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Capacious Feminism: Intimacy and Otherness in Mina Loy's Poetry

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A thesis submitted in partial fulfillment of the requirements for the Doctor of Philosophy degree in English

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Abstract

This dissertation explores Loy's interest in the "woman's cause" to interrogate how the poet was recaptured as an early feminist figure by the academy. After Virginia Kouidis "rediscovered" Loy's work in the 1980s, the poet has been consistently drafted as a central feminist figure despite her lack of commitment to organized feminist movements of her time. This retrospective lens offers a catachrestic view of Loy's feminism. I use "catachresis" to refer to the slightly inaccurate use of "feminism," tinted by current perceptions of the term, but also to hint at Loy's capacious feminine poetics. While the rise of feminist theories in modernist studies has deplored the period's rejection of the female Other, Loy's poems define women's identity through the liberating dialogue with otherness. I draw on Judith Butler's theory of gender performativity and textual studies to engage with how Loy's conception of the page as the space of feminine intimacy and otherness cements her as a multifaceted woman modernist and a model for contemporary modernist studies. I open my analysis with Loy's contentious "Feminist Manifesto" to understand the framework the poet associates with feminism. I discuss the manifesto as an aesthetic document that seemingly only performs vague demands for political and social reforms but rhetorically asserts women's marginal status as the ideal artistic identity. Her resistance to traditional reading patterns and gender *topoi* disturbs the poetic fabric and predicates textual creation on alienation. This leads me to the question of Loy's publication history and editing practices: the field of Loy's studies is mostly developed by women yet Loy's voice has been consistently mediated by men. This dissertation

scrutinizes Loy's archives to propose editing techniques that foster Loy's feminist resistance. The last chapter takes stock of the modernist anxieties with gender Loy seems to use to draw parallels between Loy's feminist intentions and that of instapoets. Such a comparison sheds light on the situated nature of Loy's feminism and her engagement with modernist notions of authorship.

Keywords: Mina Loy, feminism, feminist recuperation, modernism, modernity, gender, resistance, otherness, textual studies, media studies, twentieth century, transatlantic, femininity, performance, instapoetry, editing, multimedia, dialogics, poetics, social intimate, marginality, the body.

Summary for Lay Audience

This dissertation examines instances of feminism in the work of British poet Mina Loy (1882-1966). Loy is often considered a prominent feminist figure of the early twentieth century among scholars despite her lack of commitment to the feminist movement as established at the time. This study opens on the contents of Loy's seminal "Feminist Manifesto" – a radical text affirming that women's liberation starts with the surgical removal of the hymen – and suggests that the document is more involved in discussing the status of the woman artist than actual complaints and demands formulated by Suffragettes, and British first wave feminism as a whole. The next few chapters are then invested in the ways Loy's feminism develops outside the bounds of the feminist movement. The poet portrays femininity and womanhood through the tension between intimacy and otherness, which is particularly noticeable in the way bodies are described throughout the poems. The body is not only an object, prisoner of the other's gaze, but also a powerful tool to create. The importance of embodiment in Loy's oeuvre cannot be reduced to the construction of the poems: the practice of rediscovering the poems and making them available to the public implies a movement toward the handwritten drafts of the poet's texts and the chaotic bodily nature of archives. Diving into archival materials to make sure that the poet's voice remains authoritative is a feminist practice in itself, which points at the significance of the medium. The dissertation closes on an exploration of how Loy's feminist techniques are reused, to this day, in other poetic media. For this last part, the analysis is centered on poetry produced by women on one specific platform:

Instagram. Investigating Loy's poetry in close connection to current platform poetry is not only helpful to shed light on the friendship rhetoric of the application, but also to examine Loy's fundamentally multimedia poetry.

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This dissertation is dedicated to my parents, Louis and Fiorella, and to my brothers, Clément and Adrien, who have all impacted my work in the best way possible.

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Abbreviations

- BW* Bozhkova, Yasna. *Between Worlds: Mina Loy's Aesthetic Itineraries*. Clemson University Press, 2022.
- CB* Kelly, Jacinta. *Counting Bodies: The Untempered Spaces of Mina Loy*. 2015. University of New South Wales, PhD dissertation.
- ES* Butler, Judith. *Excitable Speech: A Politics of the Performative*. Routledge, 2021.
- EP* Tanselle, G. Thomas. "The Editorial Problem of Final Authorial Intention." *Studies in Bibliography*, vol. 29, no. 1, 1976, pp. 167-211.
- FP* Kinnahan, Linda A. "Feminist Poetics: First-Wave Feminism, Theory and Modernist Women Poets." *Literature and the Development of Feminist Theory*, edited by Robin Truth Goodman, Cambridge University Press, 2015, pp. 54-68.
- GM* Felski, Rita. *The Gender of Modernity*. Harvard UP, 1995.
- GRRC* DuPlessis, Rachel Blau. *Genders, Races, and Religious Cultures in Modern American Poetry, 1908-1934*. Cambridge University Press, 2001.
- ITA* Bozhkova, Yasna. "Icognito on Third Avenue: The Figure of the Vagrant in Mina Loy's Bowery Work." *Revue française d'études américaines*, vol. 4, no. 149, 2016, pp. 26-38.
- LaLB* Loy, Mina. *The Last Lunar Baedeker*, edited by Roger L. Conover, Jargon Society, 1982.
- LG* Derrida, Jacques. "The Law of Gender." *Acts in Literature*, edited by Derek Attridge, Routledge, 1992.
- LoLB* Loy, Mina. *The Lost Lunar Baedeker*, edited by Roger L. Conover, Farrar, Straus & Giroux, 1997.
- MMW* Parmar, Sandeep. *Mina Loy and the Myth of the Modern Woman*. 2008. University of London, PhD dissertation.
- PF* Kinnahan, Linda A. *Poetics of the Feminine: Literary Tradition and Authority in William Carlos Williams, Mina Loy, Denise Levertov, and Kathleen Fraser*. Cambridge University Press, 1994.
- RS* "Rediscovering our Sources: The Poetry of Mina Loy." *Boundary 2*, vol. 8, no. 3, 1980, pp. 167-188.
- SE* Loy, Mina. *Stories and Essays of Mina Loy*, edited by Sara Crangle. Dalkey Archive Press, 2011.

Introduction

The year 2023 celebrates the anniversary of Mina Loy's first collection of poetry, *Lunar Baedeker*, published in 1923, with a now famous spelling mistake in the title.¹ As a result, there has been a renewed scholarly interest in Loy's work recently, with many articles discussing the poet in relation to other artists, as well as longer projects set to come to fruition in the next few months. Conferences and symposiums on Loy are blossoming this year and seem to have one common goal: taking stock of what has been said so far on the British artist in order to lay the groundwork for new perspectives on her work. But the main event of 2023, with respect to the scholarship on Loy, is *Mina Loy: Strangeness is Inevitable*, an exhibition of the artist's artworks and archival materials, hidden until now in the private collections of a few contributors. The exhibition, which opened in April 2023, along with its monographic counterpart offer quite the breakthrough in Mina Loy studies as they give free access to documents that were actively kept behind closed doors.² Amy Elkins, in *Crafting Modernity: Gender, Art-Making, and Literature's Materials of Resistance in the Extreme 20th Century*, notes that one major obstacle for her research was being denied access to private collections, which would contain the few existing examples of Loy's assemblages (18). Elkins's open discussion of the setbacks of her research highlights the idea that scholars can only explore the tip of the iceberg when it comes to Mina Loy, which effectively hinders the possibility of any comprehensive discussion of Loy's artistic progression.

¹ The first printing of the collection added a "c" before the "k" of "Baedeker."

² See *Mina Loy: Strangeness is Inevitable*, by Jennifer Gross, Ann Lauterbach, Roger Conover, and Dawn Ades, Princeton UP, 2023.

Most of the conferences exploring the state of Mina Loy studies and many of the recent academic works produced on the poet stem from women, yet the base material – the author’s writings – is mediated by men, whether it is Loy’s literary agent Carl Van Vechten, the two editors Loy worked with for the texts published when she was still alive, McAlmon and Jonathan Williams, or, today, Roger Conover, who owns copyrights so that “[a]ny further publication of Loy’s manuscripts would need [his] approval and collaboration” (Drouin 346). While Conover opens his collection for the ongoing exhibition, proudly stating in his opening lecture at the Bowdoin College Museum of Art that “[Mina Loy] shines now. She is no longer [his] secret” (00:15:48-00:15:51), Loy studies were shaped by obscurity and the difficulty to retrieve her materials due, in part, to the secrecy of private collectors.³ The importance of “now,” in Conover’s statement, echoes Lauren Moya Ford’s article on the exhibition, entitled “The World is Finally Ready for Mina Loy,” as if Loy’s works were waiting on the public and scholars’ availability and not the other way around.⁴ Throughout his lecture, Conover insists that the importance of the exhibition comes from the continued relevance of Loy’s works to this day. Praising feminist scholars for their essential role in viewing language and visual art as two parts of a whole, Conover seems to owe the success of the exhibition – or, even, the possibility to consider making this exhibition – to feminism. Going back to his first encounter with the poet’s works, fifty years ago, he wonders “[w]ho was this Mina Loy, who, in the 1910s, was violating every norm of what it meant to be a ‘lady poet’” (00:19:00-00:19:06), thus equating his first reading of the poems with feminist questions.

³ Roger L. Conover, “Opening lecture: ‘Mina Loy: Strangeness Is Inevitable.’” *Youtube*, uploaded by Bowdoin College, recorded on April 27, 2023, https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=BbW1Ac_1FZI&t=1127s. Accessed 1 Aug. 2023.

⁴ See Lauren Moya Ford, “The World is Finally Ready for Mina Loy,” *Hyperallergic*, April 12, 2023. <https://hyperallergic.com/814518/the-world-is-finally-ready-for-mina-loy/>. Accessed 1 Aug. 2023.

Feminism and Loy studies

This dissertation aims to discuss how Mina Loy was recaptured as an early feminist figure by the academy and how the poet's interest in gender politics and poetics informs our reading of modernism today. In 2011, Sara Crangle already wrote in her introduction to *Stories and Essays of Mina Loy*:

should her popularity continue to grow, Loy may well become the next 'representative woman modernist'—a vexatious title, both laudatory and reductive, that has alternatively been assigned to Virginia Woolf and Gertrude Stein over the past few decades. And although a quintessential modernist in many respects, Loy is increasingly perceived as a writer whose scepticism and indeterminacy anticipate postmodern aesthetics. (xi)

This understanding of where feminist and modernist studies are heading is rather visionary as, about ten years later, it is evident that Loy is accepted as a major woman figure of the modernist canon, and, most of all, as the author of audacious feminist writings. It is difficult to negate the place of womanhood within Loy's oeuvre, especially since her poem "Parturition" is, by all accounts, groundbreaking in its depiction of woman embodiment at the time:

Against my thigh
 Touch of infinitesimal motion
 Scarcely perceptible
 Undulation
 Warmth moisture
 Stir of incipient life
 Precipitating into me
 The contents of the universe. (*LoLB* 6)

The poem does not revolve *around* the woman's body – the speaker's lens is situated *within* the body, depicted as a lived reality rather than as a scientific, observable phenomenon. The shortness of lines four and five of the excerpt is almost primal. The laconic syntax does not unveil whether those feelings belong to the parturient woman or the infant: the two figures collapse into one another in the process of being separated. The gap between “warmth” and “moisture” gives a sense of simultaneity: the reading of the poem seemingly happens at the same time as the body reacts to those sensations. The insistence on minute movements of the body at the beginning clashes with the cosmic femininity that ends the stanza; the mother-to-be becomes the link between bodily pain and God-like creation as her body is open on the page for all to see. While poets like Gertrude Stein and the Baroness Elsa Von Freytag-Loringhoven set their own bodily states down on paper and went as far as writing about female orgasm, expressing pregnancy through the point of view of the parturient woman is a topic that sets Loy apart. In that sense, Loy engaged with female poetics and politics, which culminated with her “Feminist Manifesto” – a reaction to Filippo Tommaso Marinetti's futurist view of the woman as weak and unnecessary. Despite the fact that the manifesto's title indicates kinship with the organized movement campaigning for woman's suffrage – among other demands – Loy's letters present her as someone rather doubtful of “Margaret Sanger's ‘idiotic book of preventive propaganda’” (*LoLB* 216).

In *Mina Loy and the Myth of the Modern Woman*, Sandeep Parmar notices that “[s]ince Kouidis's and Burke's early criticism in the 1980s and feminist revisionist scholarship, Loy has been repeatedly pitched to audiences as a feminist poet or as using a ‘feminist’ poetics” (102). Parmar takes a particular interest in Linda Kinnahan's idea that Loy is “defining a feminism for herself” (*PF* 21) and all the

issues surrounding that statement, from whether Loy would have considered herself a feminist, to how her poetry would fit in a movement that was not yet as established and complex as it is today (Parmar 103). Parmar's work points at Loy's own difficulties with feminism, which offers an interesting dialogue between feminism and modernism: Parmar's affirmation that Loy's modernism is constantly being rethought throughout her life (36) leads to the idea that she also discarded different aesthetics she initially partook in throughout the course of her life (255). Parmar gives the example of the "Aphorisms on Futurism:"

The Beinecke Rare Book and Manuscript Library holds a page of Loy's personal copy of the New York quarterly *Camera Work*, issue 45, in which 'Aphorisms on Futurism' first appeared. Throughout this page, Loy has pencilled the words 'modern' and 'modernism' over the words 'Future' and 'Futurism' respectively. No date is given for these changes; it is likely that they were made sometime after 1916, following Loy's arrival in New York from Florence. (32)

Loy's modifications, however, do not necessarily entail a will to erase her brief affiliation with Marinetti's movement. The straightforward transformation of "futurism" in "modernism" implies that Loy's beliefs remained the same and she was trying to find the movement that embraced her ideas best rather than simply siding with one ideology and producing a work that fitted the bill. In that sense, Loy's writings exhaust inflexible categories and work toward a more porous understanding of avant-garde movements. As for feminism, Parmar deplores the fact that feminist studies cannot take into account Loy's later poems because the poet abandoned or revised her own input in feminism. Parmar exposes the restricted body of Loy's works that gets read through a feminist lens but fails to account for the poet's sustained

concern with feminine poetics. The term “feminine poetics” encompasses all the ways in which Loy pushes against masculinist ideas without necessarily identifying herself with feminist ideologies.

Loy’s later works reflect the grime of a life of poverty at the Manhattan Bowery where she lived from the late 1930s to the early 1950s. They focus on the decay of urban life and homelessness but this shift toward social injustice is not independent from her other concerns. “Aid of the Madonna,” written in 1943, places women at the heart of discourses on the Second World War, with the figure of the Madonna expanding to all mothers suffering from the loss of a child, while “Hot Cross Bum,” written in 1949, fills the city with feminine tropes as the poet operates a reversal of the flaneur trope.⁵ As the speaker moves through the city, the lexical field of vision guides the reader among the excess emanating from the street, thus centering the poem around the feminine-coded image of the gaudy twentieth-century consumer culture. These texts develop an interest in what it means to be an aging woman – something certainly central to feminism but not articulated as a theme until recent decades. Concerns over the female subject are integral parts of Loy’s poetic practice and go beyond the historical, cultural and artistic contexts which allow for the rise of first wave feminism.

