subversive irony; by using “streetwalker,” a word synonymous with prostitute, in the plain context of one who walks in the streets who happens to be female is to reclaim the language that has formerly served to exploit the feminine.

The “iterative” practice of walking that Robertson refers to makes up the lyric subject as well as the poetic practice, or perhaps Robertson sees walking as poetry, but, nevertheless, walking in the city in the trappings of gender makes a
difference. Denise Riley notes that wearing the signifiers of one’s gender is usually not a constant nor is it always a choice; “it’s not possible to live twenty-four hours a day soaked in the immediate awareness of one’s sex” and yet when walking in public, one can be called into awareness of one’s gender, becoming “a spectacle . . . positioned antagonistically as a woman-thing, objectified as a distortion” (96, 97). This distorted Otherness brought upon by “alienated self-recognition” (Riley 97), echoes Donna Haraway’s cyborgian subjects that insist, if we are not “human,” let our inhuman-ness become our agency, another point of departure evident in Robertson’s work.

To combat this harassment and forced embodiment, Robertson, in the essay “How Pastoral: A Manifesto,” makes use of the “obsolete yet persistent tropes” of femininity as a pointedly feminist resistance to the systems that govern and shape the urban landscape:

As a tactically uprooted use, deployment of the obsolete could cut short the feckless plot of productivity. When capital marks women as the abject and monstrous cyphers of both reproduction and consumption, our choice can only be to choke out the project of renovation. We must become history’s dystopic ghosts, inserting inconsistencies, demands, misinterpretations, and weedy appetites into the old bolstering narratives: we shall refuse to be useful. (280).

Harking back to Irigaray’s argument against the status of woman-as-commodity, Robertson mobilizes the antithesis to thoughtless or “feckless” pursuits of “productivity” as defined by a consumer-driven, patriarchal society—a notion
potentially linked to her earlier stated intentions to complicate the crux of complicity. Feminists such as Elizabeth Grosz have, too, set themselves against what they identify to be damaging indifference to the powerful and distinct realities of the body. Grosz relates her understanding of the Irigarayan concept as such: “The reinscription, through discourses, of a positive, autonomous body for women is to render dysfunctional all forms of knowledge that have hitherto presented themselves as neutral, objective or perspective-less” (qtd. in Riley 101). Robertson urges the “abject” women of the world to inhabit the city in anachronistic or unproductive ways, to, as Grosz said, reinscribe autonomy by resisting reproduction of the status quo and become “dystopic ghosts” who “refuse to be useful” to a “plot” that does not serve or include them.

The word “dystopic” signifies an inverted utopia, a failed paradise, which is largely what the city can be considered, as Robertson attests: “within the capitalist narrative, the Utopia of the new asserts itself as the only productive teleology” (How Pastoral qtd. in PhillyTalks 22). Therefore, to resist the “productive teleology” of the renovated urban site that relegates women’s (re)production to the status of the object, Robertson chooses instead the dystopia of the obsolete, the critically nonproductive ruins, and that which “choke out renovation.” To be the flâneur, enough at ease in the streets and at the marketplace to be invisible, is quite different from being the anarchical phantoms that haunt the city in the guise of a woman.

In the preface, “Soft Architecture: A Manifesto,” Robertson asks, “what if there is no ‘space,’ only a permanent, slow-motion mystic takeover, an implausibly
careening awning? Nothing is utopian. Everything wants to be” (21). As such, the
coup d’état of the dystopic ghosts of history can also be considered the intervention
of the Soft Architects who “face the reaching middle” (21). Robertson has written
catalogue essays for art exhibitions that she has attributed to the ad hoc Office for
Soft Architecture. In crafting this looser, fictional identity, and becoming an
“architect,” Robertson wanted to “consider the rhetorical and descriptive practice of
architecture . . . since obviously architecture is discursive as much as it is hardware”
(PhillyTalks 33). If regular architecture is the language of concrete and steel, in
other words, hardware, then Soft Architecture, its discursive counterpart, requires a
vocabulary of flesh, air, fabric, and color. In contrast to the determinant practices of
conventional architecture (typified, for example, by the nineteenth century
modernization of Paris and even Vancouver’s growing urbanity), Soft Architecture
relies on multiform, under-the-radar tactics that work as a resistance to the
logocentric power of property development. The practice of Soft Architecture is,
therefore, aligned with Robertson’s earlier discussed modes of feminist resistance in
that they both deliberately counteract the means by which they are denigrated.