The *Oxford English Dictionary* offers the following definition of feminism from 1895 onward: “[a]dvocacy of equality of the sexes and the establishment of the political, social, and economic rights for the female sex” (“feminism n3”). In “Defining Feminism: A Comparative Historical Approach,” Karen Offen calls such a

⁵ Laure De Nervaux-Gavoty writes that “Hot Cross Bum” presents “non pas un promeneur de sexe masculin oisif et riche, mais un sujet féminin qui explore l’envers obscur du paysage urbain, les populations misérables qui vivent sur ses marges.” // “not an idle and rich male-gendered walker, but a female subject who explores the obscure hidden reality of the urban landscape and the miserable populations that live in its margins” (my translation). See “‘Compensations of poverty: la féerie urbaine ou la modernité en question dans ‘On Third Avenue’ et ‘Ephemerid’ de Mina Loy,” *Caliban*, no. 25, 2009, pp. 153-167, <https://doi.org/10.4000/caliban.1528>. Accessed 1 Aug. 2023.

definition an “English-language” (122) based one that she opposes to other European definitions of feminism that rather focus on “elaborations of womanliness” and on “sexual difference rather than similarity within a framework of male/female complementarity” (124). Offen is interested in feminisms “mount[ing] a wide-ranging critique of the society and its institution” (124), which, she insists, does not pertain to the English-speaking world at the time. According to this framework, Kinnahan places Loy toward the European tradition of feminism in the early twentieth century, which does not really ask for an equal treatment of men and women but rather attacks the source of gender inequality, notably the way language is constructed: “Mina Loy’s experimental lyrics occasion a linguistic dismantling of gender conventions, breaking the structures of language to crack open decidedly phallogocentric signifying systems” (*FP* 56).

Kinnahan’s approach of Loy’s feminism is presented, in her article, as a product of the historical context of the time, but the examples chosen to prove that point do not revolve around a strict understanding of feminism. Alice Jardine reminds us that a definition of feminism based on its applications in different fields would be too convoluted, almost labyrinthine. Going back to the basics of the word, she affirms that, “[a]s a generic term, ‘feminism’ is semantically tortuous and conceptually hazardous. Generally understood as a ‘movement from the point of view of, by, and for women,’ it covers substantial ground and becomes particularly dangerous across borders” (15). Feminism, then, is first and foremost a movement constructed by the joint efforts of activists *en masse*. Loy, however, portrays herself as an unstable subject separated from others and from the positions she takes.

Recent attention to Loy’s autobiographies shows that the poet is deeply invested in the performative process of constructing her own identity. Laura

Scuriatti's *Mina Loy's Critical Modernism* points at "the playful, shifting, and problematic approach to autobiography and self-performance found in Loy's own corpus of work—a puzzling literary strategy, which Roger Conover aptly termed 'pseudonymania' (LLB82 xviii)" (2). Loy's creation of a fragmented self throughout her oeuvre has been consistently depicted as a feminist strategy echoing (perhaps without intending to) Donna Haraway's skepticism toward holism in *A Cyborg Manifesto*.⁶ Such an understanding of Loy's work can only happen retroactively and ignores the poet's efforts to avoid categorization:

These amusing men
 discover in their mail
 duplicate petitions
 to be the lurid mother of "their" flabbergast child
 from Nima Lyo, alias Anim Yol, alias Imna Oly
 (secret service buffoon to the Woman's Cause). (*LoLB* 49)

Beyond autobiographical claims, "Lions' Jaws" depicts the poet in a contradictory light where she is both supporting, albeit secretly, "the Woman's Cause," and attempting to be part of the "flabbergast" movement – her own mocking equivalent to Futurism. The parenthetical comment does not outshine the rest of the stanza but positions the poet as a woman modernist. The importance of writing, in the passage, does not stop at the mention of "petitions:" it extends through the mention of motherhood, often used as a metaphor for creation. The three aliases are not just symptoms of self-fragmentation. They open the possibility of creating new links

⁶ Donna Haraway, "A Cyborg Manifesto," in *Manifestly Haraway*, edited by Cary Wolfe, University of Minnesota Press, 2016. "Modern medicine is also full of cyborgs, of couplings between organism and machine, each conceived as coded devices, in an intimacy and with a power that were not generated in the history of sexuality" (6).

through the ever-changing sounds of Loy's name. Rather than parcelling the self out, Loy reshapes and renews it. Indeed, "Nima" and "Anim" sound like "anima," while "Yo!" is visually reminiscent of "yolk" – and, through it, of Loy's fascination with egg imagery.⁷ Susan Gilmore in "Imna, Ova, Mongrel, Spy: Anagram and Imposture in the Work of Mina Loy" interprets the poem as a clear movement toward Loy's very own feminism: "by way of anagram, Loy voices her differences with not only Futurism but modernism. Loy substitutes for an aesthetic of impersonality a poetics of impersonation—a poetics which foregrounds the female poet's visibility and the authority borne not of cultural transcendence but of cultural disenfranchisement" (276). Gilmore's argument rests on a definition of modernism as a product of the "Men of 1914."⁸ Peter Nicholls's *Modernism: A Literary Guide* explains that this type of modernism sees in sexual desire and femininity "a loss of the borders of the self" (183). Loy's interest in forging a strong feminine identity in her poem goes well beyond that definition. My thesis ranges from Loy's account of bodily gendered experience to larger concerns with textual production as reflective of a modernist feminist poetics.

Overview of the field

In his introduction to *The New Modernist Studies*, Douglas Mao counts, at least, two waves, or "flowerings," of modernist studies: one starting in the 1950s, which takes stock of the innovative period that had just taken place, and another, sprouting from academia, focused on evolutions in the field (1). If the image of

⁷ Yasna Bozhkova notes in *Between Worlds* a recurring motif in Loy's poetry: "its cosmic imagery of oval objects like egg, moon, brain, and soap bubble conflates an allusion to Loy's alter-ego 'Ova,' with an allusion to 'Lunar Baedeker,' as well as to the antique celestial and terrestrial maps that she used for her lampshade designs, which she called *mappemondes* and *globes célestes*" (3).

⁸ The "Men of 1914" is a phrase used by Wyndham Lewis in *Blasting and Bombardiering* (1937) to refer to himself, Ezra Pound, T.S. Eliot and James Joyce. By extension, it refers to a canonically white and masculine view of modernism.

punctual “flowerings” is somewhat stilted, Mao’s mapping of the history of modernist studies makes it clear that the original formation of the field around the figure of the genius artist – what we would now call high modernism – progressively expanded through various means. Rita Felski is a key scholar when it comes to theorizing this expansion: her work takes a particular interest in how modernism and modernity could be reframed, whether it is through cultural studies or gender studies. In “Modern Girls,” written in 1996, she sees a renewed attraction to modernism as modernity is “being retrieved and reconfigured by theorists of gender, race and sexuality who are beginning to question the routine conflation of the modern with the interests of white heterosexual patriarchy” (498). Bonnie Kime Scott’s 1990 anthology, *The Gender of Modernism*, aimed at underscoring the fact that questions of gender are part of the fabric of modernism. Without limiting herself to women writers, Scott rethought the modernist canon to make it more open to the question of gender. Retracing the slow influence of feminism on modernism, Celia Marshik and Allison Pease reflect on the dialogue between Scott and Felski’s *The Gender of Modernity*, published five years after Scott’s own anthology: Felski’s project, Marshik and Pease affirm, is rather attentive to “the ways in which gender helped those in the early twentieth century theorize their own historical moment” (40) by taking women poets’ experiences as the lens through which modernity can be understood whereas Kime is interested in both masculine and feminine accounts of the intersections between gender and modernity. From then on, the construction of femininity has been studied as a shaping tool for both modernism and modernist studies.

In the past twenty years, both feminist and modernist studies have undergone similar changes in scope with more research on global and multicultural materials. For instance, Susan Stanford Friedman’s *Mappings* and *Planetary Modernisms* both

argue for more multicultural theories in literature. The state of modernist studies today, then, is unsteady and the boundaries of the field themselves are being renegotiated. Tim Armstrong's broad definition of modernism as "a series of international artistic movements in the period 1900-40, characterized by their sense of engagement with ideas of the 'new'" (24) is now too narrow. Recently, the attachment of modernism to questions of time has been discussed and challenged. For Friedman, modernism and modernity are responses to paradigm shifts happening at different times in different spaces.⁹ It is a recurring and transnational event that can be tracked down by examining the artistic reactions to moments of disruptions in societies. Michael North, in "The Afterlife of Modernism," refutes modernism's ties with time altogether – or rather, he acknowledges its tendency to repeat itself, which he explains, in line with Foucault, by asserting that modernism "is not a period but a mode or an attitude, a way of being in the present" (109). Peter Nicholls links this question of repetition with melancholy in "Cliché and Repetition: McLuhan Understanding Modernism." To avoid the restrictive nature of temporality in modernist studies completely, Nicholls turns to Marshall McLuhan's theorization of modernism and modernity and notably his focus on "instantaneity" (1481) rather than the new. "For McLuhan," Nicholls argues, "however, the present simply cannot be collapsed into tradition-as-empty-repetition – indeed, it is modernism itself that has compelled us to forget such linear temporal schemes and to think instead of cognitive process as at once a 'retrogressive movement' and as a generative repetition" (1481).

⁹ Susan Stanford Friedman, *Planetary Modernisms*: "modernism is also multiple, polycentric, relational, and recurrent. Modernism, as I use the term in *Planetary Modernisms*, is not a single aesthetic period, a movement, or a style. Instead, the creative expressivities in all media constitute the modernisms of given modernities—on a planetary scale, across time, in the *longue durée*" (4).

Modernism entails “discontinuity” (1474) and “simultaneity,” (1478) which are “experienced not as spatial and visual, but as auditory” (1478).

Scuriatti’s *Mina Loy’s Critical Modernism* and Yasna Bozhkova’s *Between Worlds* both show how Loy’s own take on modernism fits this academic rethinking of the field. Scuriatti implies that Loy complied with techniques of the avant-garde while, at the same time, distancing herself from them. By doing so, the poet proposes a critical understanding of modernisms and invites her readers to question what they are reading as well. Meanwhile, Bozhkova hints at the idea that Loy sees multiple modernisms, which she dubs “modernist constellations” (8), thus stressing the poet’s numerous travels and their impact on Loy’s aesthetics. These recent, thorough studies of the poet evidence Loy’s central but shifting position within the avant-gardes and her ability to bring different facets of and perspectives on modernism to her work. A kaleidoscopic view of Loy’s engagements with various forms of modernism, however, bears the risk of espousing the unsatisfactory description of the poet as “a Futurist, Dadaist, Surrealist, feminist, conceptualist, modernist, post-modernist, and none of the above” (*LoLB* xiii). For too long, accounts of Loy’s poetry has been multi-centered and superficial: the overwhelming structure of the sentence paints the portrait of an artist with vertiginous scholarly potential. Conover, however, nips this potentiality in the bud by the end of the sentence and Loy remains unapproachable. The poet’s own conception of avant-garde movements, however, is more fluid than the rigid categories Conover mentions.

By focusing on feminine poetics to scrutinize Loy’s modernist engagements, I hope to show that Loy is not only a central figure of literary modernism but also a model for contemporary modernist studies. As mentioned before, modernist studies have been preoccupied with geographic and temporal developments of the field,

effectively avoiding any monolithic portrayal of the movement. Loy's feminist modernism is equally dislocating: she is deeply domestic in her treatment of femininity, which directly reacts to the British Victorian era, but also explores the boundaries of female identity in multicultural and multilinguistic terms. Her feminism, in that sense, coincides with her perception of "Modern Poetry" as a mixture of rhythms and identities that can only take place in America (*LoLB* 157). Her interest in femininity consistently moves back and forth between political imperative and intimate examination, reflecting her very position within the modernist sphere; she knew everyone while being mostly surrounded by her inner circle. Her resolute public presence was mediated by her allegiances to certain artists. Her interactions with feminist ideas were situated – they served a purpose in her positioning as a woman modernist artist.

State of the Art

The 1980s mark the "rediscovery" – in the words of Virginia Kouidis – of Loy's poetic work.¹⁰ In *Mina Loy, American Modernist Poet*, Kouidis frames Loy as an artist that has been lost despite being "one of the most radical avant garde poets" (14-5). Here, radicalism has to do with a poetry that is "[d]istinctly feminine in its exploration of female oppression, the poetry seems Futurist inspired in its aggressive assertion of selfhood and its structural experiment" (8). Indeed, Kouidis's thesis revolves around the creation of a universal "female self" (26) through the poet's observations on her own life. Focusing particularly on Loy's attachment to Bergson's notion of freedom (37), *Mina Loy, American Modernist Poet* suggests that Loy's modernism stems from her feminist aspirations. The book ultimately understands

¹⁰ I borrow the term "rediscovery" from Virginia Kouidis's article "Rediscovering our Sources: The Poetry of Mina Loy." *Boundary 2*, vol. 8, no. 3, 1980, pp. 167-188.

Loy's poetry as both a critique of sexual repression and an expression of support toward women who have been repressed. Evidently, Kouidis's interpretation of Loy's poetry could be more precise. It is qualified as soon as 1986, in Melita Schaum's "Moon-flowers Out of the Muck': Mina Loy and the Female Autobiographical Epic." In the article, Loy's critical view of repressed Victorian sexuality is exemplified in an analysis of the English Rose from "Anglo-Mongrels and the Rose:" having "culturally internalized the male censor and protectorate of her virginity" (258), the Rose is visibly mocked in the following lines:

While she
 expecting
 the presented knee
 of chivalry
 repels
 the sub-umbilical mystery
 of his husbandry
 hysterically. (*LaLB* 126)

Schaum briefly mentions this passage just to comment on the "razor-like satire of the couple's wedding night" (263). Indeed, *Exodus* and the English Rose – Loy's parents' literary doubles – are presented in a rather mocking way in the excerpt. The mother, specifically, appears delusional as she expects the fiction of Arthurian myths to be real. "[T]he sub-umbilical mystery / of [Exodus's] husbandry" is a particularly humorous turn of phrase as, in the Rose's unwillingness to mention the loss of virginity, the very sexual act is highlighted by the long words used to avoid the topic. The paradox of the "sub-umbilical mystery" lies in the use of a precise medical term that shows knowledge of the human body to discuss a "mystery." Moreover, the

repetitions of [i] and [h] sounds in the last three lines, paired with long multi-syllable words, imitates the pompousness of the Victorian Rose, showing that the speaker, and, through them, the author, is not taking pity on Ada's repressed upbringing. Schaum proves that women are denounced just like men are throughout Loy's oeuvre. Even if she departs from Kouidis's lens, her article is nonetheless based on the idea that the poet writes for women's liberation. Likewise, when Conover's Introduction to *The Last Lunar Baedeker* points that "[Loy] waved off would-be 'rediscoverers' with a shrug" (xv), far from contradicting Kouidis, the editor further fleshes out the image of Loy as an ambivalent, ungraspable artist who is beyond comprehension.

Early scholarly work on Loy, then, legitimizes itself by enhancing the mysterious yet theatrical side of the poet's life. Timothy Galow, in *Writing Celebrity: Stein, Fitzgerald, and the Modern(ist) Art of Self-Fashioning*, explains how the mass culture of little magazines impacted the creation of "public personae during the 1920s and 1930s" (xi). Taking the example of Gertrude Stein, Galow remarks that the author "had managed to generate a significant amount of interest in her persona without drawing audiences to her ideas" (28). Similarly, the publication of Carolyn Burke's biography *Becoming Modern: The Life of Mina Loy* and Joshua Weiner's "Rediscovering Mina Loy" shows that academia was still trying to find space for the poet by the late 1990s: Weiner and Burke both take an interest primarily in the poet's life and bring her writing into the conversation only to emphasize her interest in transgression. At the same time, Conover published *The Lost Lunar Baedeker*, which opens on Loy's legendary status as "the Belle of the American Poetry Ball" (*LoLB* xi). Weaving together anecdotes about her wild friendship with Duchamp and discussions on her poetry, Conover effectively turns Loy into a socialite star.

In many ways, accounts of Loy's feminism in the 1990s and early 2000s read as products of the interest in extravagant bibliographical details. Kinnahan's *Poetics of the Feminine: Literary Tradition and Authority in William Carlos Williams, Mina Loy, Denise Levertov, and Kathleen Fraser* rightly tries to move away from this tendency. Kinnahan insists that the American feminism exhibited by Loy, even before she arrived in New York, restructured the modernist movement by upsetting its gender tradition. For Kinnahan, Loy had a clear feminist agenda reflected in a 1915 letter to Van Vechten: "[w]hat I feel now are feminine politics – but in a cosmic way that may not fit in anywhere" (qtd in Burke, *Becoming Modern* 187). The very term "feminine politics" is too often understood as a synonym of feminism but Loy clearly highlights that she uses the term as something separate from any organized movement. Therefore, in her effort to recontextualize Loy in her timeline, Kinnahan undermines Loy's affirmation of her own singular voice. Laura Scuriatti's "Negotiating Boundaries: The Economics of Space and Gender in Mina Loy's Early Poems" implies that Kinnahan may be too restrictive by simply linking Loy to first wave feminism. Her article explores gender in Loy's poems in regard to the poet's relations with different artistic movements, stopping, notably, on the motif of the house to note that "[t]hrough the spatialization of gender identity, Loy offers in this text a way of thinking beyond gender categories" (81).

This interest in space influences Jacinta Kelly's "Purging the Birdcage: The Dissolution of Space in Mina Loy's Poetry." Kelly bases her understanding of Loy's feminism on space but follows the Bergsonian tradition implemented by Kouidis. She sees in Loy an example of writing in movement. The poet destabilizes feminine and masculine spaces through language and typography, "[a]nd it is here that Loy departs most radically from Bergson, for rather than abandon language to the artificially

constructed realm of the spatial, the stable, and the static, Loy reinvigorates the written word with movement and wrenches it from this designation as ‘static’ and disempowered” (Kelly 12). Scuriatti and Kelly’s research is already more careful in using the term “feminist” to characterize Loy’s writing and instead shows how the poet put a feminine spin on theories that she actually had read – as shown with Kelly’s analysis of Bergson’s work. Yet, those articles, while mentioning gender, do not really wrestle with the idea of feminism: Scuriatti seemingly avoids the term despite being published in the academic journal *Feminismo/s* and Kelly’s article makes clear that considering Loy as a feminist is a simple pre-requisite to her analyses. More recent discussions of the poet’s work – from 2018 onward – focus on following feminist methodologies. Indeed, in the 2018 issue of *Feminist Modernist Studies* on digital humanities, two out of ten articles are centered around Mina Loy and how digital tools enable scholars to have a better grasp on her work.¹¹

The seemingly established scholarly agreement about Loy’s feminism has been qualified by only a few academics. Marjorie Perloff argues that the poet’s behaviour was by no means excessively different from the women in the circles she visited (18). Parmar states that Loy’s publication of *Love Songs* in the magazine *Others* in 1915 was deemed controversial, and that the *New York Evening Sun* cemented the poet’s identity as a “modern woman” (42), but also addresses how those anecdotes have been heightened since the beginning of Loy scholarship. She writes:

Despite increasing interest in Loy both within and outside of academia, assumptions made about her life and her character overshadow critical

¹¹ Churchill, Suzanne et al. “Feminist Designs: Modernist Digital Humanities & Mina Loy: Navigating the Avant-Garde.” *Feminist Modernist Digital Studies*, special issue of *Feminist Modernist Studies*, vol. 1, no. 3, 2018, pp. 243-256.

Konkol, Margaret. “Prototyping Mina Loy’s Alphabet.” *Feminist Modernist Digital Studies*, special issue of *Feminist Modernist Studies*, vol. 1, no. 3, 2018, pp. 294-317.

interpretations of her writing. Surely, mythmaking serves a dual purpose, especially in cases of ‘marginalised’ authors: it provides a historical context for the discussion of the author’s artistic contribution and heightens the reader’s sense of his or her uniqueness. (6)

Parmar makes it clear that later conversations framed Loy’s feminism and modernism. The early stages of Mina Loy studies in the 1970s were quite interested in everything revolving around women’s intimacy before moving toward broader questionings of gender from the 1990s onward, showing that scholars followed the different waves of feminism that happened as they wrote. For instance, Andrew Michael Roberts’s “Rhythm, Self and Jazz in Mina Loy’s Poetry” (2010) draws on a more recent theoretical framework but it appears disconnected from Loy’s intentions at the time. The article opens with the idea that

Loy’s modernist and avant-garde techniques, the foregrounding of textuality and materiality by her poetic texts, her pervasive irony of style and interrogation of subjectivity, all encourage us to adopt a deconstructive model of the subject in reading her work; indeed to see that work as a prescient precursor of the postmodern textualization of the subject. (99)

He then goes as far as making the claim that “Loy’s spacing foregrounds the signifier; it also interrupts the illusion of ‘voice’, that trope so closely tied to ideas of the poetic subject, precisely because the gaps cannot really be ‘spoken’” (104). This postmodern view of Loy’s visual gaps falls a bit short, however. In “Costa Magic,” the third poem from “Three Italian Pictures,” the speaker is a mother taking her daughter’s side as the father refuses her marriage. The poem reads:

While listening up	I hear my husband
Mumbling	Mumbling

Mumbling at the window

Malediction

Incantation. (*LoLB* 13)

Far from “interrupting” the flow of the voice, the large blank spaces in this passage make it easy to imagine the scene – the exact moment in which the husband mumbles or stops mumbling, utters maledictions or incantations. By repeating the verb “mumbling,” and inserting blank spaces in the lines, the resolution of the sentence is postponed, inducing suspense and latency in the reading of the poem. Syntax is split into propositions and objects, meaning that pieces of information come bit by bit. The circumstantial subordinate clause of place “at the window” should have been placed after “Malediction” and “Incantation” for the syntax to be more readable. Instead, the reader finds out what is being mumbled at the very end of the sentence. If there is a form of actualization unfolding on the page through the blank spaces, it is also worth noticing that the layout of those lines separates the text in three columns. One could see those columns as the simultaneous experiences of the three figures mentioned in the poem. In the context of the section “Italian Pictures,” this passage could be seen as a compression of the three poems. The overall aspect of the lines reminds the reader of a sort of triptych, which is also the structure of the section. The two columns that are facing each other would be the voices of the two women: the daughter and the mother, while “Malediction” and “Incantation” belong to the father’s part of the poem. This vertical reading of the poem shows the position of the mother, torn between husband and daughter but still using her voice to give a subjective account of what is happening. By confronting the gaps in Roberts’s analysis, I side with Rachel Blau DuPlessis’s affirmation that Loy’s voice is not easily unsettled but it is the cause of unsettlement: “Loy’s satiric, ironic, wickedly learned, and passionate voice goes far

to destabilize lyric assumptions about the romance plot, female silence, and objectification” (*GRRC* 52). In “Costa Magic,” the separation and repetition of “Mumbling” silences the man’s voice but still evidences the mother’s voice.

This quick retrospective look at the field of Loy studies highlights the difficult positioning of the poet within modernism: articles on Loy’s feminist allegiances push the narrative of her precursory poetics in many directions. Nonetheless, there is value in the practice of putting Loy in conversation with later theoretical backgrounds. By pitching the poet as a devoted feminist, scholars have not only generated more interest in Loy but also enabled fruitful discussions on the poet. Such an understanding of the poet’s feminist intentions, tinted by current perceptions of the term “feminism,” enables a more expansive view of Loy’s attachment to feminine poetics and experiments with conventional notions of womanhood. I base my own understanding of Loy’s feminist modernism in the idea that there is a personalizing tendency at the heart of studies on Loy’s feminism. If we argue that feminism rests on its coordinated commitment to political and social issues, using “feminism” to describe Loy’s poetry appears catachrestic. I define catachresis, like Derrida, as an idiomatic problem of language, meaning that Loy scholars repurpose the term “feminism” to brand Loy’s peculiar take on femininity because there is no other word for it.¹² This basic definition allows me to further grasp what makes the poet’s feminist modernism so interesting. Drawing on Enikő Bollobás’s examination of Emily Dickinson’s poetry, I apply his theorization of catachresis as an “exploration of boundaries” (29) through language to posit that what scholars see as feminism in Loy’s poetry is, first and

¹² See Jacques Derrida, *White Mythology: Metaphor in the Text of Philosophy*, *New Literary History*, vol. 6, no. 1, 1974. Catachresis is the literary device by which “a sign already assigned to a first idea should be assigned also to a new idea which has no other sign at all, or no longer has a sign as its proper expression” (57). It “does not go outside the language, does not create new signs, does not enrich the code” (59).

foremost, “a ‘capacious[ness]’ within language” (25). I do not mean that Loy’s work cannot be described as feminist, but rather that her feminism is so boundless that it cannot be limited to a “wave” or a trend in feminist studies. Her gender concerns seep beyond any definition of the term.

Theoretical framework

Although the body of this dissertation is not directly referencing the question of gender performativity, I find that Judith Butler’s theorization of the concept is a useful framework to discuss Loy’s textual experimentations with femininity. In *Bodies That Matter: On the Discursive Limits of Sex*, Butler stresses that performativity is the “reiterative power of discourse to produce the phenomena that it regulates and constrains” (2). For Butler, gender is constructed through repetitions rather than being a spontaneous act or something permanently given by nature or by social convention. Modernism has its fair share of conventional roles for women: the idea that women’s writings focus on sentimental and romantic plots is still entertained in the early twentieth century, meanwhile the image of the “modern woman” puts women out of the closed space of the household and within cityscapes. Loy often moves from one cliché to the next in her poems, borrowing the language of those different perspectives on women, as apparent in “Virgins Plus Curtains Minus Dots.” At first, the women of the poems are imprisoned in their houses, but looking through the window provides them with an escape:

Someone who was never

A virgin

Has bolted the door

Put curtains at our windows

See the men pass

They are going somewhere (*LoLB* 22)

At first glance, the poem plays with the stereotype of the enclosed woman. The virgins hurry at the window to see men walk by and hope for a future marriage that will get them out of the house. Loy, however, subverts this traditional image by presenting two points of view: the virgins', and that of the person who has never been a virgin. The indentation of "A virgin," so far away on the line that it does not share the same margin as the rest of the poem, exemplifies the displacement of the gaze: the non-virgin does not see the importance of the window, despite it being the only contact the virgins have with men. The motif of gazing through the window of a house and not seeing the same things according to the person is reminiscent of "The House of Fiction," Henry James's preface to *The Portrait of a Lady*, in which the author makes an analogy between fiction and a building full of holes:

They [those holes] are but windows at best, mere holes in a dead wall, disconnected, perched aloft; they are not hinged doors opening straight upon life. But they have this mark of their own that at each of them stands a figure with a pair of eyes, or at least with a field-glass, which forms, again and again, for observation, a unique instrument, insuring to the person making use of it an impression distinct from every other. (46)

The description of "The House of Fiction" responds to "Virgins Plus Curtains Minus Dots" in its fascination for windows over doors. The juxtaposition of the trivial narrative of the marriage plot and the reference to the mechanics of writing shows that Loy is aware of the limits of gender conventions and performing them somewhat ironically. This performativity becomes a site of creative power.

Butler links this performativity with the body, which is useful for the study of Loy's poetry as the poet shows a deep interest in materiality and embodiment. For Butler, "[s]peech is bodily, but the body exceeds the speech it occasions; and speech remains irreducible to the bodily means of its enunciation" (*ES* 156). In this quotation, Butler is hinting at questions of control in regards to gender that she further develops in *Bodies That Matter*:

The effects of performatives, understood as discursive productions, do not conclude at the terminus of a given statement or utterance, the passing of legislation, the announcement of a birth. The reach of their signifiability cannot be controlled by the one who utters or writes, since the one who utters them does not own such productions. They continue to signify in spite of their authors, and sometimes against their authors' most precious intentions. (241)

Here, Butler helps us connect gender with questions of textual studies, which occurs across all the chapters of this dissertation. Textual studies – or “bibliography” – engage with the text as a material object, inseparable from its medium. “[W]hat the bibliographer is concerned with,” Walter Greg proclaims, “is pieces of paper or parchment covered with certain written or printed signs. With these signs he is concerned merely as arbitrary marks; their meaning is no business of his” (121-2). This definition of what Greg calls “pure” textual studies is perhaps a bit restrictive but serves as a base for D. F. McKenzie's own theorization of the discipline, which rests on the “human” side of textuality. McKenzie designates “bibliography as the study of the sociology of texts. If the principle which makes it distinct is its concern with texts in some physical form and their transmission, then I can think of no other phrase which so aptly describes its range” (13). Although I am dedicating a chapter to the material textuality of Loy's poetic oeuvre, Greg's reductive definition of textual

studies is disconnected from how textual studies can unfold stimulating perspectives on Loy's feminist modernism. It singularizes the object without being concerned with its contents or context. It almost pushes to the extreme a formulaic view of modernism which calls attention to language as medium. McKenzie's take on bibliography, on the contrary, is particularly productive in the context of Loy's work as it links the very materiality of the text with questions of temporality and history:

At one level, a sociology simply reminds us of the full range of social realities which the medium of print had to serve, from receipt blanks to bibles. But it also directs us to consider the human motives and interactions which texts involve at every stage of their production, transmission, and consumption. It alerts us to the roles of institutions, and their own complex structures, in affecting the forms of social discourse, past and present. (15)