The Soft Architect, a hyphenated poet-artist-wanderer, works with the
textures and fabrics, the flawed and fraying surfaces, and the affected materials of
the everyday: “We note that the holy modernism of the white room is draped and
lined in its newness by labile counter-structures of moving silk, fur, leather, onyx,
velvet” (14). The nature of the “counter-structure” is decorative, bordering on
superfluous, and in opposition to the progress of the triumphalist narratives
represented by the “modernist white room.” Here the image of a gallery,
traditionally the site of high art and the genius of the male artist, is overtaken by the glamorous, formless, “labile,” and grotesquely feminine architecture of resistance. Such a “counter-structure” can be placed in the tradition of the feminine decorative arts, or the affective labor of homemaking, as a kind of the counter-argument against the triumphal discourse of Modernism. Gertrude Stein’s Tender Buttons (1912) comes to mind as a similar statement. In this largely semiotic text, excessive domestic materiality clogs the text, while descriptions of surfaces become an end in itself, rather than subordination to action or event.

To think metaphorically about the literal and conceptual schema behind the decorative excess in Soft Architecture, I turn to Irigaray’s theory of “disruptive excess” in terms of the possibility of a feminine discourse that effectively counter-acts the phallocentric operations:

The issue is not one of elaborating a new theory of which woman would be the subject or the object, but of jamming the theoretical machinery itself, of suspending its pretension to production of a truth and of a meaning that are excessively univocal. This presupposes that women do not aspire simply to be men’s equals … but that they are rather attempting to wrest this question away from the economy of the logos. They should not put it, then, in the form “What is woman?” but rather, repeating/interpreting the way in which, within discourse, the feminine finds itself defined as lack, deficiency, or as imitation and negative image of the subject, they should signify that with respect to this logic a disruptive excess is possible on the feminine side (78).
Decorative excess in Soft Architecture serves to counter-act the reproduction of a coherent, efficient, and rationalized modernity as planned by conventional urban architects. In this way, the excess is one of feminine capability. Decoration becomes a force of architecture, not secondary to but subversive of its function. In “Soft Architecture: Manifesto,” Robertson identifies the ruined and diaphanous materials utilized by the Soft Architect:

The work of the Soft Architect paradoxically recompiles the metaphysics of surface, performing a horizontal research which greets shreds of fiber, pigment flakes, the bleaching of light, proofs of lint, ink spore, liquid and pixilation, the strange, frail, leaky cloths. . . The work of the Soft Architect, simultaneously strong and weak, makes new descriptions on the warp of former events. (21)

These “new descriptions” are essential to Robertson’s counter-intuitive poetic locations, places that are at once charged with burgeoning agency and reeking of decay. In addition, these ambiguous, leaking materials lend themselves nicely to the practice of soft sculpture, a medium which can be considered analogous to Robertson’s Soft Architecture.

Popularized in the 1960s by artists such as Claes Oldenburg, Yayoi Kusama, Louise Bourgeois, and Eva Hesse, soft sculpture techniques utilize cloth, rubber, plastic, fibers, and similar “soft” or organic materials to make a non-rigid, sculptural object. While textile and fiber arts are often considered low-brow or “crafty,” feminist artists have a long tradition of reappropriating “soft” materials and crafts traditionally considered women’s work, such as crocheting and quilting, to bring
awareness to divisions within gender, labor, and art. For example, take Faith Wilding’s “Womb Room” also known as “Crocheted Environment” form the 1972 exhibit “Womanhouse,” an immersive site-specific work staged by Judy Chicago, Miriam Schapiro, and other participants in the Feminist Art Program at the California Institute for the Arts. Each room in the Womanhouse space was devoted to a different ironized element of housemaking or women’s experience. “Womb Room” consists of a giant web made out of rope and knotted with contrasting crochet patterns that create a rounded, cocoon-like structure. The web is at once a shelter and a craft item. It is Soft Architecture in that it is both “weak and strong” and seeks to describe the “warp of former events” (21).