In that sense, looking at Loy's poems through the lens of textual studies encourages new ways of understanding feminism, as a phenomenon embedded in the various aspects of textual production, which seems to find its place between very personal matters of physicality and historical trends such as mass culture and political concerns. Indeed, textual studies is engaged with the text itself, the variations of its form, reader-response theory and all the actors involved in the production, edition, and publication of the text. "Letters of the Unliving" is paradigmatic of Loy's involvement in processes of textual studies:

The present implies presence
 thus
 unauthorized by the present
 these letters are left authorless—
 have lost all origin

since the inscribing hand

lost life — — —

The hoarseness of the past

creaks

from the creased leaves

covered with unwritten writing

since death's erasure

of the writer — — —

of the lover — — —. (*LoLB* 129)

The erasure of the author is linked later in the poem with the death of Loy's husband.¹³ The reference to "letters" exchanged between the poet and Arthur Cravan explores stereotypical images of romantic love. The poem layers different meanings on the "inscribing hand:" it is silent like the male lover but also inevitably alludes to the poet herself. Beyond its aspect of a tragic love poem, "Letters of the Unliving" also refers to the status of women authors in the early twentieth century and challenges preventing complete control over what is published. Moreover, the em dashes scattered in the lines reinforce the impression of the author's absence and further echo McGann's insights on the socialization of texts:

But thickness is also built through the textual presence and activities of many nonauthorial agents. These agencies may be the artist's contemporaries—these are the examples most often adduced—or they may not; furthermore, the agencies may hardly be imagined as "individuals" at all. The texts of Sappho,

¹³ Poet and boxer Arthur Cravan disappeared somewhere around the Isthmus of Tehuantepec in November 1918.

for example, gain much of their peculiar power from their fragmented condition, and the same is true for various ballads and songs, which exploit their textual fractures and absences for poetic results. (76)

Likewise, Loy's poems tend to foster an unfinished aesthetic, a feeling that the page is always *in medias res*. This "fragmented condition" of the poems – although intentional – responds to the current taste in both modernist and textual scholarship devoted to recovering and preserving texts that were until then undiscovered. In textual studies, such an endeavour is more often than not a feminist project as many neglected texts were written by women who did not have the opportunity to be published at their time. Textual scholarship is all the more important in this study since, as Parmar mentions, "the process of editing as the shaping of a corpus of work is the textual equivalent and counterpart to the 'making' of a literary figure" (13). The turn to digital editing at the beginning of the century also increased attention to women writers. Barbara Page affirms that female writing is "hypertextual in principle" while Julia Flanders explains the tendency to see the "error-ridden manuscript" as an "unchaste female body" (129).¹⁴ Studying Loy's feminism through the lens of textual scholarship is an opportunity to explore gender differences in cultural expression and memory but also to say more about modernist archives. Loy's archival materials bear the traces of the poet's sustained presence throughout the twentieth century and synthesize the various modernist phenomena. These papers are also a good starting point when reflecting on the importance of archives when investigating both women authors in general and the specificities of Loy's body of

¹⁴ See Barbara Page, "Women Writers and the Restive Text: Feminism, Experimental Writing and Hypertext," *Postmodern Culture*, vol. 6, no. 2, 1996. *Project MUSE*, [doi:10.1353/pmc.1996.0002](https://doi.org/10.1353/pmc.1996.0002).

works in particular. The hybrid methodological approach that Loy demands is both a testament to the poet's numerous innovative contributions and an attempt to use feminist methods of recovering excluded voices.

Outline

Loy's capacious feminist modernism particularly encourages poetics of alterity and intimacy. Feminist scholars' legacy for modernist studies is an expansion of the field toward the "Other" of modernism, which negates the center/periphery dualism that characterized a lot of early modernist studies. The "Other" of modernist studies simply refers to authors who, for a long time, were not included in the modernist canon, such as many racialized and gendered poets, for instance. For Loy, otherness is tied with the treatment of femininity and power dynamics in the poems, echoing Simone de Beauvoir's own discussion of otherness in *The Second Sex*: "[t]hus it is that no group ever sets itself up as the One without at once setting up the Other over against itself . . . the subject can be posed only in being opposed – he sets himself up as the essential, as opposed to the other, the inessential, the object" (xxi). Loy often plays with the trope of the objectified and nonessential woman, as in "Costa Magic," which focuses on a father's controlling demeanour toward his daughter:

Her father

Indisposed to her marriage

And a rabid man at that

My most sympathetic daughter

Make yourself a conception

As large as this one

Here. (*LoLB* 12)

The poem opens on the mention of a “father,” impossible to miss in his isolation thanks to the blank space preceding the beginning of the line. The daughter, however, is drowned in the middle of the poem and does not have a voice. Interestingly, despite the father’s lack of direct speech in the first stanza, his opinion on the wedding is still the first thing the reader learns. The daughter’s reaction, conversely, is secondary and less important. Placed in the middle of the page, the “rabid” father mentioned in the poem is both put in a position of power in that his presence invades the poem from the first line on, but also represents a minority, an “Other” since the speaker sides with the daughter whose marriage he disapproves. Indeed, Loy’s focus on otherness cannot be restrained to a division of genders in modernism but is also the place of networks and communities. For Felski,

[t]he exclusion of women from Western modernity thus allows them to function as a symbol of escape from all-pervasive systems of power. On the other hand, this very critique risks the continuing identification of women with presymbolic otherness in its emphasis on the fundamental masculinity of the social. (*GM* 6)

Yet, throughout the dissertation, otherness *as* intimacy is a recurring theme associated with artistic creation: what makes Loy’s feminism so rich and interconnected is its dialogical nature. Loy’s feminist modernism is one that stimulates expansion.

The heart of the dissertation revolves around the features of Loy’s “feminist modernism” and how she conflates those two influences to create a poetry that not only casts a wide net on modernity and the politics of the first half of the twentieth century but also shows that the field of modernism could benefit from feminist methodologies to map itself. Loy’s focus on femininity paradoxically enables her to escape the way women are cast as “others” in modernism by tracing her

interconnected and intimate modernist networks on the page. Overall, Loy is presenting herself as a woman modernist, not as a feminist: she is using womanhood and feminine-coded tropes to cement her place in the movement and in her time but she often distances herself from her own feminist practices. Challenging the abiding belief, in scholarly work, that Loy is actively feminist, this dissertation offers a wide view of Loy's oeuvre from the early writings to the way it can be put in dialogue with current trends in poetry. I analyze the poet's own view of activism, before moving toward the ways in which Loy develops her interest in feminine poetics and the woman question. I expand my discussion on Loy to the ways in which the poet's writing has been received after her death and continues to influence feminist poetics to this day.

Chapter 1 takes an interest in Loy's "Feminist Manifesto," which is undoubtedly the origin of the current association of the poet with feminism and the only mention of the term "feminism" within her oeuvre – save for her private letters. The deconstruction of the female body as an act of liberation and autonomy in the manifesto opens a reflection on the progressive construction of the poet as a prevalent modernist author rooted in the artistic current moment. The chapter presents a survey of Loy's influences and borrowed rhetorics as she creates the female body anew. The contradicting nature of the manifesto, whether it is in its contents or in the way contents and form, at times, work in different directions, provides a broad tableau of the political, social, scientific and artistic landscape of the time and how Loy embeds her work in this context. The professed feminist argument is apparently outshined by constant references to the literary contributions of men, futurists and sexologists alike, which Loy's fascination for modernity foregrounds. Yet, I see a double commitment to the "woman's cause" in the manifesto: the superficial, performative one putting the

body on display, and a more subdued reappropriation of women's marginal position. Loy theorizes artisthood as a component of womanhood, suggesting that feminism is in fact a privileged position through which one partakes of modernist art.

Chapter 2 focuses on Loy's experimentation with the concept of boundaries in the poems. Here, I use theories relating to pregnancy and motherhood, such as Anne Fourmand's corpospatiality or definitions of "the pregnant posthuman" to reflect on the link between womanhood, maternity, plurality and otherness. In that sense, this chapter compares the poet's treatment of both men and women and discusses the differences that are at stake. Loy, at times, buys into or subverts gender conventions on the page but seems to always picture female authority in construction. Starting with Loy's take on parturition I investigate how Loy's use of language breaks the boundaries between space and the body, a *leitmotiv* that comes back throughout the chapter as the discussion moves on to her reversal of masculine and feminine modernist tropes, which displaces the gender imbalance of the sexualizing gaze. The poet cultivates discomfort by slightly mutilating language, a feeling that reaches its peak when discussed in connection with reader response theory. The chapter ends, then, on the finely crafted unreadability of the poems and how it proactively informs one's apprehension of Loy's textual body.

Chapter 3 explores the history of publication and the various editorial processes that have been used to transform Loy's archival material into the poems as we currently know them. I start by scrutinizing the different editions available of Loy's work and the sets of problems they present. The chapter takes a particular interest in Roger Conover's two editions, *The Last Lunar Baedeker* (1982) and *The Lost Lunar Baedeker* (1996) as well as Marisa Januzzi's tentative critical edition in her dissertation, "*Reconstru[ing] Scar[s]*": *Mina Loy and the Matter of Modernist*

Poetics (1997). I argue that the poems are inherently resistant to traditional editing techniques for Loy's conception of the space of the page in her manuscripts both informs our reading of the poems and is not translatable in codex form. To resolve these problems, the chapter conceptualizes a digital archive – different from the one already existing – as the most efficient medium to shed light on Loy's idiosyncratic writing. Such a claim necessarily questions the complexity of Loy's poems and favours scholarly work over casual reading. Overall, the chapter deplores the lack of new edition of Loy's work at a time where feminist theory is more and more proving the usefulness of digital editing tools to process porous and unfixed texts – notably since it makes genetic criticism much easier to handle than on paper. Here, feminist methodologies help us identify the challenges of modernist poetry.

Finally, the last chapter examines Loy's poetry in relation to social platform-based poetry, such as instapoetry. Drawing on communities created by literary salons and little magazines, I argue that Loy has social media-like interests in her time, due to her many attachments to avant-garde movements, and that those interests come within the scope of a tradition of female poetry. In that sense, I identify Loy's poetry as being inherently multimedia since it was turned toward periodical publication, which enables me to develop the similarities between the editorial context of modernism and that of instapoetry. The parallel between Loy and instapoets also enables me to investigate the modernist poet's concern with multimedia or how her poems flirt with the boundaries between different media and how it calls attention to the structure of meaning-making. The chapter starts with a rather expansive definition of instapoetry before engaging with three themes that combine singular and community identities: friendship, the body and multiculturalism. With this final thought on the temporality of feminist modernism, as a movement still pertinent to

understanding current poetic genres, I conclude my study by observing the belated fascination with Mina Loy outside the British American context.

Chapter 1

“Feminist Manifesto”: the woman artist and marginality

The feminist movement as at present instituted is

Inadequate (*LoLB* 153)

Despite the complete absence of doubt that the first sentence suggests, with its succinct but efficient syntax and visual appearance, Loy’s “Feminist Manifesto,” written in 1914, is as unsettling as the period in which it was written. In *Modernism, Sex, and Gender*, Marshik and Pease draw attention to the gendered tension at the heart of the modernist era: “[w]hile the modernist period is really the time that witnessed women’s changing status in relation to literature, it would take decades until the range of women’s contributions to modernism were recognized” (3). On the one hand, women of the time saw their social status shift into something more progressive. On the other hand, such changes triggered “extreme forms of masculinity and male homosocial behavior” (91). Loy’s manifesto is placed right in the middle of that duality; it is a document that celebrates women’s prerogatives while searching to establish its author as an integral part of the contemporary, generally masculine, literary scene. Behind vows of breaking free from men – “Leave off looking to men to find out what you are not —seek within yourselves to find out what you are” (*LoLB* 154) – Loy reproduces what she wishes to avoid:

deny at the outset—that pa-

thetic clap-trap war cry Woman is the

equal of man—

for

She is NOT! (*LoLB* 153)

Loy is not only emulating men's portrayal of women – revolving around negation – but also contradicting mainstream feminist movements which are attempting to prove gender equality. Loy wrote during the development of first-wave British feminism, which is mostly viewed as the rise of the Suffragette movement, but also dealt with more complex positions entangling political rights, notions of sex and reproduction, sociology, and even art. Maggie Humm, in the introduction to *Modern Feminisms: Political, Literary, Cultural*, briefly summarizes the movement as “long-lasting” and “highly diverse . . . stretching from before the liberalism of Mary Wollstonecraft to the militant activism of Edwardian feminism” (5). Humm's focus on the span and density of the movement points both at the diversity of actors invested in it and at the layered nature of women's identities. The manifesto, however, escapes strict categorizations and locates itself outside of the main feminist demands of the time. Instead, it bases “feminism” on different schools of thought that share the public sphere at that time.

This chapter aims at closely analyzing Loy's feminist views, introduced in the “Feminist Manifesto,” in order to propose a nuanced understanding of the poet's disruptive gender aesthetics. Throughout the manifesto, the female body is surprisingly deconstructed, deformed, and silenced, though this dismantling is presented as a form of resistance. Loy theorizes the fairly marginal position of women in modernity as the model for artistic success. Though scholars often affirm that she strives to free women of their forced marginality within the modernist movement, I argue that Loy reclaims a marginal position as the very core of artistic identity, which inscribes women, in general, within the fabric of artistic modernity, and the poet

herself, in particular, as a mediator drawing parallels between contradictory movements. Loy's feminism is one that synthesizes but seemingly does not take sides in the central gender concerns shaping the early twentieth century. In the *Gender of Modernity*, Rita Felski mentions "the conflicts and crises engendered by processes of modernization" and how "[t]he figure of woman and the idea of the feminine have emerged as a key zone for the expression of such ambivalences by both men and women" (210). Not unlike Felski, Loy implies that the cultural and political landscape produced by the diverse phenomena of modernity enables women to have a privileged understanding of the artistic anxieties of the time. In that sense, Loy is more interested in cultivating an aesthetic of contradiction. She chooses to perform marginal womanhood and be at odds with first wave feminists. As such, the "Feminist Manifesto" is engrossed in the inner workings of techniques of persuasion. While the modern manifesto, Jane Birkin argues, "ha[s] become corporate in style and language" (152), Loy's "Feminist Manifesto" is first and foremost an aesthetic document disguised as a political one.

Loy repurposes the medium of the manifesto by forgoing its traditional intent to lead to public exchange and collective action. In her seminal anthology, *Manifesto: A Century of Isms*, Mary Ann Caws explores the defining trait of the manifesto genre: a manifesto, above all, is a public document, "a deliberate manipulation of the public view," "crafted to convince and convert" (xix). Caws further states that the manifesto is a sort of "battlefield" (xx) between "we" and "they," which points at the public nature of manifestos and their integration into ongoing debates. Surprisingly, Loy's "Feminist Manifesto" had a fairly intimate birth as it was first shared in a letter to Mabel Dodge Luhan. While written in 1914, Loy's manifesto stayed at the stage of unfinished draft until published by Conover for the first time, in 1982, in *The Last*

Lunar Baedeker. The form of the manifesto is flexible and accommodates Loy's stylistic experiments, which convinces Lusty that "Loy espoused an intrinsic connection between aesthetic innovation and radical social change" (249). Indeed, Loy's manifesto plays with different typographies, using words of different sizes, dashes galore, and underlining key words. The "Feminist Manifesto," then, is a true embodiment of Caws's definition: "[a]t its height, it is a deictic genre par excellence; LOOK! it says. NOW! HERE! The manifesto is by nature a loud genre, unlike the essay" (xx).

If the manifesto genre is a means of communication that places itself in the middle of the political and social action of the historical moment in which it appears, the "Feminist Manifesto" follows the main aesthetic features of the genre but fails to communicate its militant ideas – or rather, the epistolary transmission of the manifesto to the poet's inner circle paradoxically allows the tone of the document to be transgressive but in a way that is catering to a specific group of artists. In a 1914 letter to Mabel Dodge Luhan, Loy asks, "[d]o tell me what you are making of Feminism? I heard you were interested — have you any idea in what direct[ion] the sex must be shoved — psychologically I mean —."¹⁵ The fact that Loy later sends her "Feminist Manifesto" to Dodge Luhan out of all people and asks for her opinion on it – which her friend never gave – shows the poet's attachment to her friend's judgement. It suggests that Loy was expecting something in return, even within the realm of the manifesto itself. The narrator's voice is direct and confrontational, especially when she asks whether the reader is satisfied by the new opportunities in "[p]rofessional & commercial careers" (LoLB 153) – a question that appears just as

¹⁵ Beinecke Digital Library, Mabel Dodge Luhan's Papers, YCAL MSS 196, Series 1, Box 24, Folder 664-5. https://archives.yale.edu/repositories/11/archival_objects/552121. Accessed 10 July 2023.

meaningful today. The manifesto's audience, however, is difficult to grasp: the first lines are directed to women of the time yet the changes in what is considered "masculine" (153) entails that men are also included in Loy's readership. The manifesto can be read, then, as a response to how Loy's inner circle of artists understood feminism at the time. Gender and artistic concerns coalesce in a way that echoes other women modernists writers. When discussing Marianne Moore's feminism in *Marianne Moore: Questions of Authority*, Cristanne Miller stresses Moore's desire to go beyond traditional poetic models as a "departure from what she understands as the poet's masculist egotism" (205). Similarly, Loy upsets tradition by bringing together the figure of the poet and femininity.

Loy's manifesto is layered and sometimes contradictory, thus refuting the very idea of modernism as a "monological sort of phenomenon sought in their own ways by authors of the now famous manifestos" (Scott 4). Starting with Loy's physical, syntactical and institutional vow of destruction, I discuss the manifesto's lack of commitment to any movement despite the fact that it borrows the techniques of different artistic and political groups populating the public scene of the time. Such a desire for annihilation is tempered by Loy's idea that destruction of traditional discourses on the female body enables the creation of a new and improved woman. The manifesto's allusions to a cross-gendered aesthetic re-establish the weight femininity bears in the development of a stable society. The role of women is highlighted by questions of maternity and motherhood: from procreation, Loy slips women into the realm of decision-making. Having proven the crucial part that women play in being able to navigate porous boundaries that were only implemented to ensure masculine authority, the manifesto acknowledges women's marginality as an advantage, notably when it comes to artistic creation. Loy's writing style first appears

too performative and empty but reveals the poet's interest in the female artist as a bridging figure. For that final argument, I will focus on the manuscript of the manifesto, and specifically on how the construction of the handwritten text is symptomatic of Loy's understanding of public and private spheres. Textual history is an important part of Loy's grappling with media and feminism. This final section will then be developed in a more systematic manner in a later chapter.

1.1. "Absolute Demolition": Loy's women politics in context

The "Feminist Manifesto" undoubtedly played a large part in cementing Loy's status as a poetic figure dialoguing with first-wave feminism. Breanne Fahs's 2020 anthology of feminist manifestos, *Burn It Down! Feminist Manifestos for Revolution*, develops the idea that "feminism and its explosive anger have borne many fruits, owed in large part to feminism's politics of disruption" (2), already conveyed in the title of the monograph. Loy, in that sense, fits the bill of "traditionally" angry feminism in her interest in destruction, a key word that structures her feminist endeavour. The manifesto is, indeed, constructed as a series of "illusion[s] it is to [women's] interest to demolish" (*LoLB* 154). Moreover, the form of the document as a forever unfinished draft reflects the demands for obliteration developed in the body of the text; the unpolished aspect of the text typifies, if not destruction, at least, something under construction. Often discussed as a midpoint between futurism and feminism, Loy's manifesto is relentlessly put in dialogue with other texts written by women during the same period, such as Valentine de Saint-Point's "Manifesto of Futurist Woman" (1912) or Christabel Pankhurst's *The Great Scourge and How to End it* (1913).¹⁶ Destroying society under the pretext that it does not currently work

¹⁶ See Valentine de Saint-Point's "Manifesto of Futurist Woman" in Mary Ann Caws's *Manifesto: A Century of Isms*. University of Nebraska Press, 2001, pp. 213-6.

well enough is as much a feminist statement as a futurist one and Loy's text sheds light on the similar stylistic devices used by both movements in order to convince their readers. Though it makes sense to resituate the text into its historical context, such an endeavour tends to take the title of Loy's manifesto at face value, that is to say, as a genuine attempt to converse with feminist concerns of the time. However, it is worth noticing that Loy's transmission of the draft in private letters to chosen readers eludes the common collective goal to both feminism and the medium of the manifesto, that is to say, making a large public react in powerful manner.

The status of the "Feminist Manifesto" is a peculiar one: Loy's work is perhaps one of the first pieces of writing that plainly and openly use the term "feminism" in their titles – rather than any other word affiliated with women's rights – to brand a political and aesthetic document. Yet, the contents of this manifesto are not really supporting the first wave of feminist ideas or even referencing them all that much. Loy's text, then, is completely absent from the anthology *Feminist Manifestos: A Global Documentary Reader*, edited by Penny A. Weiss and Megan Brueske. Though the editors express their desire to publish documents written collectively, a handful of singular authors are still mentioned in the introduction but only writers that take a strong stance and react to prejudices. Loy's professed feminism, by contrast, reads as a reaction to others rather than as a personal commitment to political issues raised by the suffragette movement. If we admit that the feminist movement, as established at the time, is a bit tentacular and loosely organized around the claim of equal rights between men and women, Loy still reads as an outsider in that she does not follow the main ideas of feminist figureheads. In "Moths and Mothers: Mina Loy's 'Parturition,'" Tara Prescott shows the divide between Loy's manifesto and feminist fights of the time through one meaningful example: "[a]t a time when

Margaret Sanger advocated for a married woman's right *not* to have children, Loy argued for a single woman's right *to* have them" (195) as she proclaimed that "[e]very woman has a right to maternity —" (*LoLB* 155). For all that, the manifesto is still referenced in Fahs's anthology under the section "Angry/Violent" (viii-ix), among very transgressive second-wave feminist texts such as Valerie Solanas's 1967 *SCUM Manifesto*.¹⁷ Loy's "Feminist Manifesto" uses the *leitmotiv* of destruction to position the female body as the space of modernity, which both refutes and repurposes masculinist and feminist militant discourses of the time. The manifesto itself becomes an extension of the female body: by destroying syntax in the same way she invites women to self-mutilate, the poet embeds social progressive issues in a more aesthetic project.

Syntactical destruction

In the opening of the manifesto, Loy's key image is one of ripping the past and bringing a completely different and new outlook to the question of feminism. This image is somehow enacted in the form of the manifesto, notably in Loy's idiosyncratic syntactic fragmentation, which consists in juxtaposing syntagmata without structuring them in a coherent whole. As the speaker leaves the organization of her ideas open, Loy's text becomes a prime example of what Michael Levenson calls modernist "creative violence" (2), that is to say, the challenging of established structures through art:

¹⁷ The *SCUM Manifesto*, which, according to some editions, stands for "Society for Cutting Up Men," is a pamphlet that aggressively blames men for the main failures in society. Women, according to Solanas, are forced to fix men's mistakes. The vocabulary used in the manifesto is denunciatory and demeaning. Solanas writes: "the male is an incomplete female, a walking abortion, aborted at the gene stage. To be male is to be deficient, emotionally limited; maleness is a deficiency disease and males are emotional cripples" (Fahs 217). I argue that Fahs's choice to pair the "Feminist Manifesto" with texts such as the *SCUM Manifesto* is a surprising one since the poet is less hostile and militant. Loy's confrontational tone is part of the aesthetic rhetoric of the text.

The feminist movement as at present instituted is

Inadequate

Women if you want to realise yourselves—you are on the eve of a
 devastating psychological upheaval—all your pet illusions must be
 unmasked—the lies of centuries have got to go—are you prepared for the

Wrench—? (*LoLB* 153)

From the beginning, the poet uses a condescending tone to accuse women of being accomplices in their own oppression, as the term “pet illusions” seems to indicate, despite writing under the pretext of helping women “realise [them]selves.” The opening sentence reads as an intimidating warning advising the reader to proceed with caution. The final question of the passage lets the reader anticipate that the rest of the manifesto will be equally transgressive although the play with typography appears increasingly performative as the text unfolds: the visual emphasis on words is less and less present as the text goes on, with the ending being surprisingly more conservative, whether it be typographically or phonetically. The numerous long dashes, especially the one at the very end of the sentence, convey the impression that the author is warning the addressee about the unboundedness of the feminist fight, adding layers of threat through the lexical field of destruction. The diatribe only starts but already seems expandable.

The very syntax, then, operates the “wrench” on the page: “if you want to realise yourselves” is only completed with “all your pet illusions must be unmasked,” showing the difficulty of navigating Loy’s manifesto in a linear manner. As the text continues, the line between what Loy wants for women and what she is denouncing

blurs through the disjointed syntax, exemplifying the manifesto's vows of destruction while weakening the poet's effort to create strong assertions:

Woman for her happiness must retain her deceptive fragility of appearance, combined with indomitable will, irreducible courage, & abundant health the outcome of sound nerves—

Another great illusion that woman must use all her introspective clear-sightedness & unbiassed bravery to destroy—for the sake of her self respect is the impurity of sex the realisation in defiance of superstition that there is nothing impure in sex—except in the mental attitude to it—will constitute as incalculable & wider social regeneration than it is possible for our generation to imagine. (*LoLB* 156)

The ending of the first sentence that seems to cut itself short and the beginning of the second sentence about yet “[a]nother great illusion” leave the reader wondering whether Loy is in fact advising the reader to “retain her deceptive fragility of appearance” or not. It is only when the reader reaches the verb “is” in the second sentence that the meaning of the lines gets clearer but, even then, the poet's use of punctuation is somewhat surprising. The dash between “destroy” and “for,” for instance, cuts the flow of the sentence and separates the term “illusion” from said illusion. Furthermore, the lack of punctuation between “the impurity of sex” and “the realisation in defiance of superstition that there is nothing impure in sex” mashes the two contradictory statements together, as if the second half of the sentence was a simple reiteration of the first half.

As a result, the manifesto reads, at first, as very close to an “aggressive Futurist hyperbole” (Lusty 254). Considering that the manifesto was sent to Dodge Luhan when Loy was living in Florence and spending time with the major figures of

the Futurist movement, such a parallel between the ostentatious tone of the “Feminist Manifesto” and futurist aesthetics is far from irrelevant.¹⁸ Paradoxically, then, by affirming “total destruction,” Loy places herself in the context of different, often contradictory, movements and traditions. On the one hand, Loy builds her feminist tirade on references of early feminist contributors:

Leave off looking to men to find out what you are not—seek

within yourselves to find out what you are

As conditions are at present constituted—you have the choice between

Parasitism, & Prostitution—or Negation. (*LoLB* 154)

In this passage, the poet insists on women’s agency and ability to choose their own identity, as opposed to the preestablished categories of “Parasitism, & Prostitution” and “Negation” (*LoLB* 154), which DuPlessis traces back to “earlier feminists Charlotte Perkins Gilman and Olive Schreiner” (*GRRC* 56). Indeed, in *Women and Economics*, Gilman uses the metaphor of the “parasite mate” (141) who is fed and taken care of in exchange for “sex-relation” (5). By using the jargon of first-wave feminism, Loy, who asserts the inadequacy of the movement, engages in the feminist tradition of her time. The fact that Loy does not offer an alternative to those categories may, at first, look like a way of suggesting that women are not restricted to any roles. However, the poet still legitimizes masculinist positions later in the text, when, after contesting “the division of women in two classes the mistress, & the mother” (*LoLB*

¹⁸ Loy was living in Florence from 1906 to 1917. This period was extremely important in her development as an artist as it marked the beginning of her belief in Christian Science, as well as her meetings with various figureheads of avant-garde movements, such as Gertrude Stein or the Futurists. In 1913, specifically, Loy met F.T. Marinetti and Giovanni Papini – two relationships that influenced her writing.

154), she affirms that “the woman who is a poor mistress will be an incompetent mother” (154), thus staying within the realms of those categories. Loy’s limited definition of womanhood is emblematic of her “rejection of straightforward feminist resistance in favour of more subversive and ambivalent strategies, both participating in and mocking the male-dominated artistic milieu” (Gillespie).

On the other hand, this inscription within earlier feminist traditions is challenged by the poet’s participation in avant-garde movements. The manifesto, in that sense, is at the junction of various political and artistic currents but is also a deeply historical text, documenting, perhaps unintendedly, the reception of feminism and its dialogue with other movements. Feminism is often placed as a foil to the avant-garde: Marinetti declares in his own manifesto that he “will fight moralism, feminism” (Caws 186); meanwhile in the first volume of *Blast*, Wyndham Lewis’s journal-manifesto, the author “curses” “snobbery (a disease of femininity)” (15).¹⁹ In both cases, women are depicted as an impediment to the values of the avant-garde. Such a clash between the slow emancipation of women and the ideas of “the men of 1914” is encapsulated in Loy’s expansive literary connections. While she briefly was a proponent of Futurism, her link to vorticist Wyndham Lewis is less striking. Her poem “‘The Starry Sky’ of Wyndham Lewis” is a testament of her admiration for the writer and painter. However, David Trotter, in *The Literature of Connection: Signal, Medium, Interface, 1850-1950*, highlights their sparse encounters over the years, as young people studying in Paris, and later, at exhibitions, noting that “[p]erhaps there is nothing to find out” (115) about the connection between those two authors. Yet,

¹⁹ The vorticist manifestos are published in Lewis’s journal *Blast* in 1914. Like Loy’s, the manifesto opens on a strong rejection of values: Lewis “curse[s] . . . the Britannic Aesthete” (15). See <https://modjourn.org/issue/bdr430555/>.

despite the fact that Lewis, like Marinetti, “attributed the corruption of modernity in part to ‘the feminine’” (Lyon 102), Loy’s manifesto bears the traces of the tensions between the Vorticists and the feminists in her treatment of destruction. Janet Lyon, in *Manifestoes: Provocations of the Modern*, not only proves that both modernist artists and feminists were seen as equally problematic – “[t]he press’s discursive construction of frustrated women and diseased artists was part of its response to the militant identities actively cultivated by avant-garde artists and Suffragettes” (103) – but that they expressed their opinions in a similar fashion, that is to say, through “the use of militant discourse, the rhetoric of contempt and the importance of energy and gender as sites of insurgency” (Laing 55). The difficult cohabitation of feminist and avant-garde diatribes is perhaps best represented in Loy’s view of the female body.