Other minor, decorative, and counter-modern architectural forms featured in this collection, such as shacks, fountains, reclaimed industrial sites, scaffolding, an Arts and Crafts house, home interiors, and a thrift store. These devices represent fabrications of everyday resistance. In “The Value Village Lyric,” Robertson notes the temporality of modern fashions that have come and gone out of vogue and now exist as thrown-out, base elements that have become noting more than a seedy record of the past:

At the House of V, modernity greets the rag trade. Here, theories are cheap. Cast-off Being dangles from the racks. Under the hard, flat light of fluorescent tubing, all labels and movements converge in a convenient and accessible archive. This is the mirror image of the avant-garde: like an unraveling shawl, it recedes from its economy. (183)
The thrift store is a compendium of discarded clothes, no longer constituting elements of the identities or subcultures that they once formed. But the poet seems to delight in this curious encounter with the “glimmering selvage of the popular” (182). Robertson approaches the scraps of clothing (worn out like “metaphysics”) with the intention of building something new out of the artifacts of unsuccessful inventions, providing new agency to an otherwise failed site: “we luxuriate in the unoriginality of our desires and identities. They are clearly catalogued. They unravel back to a foundational boredom. The proliferation of failures resides for a moment on the frayed surface. In the tedium of failure we glimpse the new” (186). The poet’s role in this bargain-basement archive is not to determine the origins of the text(iles), but to use them to construct the landscape of livable future, one that is not a product of desires or identities, “neither a style nor a content,” but one which affirms an unheroic “stance” (187).

While Robertson’s concerns with commodity culture questions to what degree her poetry serves as an interrogation of capitalism, she also significantly reworks the classic tomes of critical theory to inform her practice, one which effectually merges feminist poetics with anti-capitalist critique by way of distinctly female subjectification. Femininity, while used consciously and often ironically, overflows the bounds of its possible uses in traditional figuration; the landscape, systems of poetic language, and the feminine refuse to be deployed as material fodder for triumphal, patronymic narratives. Robertson proposes a conscious counter-action against the modern regimes that only associate women with the abject/object. By building counter-structures that disrupt the progress of
hierarchical mechanisms, and privileging ongoingness and the decorative as statements that override previous visions of feminine ‘lack,’ Robertson’s poetics are able to construct livable feminist habitats that are “neither inside nor outside, neither a space nor a site” but an “inhabitable surface that recognizes us” (142).

***

If Louise Glück speaks from the primordial earth of the mythic, governed by the confined and abandoned muse; and Barbara Guest speaks from the cosmopolitan city streets, built precariously on the soft ground of ancient landscapes; Robertson speaks from both above and below, from within the architectural framework of buildings of all kinds, in various stages of decay, that are transposed from a failed Arcadia. The lineage between these three poets is complicated and disparate, but they remain relatable in terms of their highly contingent relationships to a constantly evolving feminist narrative.

In each of their poetic oeuvres, we experience the breaking down, the necessary felling of traditions laid bare and crumbling, upon which a new kind of poetic landscape begins to assemble, and while it is not always one that is explicitly feminist, it is one that is refigured from a perspective that is highly conscious and concerned with the possibility and difficulty of the possession of female subjectivity and the problem of constructing such subjectivity in world governed by historically gendered systems. The work of Guest, Glück, and Robertson is charged with the emancipatory action of thinking, and by thinking they remain active within the historical and political space of language, and by existing within this space they are
able to change language itself. In this way, these poets, and all women writing with the purpose of reclaiming the traditional spaces and mythic grounds that have served to keep them out, are staging a resistance.
Works Cited