The Sexualized Body in tension

In “Bodies of Discomfort: Mina Loy, the Futurists and Feminism in Italy Between the Wars,” Laura Scuriatti explains that there is a “paradox” (131) at the heart of both Loy and Valentine de Saint-Point’s manifestos when it comes to their conceptions of the female body, which is viewed as the trigger to vitality while still being trapped in the past:

in their attempt to provide new instruments for reconsidering women and their bodies, the manifestos echo the Futurists’ ‘modernolatria’, that is, the glorification of anything that is modern, or posited as such. Energy, potential, movement and change are celebrated as productive forces. But within this radical project of modernization and rethinking of sexual and gender categories, the female body is in both texts a site of resistance, standing out as a signifier of discomfort and unease. The problematic presence of the female

body is associated in both texts with the idea of nature, which is both a vital force and a relic of *passéiste* sensibility. (131)

Scuriatti backs up her argument about the question of nature in Loy's text by affirming that "the origin and aim of gender identity are located in the body and its power to procreate" (137) and that "the problems regarding the financial and social position of women are simplistically made to depend entirely on a surgical intervention performed on the female body – a body which is conceived as an inconvenient, uncomfortable presence to be removed or modified" (138). Loy's desire to change the female body points at its problematic nature – DuPlessis goes as far as saying that "this is a feminism that wants to change women, not one that claims to change men" (*GRRC* 56). Instead of blaming the institutions oppressing women, she encourages women to change. Yet, this "paradox" is not necessarily one since Loy's manifesto overcomes masculinist theories by pushing them always farther and emphasizes the use of the modern to go beyond the faults of modernity. In that way, the poet, having established that women are treated like commodities, lets the language of property and ownership seep into her manifesto:

[t]he man who lives a life in which his activities conform to a social code
which is a protectorate of the feminine element—

—is no longer a masculine

The women who adapt themselves to a theoretical valuation of their sex as a
relative impersonality, are not yet Feminine. (*LoLB*153-4)

The poet is reversing conventional views of gender roles; traditional patriarchy is what she now calls "no longer masculine." The terms "protectorate" and "valuation" are part of roughly the same lexical field, with "valuation" having to do with the

financial aspect of real estate property, and “protectorate” not only meaning “protection” but also the dominion over a territory. Loy, here, is criticizing traditional understandings of gender, but reusing the kind of vocabulary used by patriarchy. She is in fact pushing the narrative of women as commodities to the next level when she discusses the most subversive point of her manifesto – the removal of the hymen:

To obtain results you must make sacrifices & the first & greatest sacrifice you have to make is of your “virtue”

The fictitious value of woman as identified with her physical purity—is too easy a stand-by— rendering her lethargic in the acquisition of intrinsic merits of character by which she could obtain a concrete value— therefore, the first self-enforced law for the female sex, as a protection against the man made bogey of virtue—which is the principal instrument of her subjection, would be the unconditional surgical destruction of virginity through-out the female population at puberty—. (*LoLB* 154-5)

Loy’s solution to the objectification of women is to simply destroy the element that gives women value according to men. By suggesting to medically modify the female body, Loy seems, at first glance, to abide by the same view of genders as the men she criticizes. Yet, it is by bringing this view to the extreme that the poet envisions the potential freedom of women. It is meaningful that Loy sees the destruction of the hymen as “a protection against the man made bogey of virtue” when the membrane was considered a closed door protecting women’s honour. Loy reverses this idea by showing that the only way to protect women is to remove what men view as protection. Devoid of hymen, women can no longer be ranked according to their purity level. Once again, the syntax of the excerpt is interrupted by dashes of various length, which, this time, enable the sentence to develop and stretch on the page as

much as possible before finally revealing its central idea, right at the end. Just like the destruction of the hymen would make it possible for women to be whole – in the sense that they would retrieve authority over their own body – the dashes make the sentence choppier yet richer.

Though not suggested by any political or artistic movement of the time, the eradication of virginity reinforces the manifesto's place within ongoing discourses of the time, notably scientific ones intellectualizing the female body. In a letter to Dodge Luhan, Loy writes "I find the destruction of virginity—*so* daring don't you think—had been suggested by some other woman years ago—see Havelock Ellis" (*LoLB* 216).²⁰ Loy glosses over the source of the central point of her manifesto: the brief reference, associated with the dismissive "some other woman years ago," suggests that Loy did not take time to get acquainted with the first author of the "destruction of virginity," briefly mentioned by Ellis in *Studies in the Psychology of Sex*:

The woman is "dishonored" by sexual intercourse, depreciated in her market value, exactly as a new garment becomes "second-hand," even if it has but once been worn. A man, on the other hand, would disdain the idea that his personal value could be diminished by any number of acts of sexual intercourse.

This fact has even led some to advocate the "abolition of physical virginity." Thus the German authoress of *Una Poenitentium* (1907), considering that the protection of a woman is by no means so well secured by a little piece of membrane as by the presence of a true and watchful soul inside, advocates the

²⁰ Havelock Ellis (1859-1939) was a founder of British sexology, laconically defined in the OED as "[t]he study of human sexual life or relationships" ("sexology n."). Paul Peppis, in *Sciences of Modernism: Ethnography, Sexology, and Psychology* describes Ellis as part of the "canonical figures" (6) that inspired modernist writers. Loy is known to have read Ellis's works as she mentions him throughout her correspondences with various people.

operation of removal of the hymen in childhood. It is undoubtedly true that the undue importance attached to the hymen has led to a false conception of feminine “honor,” and to an unwholesome conception of feminine purity.²¹

While the book entitled *Jungfräulichkeit?: Una poenitentium* (which could be roughly translated by *Virginity? A Penitence*), written by an unknown German author, is not easily available, it is cited in Max Marcuse’s *Dictionary of Sexology* (243). Loy’s view of the body is then presented as rational because it is acknowledged by authoritative figures (Ellis, Marcuse) and takes roots in the most medical sense of the body. The dialogue with scientists of the time emphasizes Loy’s modernity. Her interest in various disciplines appears to be very much linked to her will to understand and partake in the world she lives in in all its innovations. By elaborating a web of political, aesthetic and scientific discussions around the notions of women’s rights and the female body, Loy’s manifesto positions women as central intellectual figures.

Rhetoric of destruction, rhetoric of renewal

Through these references to scientific progress and new ways of understanding sexuality, bodily destruction is no longer synonymous with annihilation but rather triggers renewal. Loy theorizes the artist as a woman destroying the old to create the new. She is offering an alternative to the feminists’ wrath by borrowing from avant-garde movements’ elevation of art. The apostrophe to Suffragettes at the very end of *Blast*’s first volume is meaningful in that regard:

To suffragettes. A word of advice. In destruction, as in other things, stick to what you understand. We make you a present of our votes. Only leave works of art alone. You might some day destroy a good picture by accident. Then!

²¹ Quoted from Havelock Ellis, *Studies in Psychology Volume VI, Sex in Relation to Society* (1927). Project Gutenberg. 8 Oct 2004, https://www.gutenberg.org/files/13615/13615-h/13615-h.htm#6_CHAPTER_V. Accessed July 8th 2023.

mais soyez bonnes filles! Nous vous aimons! We admire your energy. You and artists are the only things (you don't mind being called things?) left in England with a little life in them. If you destroy a great work of art you are destroying a greater soul than if you annihilated a whole district of London. Leave art alone, brave comrades! (151-2).

Here, Lewis refers to the Suffragettes' vandalism of art – the most famous example being the slashing of Velasquez's *Venus* – as a way to protest.²² *Blast's* condescension has less to do with devaluing feminism than with preserving art and, with it, the place of the artist as a true rebel, as an exception. Loy's manifesto reorients the Suffragettes' rhetoric of destruction in a way that does not harm art but rather builds it: instead of destroying art, the poet suggests women destroy *for* their own art.

“Aphorisms on Futurism,” insists that “LIFE is only limited by your prejudices. Destroy them and you will cease to be at the mercy of yourself” (*LoLB* 150). Similarly, the destruction mentioned in the manifesto acts as a placeholder for liberation – as it will bring “Reform” (*LoLB* 153) – and, through liberation, creation. Indeed, the manifesto, though it repeats its call to “every woman,” contradicts itself and focuses on women intellectuals and artists:

Every woman has a right to maternity—

Every woman of superior intelligence should realize her race-responsibility, in producing children in adequate proportion to the unfit or degenerate members of her sex—. (*LoLB* 155)

²² On March 10th 1914, Suffragette Mary Richardson (1882-1961) leaves stabbing wounds on Diego Velasquez's “Venus at her Mirror” in London. Rowena Fowler in “Why did Suffragettes Attack Works of Art?” clarifies that Richardson “claimed that her slashing of the Velasquez Venus was a reprisal for the Glasgow arrest of Emmeline Pankhurst” (109).

The distinction brought by “superior intelligence” redefines the subject of the manifesto – and perhaps Loy’s ideal woman reader as well – as the potential builder of a new society: women must destroy because they have the power to reconstruct. The mention of “maternity” emphasizes the status of women as creators and presents both the poet herself and women members of her inner circle as the epitome of “intelligence” since they are able to create art and procreate:

Nature has endowed the complete woman with a faculty for expressing herself through all her functions—there are no restrictions the woman who is so incompletely evolved as to be un-self-conscious in sex, will prove a restrictive influence on the temperamental expansion of the next generation.

(LoLB 154)

Sexuality becomes the means through which women can “express” themselves and be fully realized as people and artists. This passage anchors the manifesto in the budding discussions on sexology happening in the late nineteenth and early twentieth centuries, thus lending Loy a sort of scientific authority. The poet specifically nods at social psychology as sexuality becomes “a faculty for express[ion].” Two main treatises of social psychology were written in 1908: Edward Alsworth Ross’s *Social Psychology, an Outline and Source Book* and William McDougall’s *An Introduction to Social Psychology*. Both McDougall and Alsworth Ross were American sociologists and psychologists. Their texts set out to develop the new emerging field of social psychology, defined as the study of mental life in relation to social behaviour.²³ While Alsworth Ross was interested in social habits, McDougall is

²³ Social psychology, as defined by DeLamater and Collett has three main components: an interest in human behaviour, a search for the causes of such behaviour, and a systematic approach in both cases (3). See DeLamater and Collett, *Social Psychology*, 9th ed., Routledge, 2018.

famous for his theory of instinct as a behavioural influence. Both men were particularly interested in eugenics and racist theories, which is why their impact on science is limited. They were also deeply invested in gender and sexuality, with Ross noting that “[m]uch of woman’s exaggerated impressionability disappears once she enjoys equal access with men to such individualizing influences as higher education, travel, self-direction, professional pursuits, participation in intellectual and public life” (17). McDougall, on his end, mentioned that “all altruistic conduct has its root and origin in the maternal instinct” (204) that mothers transmit to the rest of the population. These discussions on the place of women in society are similar to the arguments evoked in the manifesto. Loy does not make any reference to them in her oeuvre or in the letters available from the Beinecke Library, but it is possible that the poet had access to those books and read them as they both discuss matters that are hinted at by Loy and base their theories on theorists we know Loy read – such as Ellis, for instance. McDougall, specifically, clearly linked sexuality with the figure of the artist:

[T]he connexion between sex instinct and artistic production is probably more direct in many instances. The stirring of the sex impulse may suffuse the body with energy and the mind with a vague emotion and a longing for something indefinable ; and this surplus energy, not being consciously directed to any end, and being denied the opportunity and the conditions which would lead on the impulse to define itself in action and in thought, vents itself in spontaneous and self-sufficing, *i.e.* purely lyrical, activities, such as mere gambolling, dance, or song. (402)

McDougall’s insight supports the idea that “there is nothing impure in sex” (*LoLB* 156), but beyond that, the mention of “surplus energy” triggering artistic creation

resonates with Loy's theme of revival. For her, destroying the belief that seeking sexual intercourse is bad "will constitute an incalculable & wider social regeneration than it is possible for our generation to imagine" (*LoLB* 156). Lack of sexual intercourse is discussed at length in the poems, where virginity induces aridity. In "Virgins Plus Curtains Minus Dots," published in 1915, Loy's over-the-top characterization of women as objects – they have no names and are all grouped under the moniker of their sexuality – makes virgins the butt of the joke. The girls standing at the window, in the poem, are completely stripped of their agency in a farcical way:

Virgins may squeak
 'My dear I should faint'
 Flutter flutter flutter
 'And then the man—' (*LoLB* 22)

The first line of that extract characterizes the girls as annoying, and almost reified with the use of the verb "to squeak." They are not individuals but all part of a category – "virgins," which Loy already said should be surgically removed. The introduction of direct speech in the poem implies that the virgins are still active figures who have a voice of their own; however, typography seems to suggest otherwise. The blank spaces within the inverted commas impose silence where silence is not expected, as if the girls had to keep quiet. The moment of direct speech is interrupted by the narrator making a generalized summary of what the girl says. The simple repetition of "flutter" followed by spaced out periods indicates that there is not much worth mentioning. The dots appear to be the opposite of aposiopeses, meaning that instead of inducing a sudden interruption in the discourse, they infer that the woman who talks goes on and on. The long space dedicated to those dots, at the end of line three and the beginning of line four, hints at the useless nattering that is

eventually cut short by the final dashes. The inverted commas are useless, for nothing substantial is said; words are simply uttered. Indeed, the concentration of typographical elements, including blank spaces, here, fills the page with emptiness and silences the characters, thus equating lack of sexuality with barrenness.

The rhetoric of bodily obliteration women should undertake, advocated in the manifesto, is sustained in the poems but there is a clear divide between women choosing to destroy parts of their bodies and having it forced upon them. “The Song of the Nightingale is Like the Scent of Syringa,” for example, deplores the destruction of the female body through the violence of war. In the poem, the lines unfold outside of strong linguistic structures. The dashes link the sounds by acting as surrogates for syntactic constructions:

Nightingale singing—gale of Nanking

Sing—mystery

of Ming-dynasty

sing

ing

in Ming.²⁴

The main issue here lies in the last three lines. It seems difficult to choose whether “sing / ing” has to be understood as one word – “singing” – divided in two parts or if the poet is slowly diminishing the word “sing” until it is all but two letters, “in,” in the last line quoted. Suzanne Zelazo understands the poem as “a cry of mourning” (79) referring to the genocide in Nanking that took place in 1937. The reduction from

²⁴ “The Song of the Nightingale is Like the Scent of Syringa.” N.d. YCAL MSS6, box 5, folder 120, Yale

University, New Haven, Connecticut. *Yale University Library*, <https://collections.library.yale.edu/catalog/11700580>.

“sing” to “in” could therefore be pertinent in the context of the population living in Nanking and being progressively reduced by violence. Yet, Loy’s poem defeats the slow silencing of women by reproducing destruction on the page. The body of the text, just like the bodies of victims, appears “feminine” through the softness of the sounds. Suzanne Zelazo reminds us that the whole poem revolves around a series of feminine rhymes encapsulated in the final “a” of the lines “Syringa / Myringa” and the omnipresence of soft [s] sounds (81). If the nightingale of the title is necessarily a male bird, as female nightingales do not sing, feminine imagery is still very prominent in the poem through the sounds echoing the poet’s very name and the word “Syringa,” which, according to Zelazo, is reminiscent of another typically female figure in literature: the Siren (80). Of course, these two figures clash with the representation of femininity as soft since the poet has to be the most powerful figure in the text, as she is its creator, and the siren, in Scandinavian folklore, is one of the most aggressive monsters. Thus, even though the poet references the destruction of the female body by the masculinist violence of war, the slow disintegration of words into smaller pieces invites re-creation. The reader is able to recreate logic through sounds: “the poem is a kaleidoscope of sounds and puns, and it reveals specifically how those sounds command the space of the page in a playful and complex *jouissance*” (Zelazo 78). As graphemes turn increasingly shorter on the page, it also becomes easier to create words, proving that even forced annihilation and damage only makes more evident the link between women and artistic creation. Through destruction, the female body is able to form itself anew.

1.2. From feminine masculinity to disruptive gender roles

The renewed body that Loy describes in her “Feminist Manifesto” upsets the psychology of the female as it is conceived in the early twentieth century. I am

particularly interested in how Loy launches a clear criticism of Marinetti's gender dynamics. Even though Loy boldly declares that "[m]en and women are enemies" (*LoLB* 154), there are limits to this compartmentalization of genders when, a page later, the poet writes: "[f]or the harmony of the race, each individual should be the expression of an easy & ample interpenetration of the male & female temperaments—free of stress" (*LoLB* 155). This gender balance is established by the sexually-coded term "interpenetration" that not only reasserts the earlier postulation that virginity should be abolished, but also sets women and men on equal footing when it comes to excelling as a citizen. Loy establishes the porousness of gender categories and even designates it as the very basis for every person to flourish. Coalescing femininity and masculinity is not a novel idea *per se*: Marinetti's dream of masculine autonomy is precisely described in *Mafarka the Futurist: An African Novel* (1909), in which the protagonist, thanks to technology, is able to "give birth" to a son without the help of a woman, becoming the sole creator of a process that is, in the novel, defeminized.²⁵ Valentine de Saint-Point, in her "Manifesto of Futurist Woman" (1912), expresses a similar sentiment when she declares:

It is absurd to divide humanity into men and women. It is composed only of femininity and masculinity. Every superman, every hero, no matter how epic, how much of a genius, or how powerful, is the prodigious expression of a race

²⁵ Amanda Recupero, in "Unexpected Organs: The Futurist Body and Its Maternal Parts," summarizes the text – and the tension it maps in regard to gendered bodies – as follows: "The novel, charged with 'offending public decency,' tells the story of a hero who rises above his bad behavior to become an artist. Mafarka shows his heroic qualities at first by killing his uncle Bubassa in battle and seizing the throne. But Marinetti's hero only reaches his lofty potential by creating a mechanical son. Using his masculine will and a collection of stolen parts, Mafarka gives life to the ideal Futurist. Gazurmah, whose body resembles an airplane more than a human, combines male virility and vigor with the latest modern technology to realize Marinetti's fantasy initially sketched in the 'Fondazione e Manifesto del Futurismo'" (205).

and an epoch only because he is composed at once of feminine and masculine elements, of femininity and masculinity: that is, a complete being. (Caws 213)

Without this mixture of genders, Saint-Point professes, both men and women are “weak” (214).²⁶ In that sense, the “Manifesto of Futurist Woman” is a somewhat twisted version of early feminist thoughts: men and women are fundamentally equal in their lack of virility, whereas Marinetti’s mechanical man simply finds a way, not to replace women, but to avoid them. In both cases, the fluidity of gender boundaries comes with the pre-knowledge that masculine attributes are necessary to the proper functioning of individuals and society. Loy’s construction of a female masculine body is indeed original in its will to set a proper dialogue with Futurism. Loy’s *modus operandi* in the manifesto tends to demystify Marinetti’s supposedly ideal masculine reproductivity by reclaiming women’s domesticity. By contrast, other women modernist poets present a similar proclivity for writing cross-gender bodies which actually separates women from maternity. For instance, poet H.D. was often singled out as a woman writer participating in overly masculine movements, such as imagism or even vorticism. In a poem entitled “Garden,” H.D. pushes the boundaries of femininity:

You are clear
 O rose, cut in rock,
 hard as the descent of hail.

²⁶ Erin Carlston, in *Thinking Fascism: Sapphic Modernism and Fascist Modernity*, shows that “Sapphic Modernism in particular is often aligned with a politically progressive ‘modernism of the margins’; feminist critics cite the correspondences many women writers draw among members of marginalized groups (women, homosexuals, Jews, blacks), and some interpret that gesture as a revulsive reaction against the rise of fascism” (4). However, she qualifies that statement by mentioning women’s strong involvement in masculinist or masculine-coded groups.

I could scrape the colour
 from the petals
 like spilt dye from a rock.

If I could break you
 I could break a tree.

If I could stir
 I could break a tree—
 I could break you. (24)

The stilted metaphor of women as flowers – specifically roses – that Loy herself uses when she depicts her Victorian mother as the “English Rose” in “Anglo-Mongrels and the Rose,” is superimposed with more masculine-coded themes. The rose is “cut in rock,” and entirely identified by its strength. Yet, the speaker’s thought, “I could break you,” never translates into action as there is always something making it impossible. The poem reads as the encounter of two versions of femininity. The rose is embedded in nature but it is not the slow, pastoral ideal of the natural rhythms of the female body. Instead, the rose is associated with harshness with words like “hard,” “hail,” and its visual similarity to the word “rock.” The speaker menaces the rose, as if in an effort to refute stereotypical female frailty, but ends up turning it into art through the words themselves, and the will to use it to create pure “colour.” The female body becomes both artist and art; the image of women as muses is turned into a sign of agency.

When Loy writes about the removal of the hymen (*LoLB* 155), which, for Jacques Derrida, is the membrane that figures the separation between “feminine and

masculine genre/gender” (LG 243, qtd in Crangle, *Feminism’s Archives* 247), she is placing herself among those other women modernist writers emulating a form of masculinity. Lois Rudnik remarks in “The Male-Identified Woman and Other Anxieties: The Life of Mabel Dodge Luhan” that Loy’s friend can be “male-identified” because she was white, fairly rich, and not subject to intense forms of oppression (124). Similarly, Gertrude Stein has been dubbed “masculine” as a response to her construction of a genius persona and experiments with pronouns. Stein and Loy both construct the authoritative figure of the artist in their works around perfect singularity and dialogism. In Stein’s *The Autobiography of Alice B. Toklas*, Stein is the only woman genius Toklas encounters, and her status as a genius is perhaps even more impressive in that she is unique in that respect:

The three geniuses of whom I wish to speak are Gertrude Stein, Pablo Picasso and Alfred Whitehead. I have met many important people, I have met several great people but I have only known three first class geniuses and in each case on sight within me something rang. In no one of the three cases have I been mistaken. In this way my new full life began. (3)

While the speaker highlights the idiosyncratic brilliance of the three geniuses, she also points at how meeting them impacts her life. In Loy’s “Feminist Manifesto,” the same tension between reciprocity and singularity is at stake, except that the gendering of the artist as intrinsically female alters the formulaic narrative that pushes women modernists to borrow from men and rather suggests that the artists are necessarily positioning themselves in a feminine-coded space. Loy’s manifesto is one that, at least in theory, neither highlights women’s shortcomings nor praises their ability to match men. Such a statement would be an exaltation of masculinity: women are good because they are like men. By using traditionally masculine tropes, the poet

recalibrates definitions of femininity to show that women do not borrow from men to gain authority but that they are naturally cross-gendered and thus, superior to men.

On the surface, the manifesto follows Marinetti's example when it comes to his opinion on sentimentality. In Marinetti's *Contempt for Women*, written in 1911, the author blames what, for him, is a specifically female inclination toward love and eroticism as the main cause of divide between men and women:

As for the supposed inferiority of woman, we think that if her body and spirit had, for many generations past, been subjected to the same physical and spiritual education as man's, it might be legitimate to speak of the equality of the sexes. It is obvious, nevertheless, that in her actual state of intellectual and erotic slavery, woman finds herself wholly inferior in respect to character and intelligence and therefore can be only a mediocre legislative instrument (9).²⁷

Similarly, the "Feminist Manifesto" is wary of feelings and deems them hindrances to genius. While Loy encourages women to destroy yet another of their – supposedly – instinctive urge, she underscores the responsibility of men in this situation:

Women must destroy in themselves, the desire to be loved—

The feeling that it is a personal insult when a man transfers his attentions from her to another woman

The desire for comfortable protection instead of an intelligent curiosity & courage in meeting & resisting the pressure of life sex or so called love must be reduced to its initial element, honour, grief, sentimentality, pride & consequently jealousy must be detached from it.

²⁷ See F.T. Marinetti, *Contempt for Women*, 1911 (qtd in *Modernism: An Anthology*, edited by Lawrence Rainey. Blackwell Publishing, 2005, p.9.)

Woman for her happiness must retain her deceptive fragility of appearance,
 combined with indomitable will, irreducible courage, & abundant health the
 outcome of sound nerves—. (*LoLB* 155-6)

In the first two sentences, the construction of the relation between men and women is one that the latter must suffer. The mentions of women wanting “to be loved” and “man transfer[ing] his attentions from [one woman] to another” posit that women are always the object of a heterosexual interpersonal relationship. In the next sentence, the poet minimizes feelings by calling “so called love” a “pressure” imposed on women. In a sense, men and women share the guilt of masculinist oppression and sentimentality since women are asked to fight those feelings associated with and stemming from men. Despite Rachel Blau DuPlessis’s affirmation that Loy “violated the terms of her own brave ‘Feminist Manifesto’” (*GRRC* 65) in her very poems, notably “Songs to Joannes,” by yielding to bathos, Jeffrey Twitchell-Waas refutes that idea by pointing back to the manifesto’s push for “retain[ing] [a] deceptive fragility” (120). Without believing that Loy’s entire “Songs to Joannes” is necessarily ironic, I argue, after Twitchell-Waas, that the poet’s handling of feminine-coded attitudes both abides by and undermines masculinist theories.

Poem XV of “Songs to Joannes” is often discussed as an expression of desperate loneliness, for the speaker uses the past tense to recount her love for Joannes. The poem is framed by “love” – both as a noun and a verb, which is a quite rare occurrence in the long serial poem:

Seldom Trying for Love
 Fantasy dealt them out as gods
 Two or three men looked only human

But you alone
 Superhuman apparently
 I had to be caught in the weak eddy
 Of your drivelling humanity

To love you most (*LoLB* 59)

At first sight, the tone of intimacy contradicts the manifesto: the speaker's trite declaration of love to the object of the poem, in all their weaknesses, is heightened by the alternation between lines broken in two parts and full lines, mimicking the movement of the couple being separated and finally becoming one. The final line, with its long indentation, reads as the speaker's long unspoken secret being released. Yet, the words "[s]eldom" and "apparently," highlighted by their positions in the lines, dilute the expression of love in more casual language while also impacting the syntax of the poem. The lack of punctuation, associated with the blank spaces, lays stress on the fact that the subject is unstable. Who is "[t]rying for [l]ove" in the first stanza? Is it the unknown speaker, fantasy itself, or the men who are at first referred by "them"? The fuzziness of the syntax frustrates the stereotypical love story that takes shape only by the second and last stanza. Despite the fact that the lover is a "[s]uperhuman" gendered male by being compared to "[t]wo or three men," the object of the speaker's love is the one described in term of frailty through terms like "weak" and "drivelling" while the speaker is only unexpectedly "caught" in the orbit of fragility. The last three lines, pertaining to the speaker, shed light on the whole poem as they are syntactically easy to understand compared to the rest of the poem and contextualize the importance of the link between "love" and "humanity" which fills earlier lines. In that sense, the woman speaker is in charge. As the one structuring the

poem and clearing up its meaning, she avoids the heaviness of sentimentality that is then transferred onto the lines about men.

It is also in the poems that are most interested in discussing love and bodily matters – what Marinetti, among other men public figures of the time, despises most – that the poet aligns herself with rationality and scientific progress; a realm that the avant-garde restricts to the masculine. Loy plays with conventions by bringing together categories of discourses that do not belong together – the maudlin and the level-headed. The vocabulary used in the intimate “Parturition” is surprising in its interest in objective biological reactions such as “nerve-vibrations” and “physiological potentiality” (*LoLB* 4). “Songs to Joannes” mingles questions of inter-relations with words such as “Proto-plasm” (*LoLB* 67), which was very “on trend” in the science fiction section of pulp magazines.²⁸ In “Feminist Poetics: First-Wave Feminism, Theory, and Modernist Women Poets,” Kinnahan briefly ponders over the inner mechanics of “Songs to Joannes” and infers that “Mina Loy’s experimental lyrics occasion a linguistic dismantling of gender conventions, breaking the structures of language to crack open decidedly phallogocentric signifying systems.” (56)

Seemingly borrowing the idea of modernism as a “sexual battle” (xii) from Gilbert and Gubar’s *No Man’s Land*, Kinnahan expands her initial remark on “Songs to Joannes” to the very “Feminist Manifesto,” which she calls a “battle with language . . . critiquing both the language of patriarchy and the language of a conservative

²⁸ The term “protoplasm” or “protoplasma” was coined by Czech scientist Jan Evangelista Purkyně in 1839, not too long before Loy’s birth. Daniel Liu notes in “The Cell and Protoplasm as Container, Object, and Substance, 1836-1861” that an American cytologist named Edmund Beecher Wilson asked students in his 1896 textbook avoid the term “cell,” (890) for it is defined “as a mass of protoplasm containing a nucleus, a morphological definition which remains sufficiently satisfactory even at the present day. Nothing could be less appropriate than to call such a body a ‘cell.’” (14) Liu, of course, immediately notes that, today, “cell” is still the word used, as opposed to what Wilson wrote in the late nineteenth century. (890) The poet’s fascination for science and the cosmos, in some ways, mirrors that of other male writers interested in how the present impacts the future, such as H. P. Lovecraft, who also focused on protoplasm, somewhat later than Loy (Houe 67).

feminism” (61). Though Loy is known for her irony and for not shying away from mocking her fellow Futurists, the “battle of language” she engages in can also read as a moment of stocktaking: the poet is using all the literary tools available to craft her own take on both language and femininity.

Here, I want to focus on how the poet manages to create a future collective voice more convincing than Marinetti’s, and how she attributes its success to female authorship. Helen Jaskoski, in “Mina Loy Outsider Artist” see Loy’s marginal artist as a “self-creating individual” (366) yet the “Feminist Manifesto” defeats that theory as the woman artist is put in the position of a leader who has influence in a community. By doing so, the poet underlines two facets of the manifesto genre which “proclaims a common art, rather than an art owned by the rich or the gallery, and an art which would be everywhere present, whether intentionally created or not. Nonetheless, manifestos are conspicuously the work of a minority” (Howarth 143-4). In the Futurist manifesto of 1909, this feeling of community is visible through the very use of the pronoun “we.” The opening of said manifesto almost reads as a private declaration: “We had stayed up all night, my friends and I, under hanging mosque lamps with domes of filigreed brass, domes starred like our spirits, shining like them with the prisoned radiance of electric hearts” (Caws 185). This beginning already encapsulates a few of the main ideas Marinetti outlines in the body of the manifesto, notably the slow meld of the bodies of the futurists with power, which finds its apex in the last words “electric hearts.” The turn of phrase “my friends and I,” placed so close to the opening of the manifesto seems to intimate, at first, that the Futurist manifesto is the product of a small, private group, with ideas so revolutionary that they spread through the personification of the city surrounding Marinetti and his companions. As the “domes” become “like [their] spirits,” the small group appears to

expand itself but also to become a model of being, sharing their beliefs with others. Marinetti creates a narrative in which the futurist movement spreads through friendship and the very technology praised in the manifesto.

Marinetti's focus on technology follows the idea that "modernist manifestos asserted the artist-critic's authority through the defamiliarization of conventional prestige symbols such as the museum and the university. Perhaps most revealingly, they often encouraged their readers to question both the fixity of language systems and the validity of the social and cultural institutions those systems produce" (Vondeling 128). Marinetti makes it clear that authoritative institutions are no longer relevant in Futurist thoughts as his list of demands is almost entirely refuting them:

3. Up to now literature has exalted a pensive immobility, ecstasy, and sleep.

We intend to exalt aggressive action, a feverish insomnia, the racer's stride, the mortal leap, the punch and the slap . . .

8. We stand on the last promontory of the centuries! ... Why should we look back, when what we want is to break down the mysterious doors of the Impossible? Time and Space died yesterday. We already live in the absolute, because we have created eternal, omnipresent speed . . .

10. We will destroy the museums, libraries, academies of every kind, will fight moralism, feminism, every opportunistic or utilitarian cowardice. (Caws 187)

Here, the author underlines what needs to disappear, but, by doing so, the manifesto stays focused on known institutions and on their apparent need to be destroyed – that is to say, the author focuses on the past that he refutes. While Caws's English version of the Futurist manifesto mostly uses "we will" at the beginning of each claim, the French version from *Le Figaro*, as well as the Italian publication of the manifesto in *Gazzetta Dell' Emilia*, respectively use the words "Nous voulons" and "Noi

vogliamo” – we want. Loy is directly responding to this turn of phrase in her own “Feminist Manifesto:”

Cease to place your confidence in economic legislation, vice-crusades & uniform education—you are glossing over

Reality.

Professional & commercial careers are opening up for you—

Is that all you want? (*LoLB* 153)

Marinetti states what he wants, but the “Feminist Manifesto” is more dynamic in that it encourages women to ponder on their situation and to take action. “Is that all you want?” leaves the realm of possibilities for women open-ended. As mentioned before, Loy’s manifesto is also a plea for decimation yet the poet does not quite point out specific objects that need to be destroyed beyond the feminist movement and the vague mention of “economic legislation, vice-crusades & uniform education.” As a result, the accent is put on what needs to be done to achieve a better feminism.

The speaker of the manifesto is clearly giving orders to the reader, who is hailed by a universal apostrophe to “women,” reminiscent of Susan Kingsley Kent’s discussion on the controversial “assumption in much of Western feminist thinking that women, as both subject and object of feminism’s program, share common needs, common wants, common desires, and a common oppression” (10). The back-and-forth movement between the homogenizing “women” to the singular “[w]oman,” for instance, in “[w]oman for her happiness must retain her deceptive fragility” (*LoLB* 156), at the end of the manifesto, participates in the unification of women since the plurality becomes one. The line quoted shows that Loy uses the same syntactic structure whether she chooses the plural or the singular form, thus blurring the

differences between personal and group dynamics. Moreover, the manifesto opens and closes with a call to the future: the author mentions that no futile acts “will bring about Reform” (*LoLB* 153) but finishes her text by affirming that accepting one’s sex drive “will constitute an incalculable & wider social regeneration” (*LoLB* 156). In the rest of the manifesto, the most used verbal tense is the present – or even the imperative. While Marinetti asserts his positions entirely through the relatively vague pronoun “we,” Loy creates a community through opposition between groups: “Leave off looking to men to find out what you are not — seek within yourselves to find out what you are” (*LoLB* 154). Instead of insisting on friendship, Loy highlights women’s agentive power in a same fight, rooted in the present time and expanding in the future, against one common enemy.

This adaptation of Marinetti’s collective future voice is part of a bigger design, in which the poet reappropriates masculine concerns as a way to inscribe herself within the literary sphere of the time and its immediate preoccupations. Marshik and Pease offer a view of modernity as a moment where “masculinity was somehow in crisis” (91) due to the slow apparition of women in the public sphere. As a result, their book sets a strong tension between the masculine rhetoric of loss (91) in modernist texts made by men, and a revived interest in establishing the hegemony of male authors, which was then mirrored in the beginning of modernist studies: “[a] generation of critics later solidified a notably male canon of modernism . . . Modernist women were, in contrast, roundly mocked” (15). In the “Feminist Manifesto,” however, loss connects with women rather than men simply through the lexical field of compromise:

The value of man is assessed entirely according to his use or interest to the community, the value of woman, depends entirely on chance, her success or

insuccess in manoeuvring a man into taking the life-long responsibility of her—

The advantages of marriage are too ridiculously ample— compared to all other trades—for under modern conditions a woman can accept preposterously luxurious support from a man (with-out return of any sort—even offspring)— as a thank offering for her virginity

The woman who has not succeeded in striking that advantageous bargain—is prohibited from any but surreptitious re-action to Life-stimuli—& entirely debarred maternity” (*LoLB* 155)

According to Loy, a woman is faced with two equally disappointing choices in regard to men: giving in to marriage and becoming a commodity by losing her virginity, or refusing to be part of such a capitalistic view of the female body and being robbed of potential pregnancies – a highly desirable and essential part of womanhood. While avant-garde artists may feel replaced in the face of the changing literary landscape, Loy’s manifesto stresses how loss is an integral component of women’s identity. In the poems, the motif of loss is omnipresent for the woman speaker and always caused by men – the biggest example being the haunting figure of Arthur Cravan as the “colossal absentee” (*LoLB* 96). Yet, the poet also explores the opposite dynamic; the devastating effects of the loss of the feminine. In “Human Cylinders,” for instance, the poet develops the description of a completely mechanical being that echoes Marinetti’s dream of men with “electric hearts” (*Caws* 185). Instead of being painted as superior beings, Loy describes “Human Cylinders” as bare “[s]implifications of men” (*LoLB* 40). The term “men” in this phrase proves that Loy abides completely to Marinetti’s view in this poem. The female masculinity that Loy presents in the manifesto is replaced by the simple transfer of feminine attributes into an overall

masculine being. However, this supposedly superior being, free of femininity, revolves around an “[a]bsence” (*LoLB* 40). This disjunction manifests itself through the use of different verbal forms:

Or which of us
 Would not
 Receiving the holy-ghost
 Catch it and caging
 Lose it (*LoLB* 41)

The masculine mechanical body is presented as deficient just like the English Loy is using; recognizable but just slightly off, not as “efficient” as language should be as it is the case in the line “Catch it and caging.” The two parts of the line do not work together, in the sense that the reader is facing two different verbal forms: with the connector “and,” the reader would expect the two verbs of the line to be in the same form, yet, the two actions are not placed on the same temporal level. Moreover, “to cage” is a transitive verb that is supposed to be followed by an object, whereas, here, the reader does not know what is being caged: a word appears to be missing. Because of the blank space dividing the two parts of the line, “and caging” seems to be misplaced, as if the poet had mismatched the lines. It is then difficult to understand what “caging” is referring to. The reader may be tempted to relate “caging” to “receiving” and “catch” to “lose” even though the poetic text is alternating those different verbal forms, which almost gives the impression that the poet has mixed up ideas and discourses. However, there is a form of similarity between the two parts of the line. “Catch it” and “caging” are both trochees and the second verb seems to echo the first one in terms of sounds. The line is stretched between the feeling that those two parts of the same line have been mismatched and the fact that they actually go so

well together rhythmically and alliteratively. Language fails to work to its full potential just like the mechanical bodies fail to emulate a real being, “[h]aving eaten without tasting / [t]alked without communion” (*LoLB* 40).

Devoid of femininity, the masculine robotic bodies of “Human Cylinders” are perhaps able to reproduce without a woman’s body but remain incomplete and unable to create a new society on their own. Loy’s argument points at the restrictive masculine view of the time that tends to separate spaces according to gender. Suffragettes fight for a place in the public scene through the right of vote; Loy, conversely, shows that impacting the political and societal landscape starts with embracing the private. Since women are the one in charge of raising children, they play an essential role in developing and maintaining the future public sphere:

Each child of a superior woman should be the result of a definite period of psychic development in her life—& not necessarily of a possible irksome & outworn continuance of an alliance—spontaneously adapted for vital creation in the beginning but not necessarily harmoniously balances as the parties to it—follow their individual lines of personal evolution—

For the harmony of the race, each individual should be the expression of an easy & ample interpenetration of the male & female temperaments—free of stress

Woman must become more responsible for the child than man— (*LoLB* 155)

Loy’s own insistence on procreation is not really in line with maternal feminism and its affirmation that women’s rights have to do with the right to maternity (Le Gates 237). Instead of claiming that mothers have a say in the political and social landscape, the poet inverts that statement and insinuates that women, notably women “of superior intelligence,” have a duty to produce individuals who will make a better

society by taking part in politics. This eugenic consideration is brought farther in the final sentence of the excerpt: giving women responsibility for the children, for Loy, is a way of ensuring that those children will grow up to be fit for the society she imagines. Pozorski sees in Loy's affirmation that children are to be raised by women a contradiction of her values, stating that, "while she later argues for alternatives for women's lives beyond heterosexual marriage and worn out alliances between incompatible dispositions, Loy astonishingly argues for women's oppression and dismissal" (57) with that final statement about the duty to raise children. The language used in this passage makes women responsible in the public sphere rather than the private one: women are the ones who facilitate the production of better citizens. In that sense, Loy goes beyond the traditional image of heterosexual kin, with the father being the pillar of the family. Instead, the mother is put at the forefront of the family and society as a whole. As Loy is known to have read Havelock Ellis's works, this depiction of the role and education of women bleeding into what is traditionally that of the men seems influenced by the idea of sex as "mutable" (225).

This movement from the personal to the public sphere, and, thus, from the feminine-coded space to the masculine one, shows the interconnection between the two worlds, and the power attributed to mothers. It is indeed through motherhood that Loy sees a way out of the gendered strictures. Sandeep Parmar, when discussing Loy's feminism, points at the heavy influence of Mary Wollstonecraft's *A Vindication of the Rights of Women* (18). Loy's blurring of space has been associated with the second-wave feminist slogan "The Personal Is Political," but is rather informed by the opening of Wollstonecraft's text. As early as her dedication to "M. Talleyrand-Périgord / Late Bishop of Autun," (9) Wollstonecraft pleads:

If children are to be educated to understand the true principle of patriotism, their mother must be a patriot; and the love of mankind, from which an orderly train of virtues spring, can only be produced by considering the moral and civil interest of mankind; but the education and situation of woman, at present, shuts her out from such investigations. (11)

In a similar fashion, it is through maternity that Loy reclaims women's power. In a text published three years after her manifesto, futurist Rosa Rosà implicitly gives insights on Loy's writing. Rosà (1884-1978) is an Austrian author and illustrator who was also a major woman proponent of Italian Futurism, who is mostly famous for her 1918 novel, *A Woman with Three Souls*, in which she argues against men who still are unsure whether women have souls or not. Rosà's contribution to futurism comes from her wish to create a new woman to follow Marinetti's dream of a new man. She writes:

In our time, women of a truly maternal temperament don't possess that degree of free personality which would render them conscious of a strong and objective self that exists independently of its association with others and is fated to experience the changing stages of life beginning and ending in itself. Women of a truly maternal temperament, whose epicenter is tied to the needs of the family and who altruistically live more for others than for themselves, never achieve those free forms of conscious, autonomous, and self-reflecting selfhood which alone are capable of knowing how to penetrate the world, understanding it perfectly. (234)

Though Rosà clearly could not have been responding to Loy's manifesto since it was not made public yet, it is interesting to see how maternity and caring for others is seen, here, as a fault since it would make it difficult for the mother to truly be

“conscious” and “autonomous” whereas Loy exhibits those qualities through the very act of drawing from the resources that others have made available. The importance of family in her work – as they inspired many works among which “Anglo-Mongrels and the Rose” – is indisputable and in many ways linked to the construction of “self-reflecting selfhood.” The tension between private and public in Loy’s manifesto, and even in the very history of the manifesto’s propagation, foregrounds the construction of the speaker as an artist in the margins. As opposed to Wollstonecraft, who claims: “for my arguments, sir, are dictated by a disinterested spirit—I plead for my sex, not for myself” (9), Loy’s manifesto is rather pointing at her very identity as a writer.

1.3. Public/Private: the manifesto laid out

For Loy, women are placed in the margins of society and textuality but it is not necessarily an oppressive thing. In an article entitled “Feminism and the Public/Private Distinction,” Ruth Gavison argues that the challenges of feminism reside in the two spheres of public and private and that the boundary between the two seems blurry when it comes to women (1-2). Gavison gives more details about what qualifies as public or private: “[h]ere, a distinction is drawn between the political realm (involving decisions which concern the welfare of all) and the realms of family and market (involving decisions to promote private interest)” (5). In a broader sense, she affirms that “[t]he private is that which is unknown and unobserved; the public is that which is known or observed, or at least is capable of being known or observed, because it occurs in a public” (6). The issue, then, according to Gavison, is that women are relentlessly pushed into the realm of the private without ability to participate fully in the more “rewarding” (22) public life. This argument is qualified throughout the article, however, with the idea that the private is also synonymous with freedom since it is hidden (9). Loy’s particular interest in the artist’s marginality, is,

in some way, at the borderline between the public and the private. The Oxford English Dictionary defines “marginal” as follows:

Of an individual or social group: isolated from or not conforming to the dominant society or culture; (perceived as being) on the edge of a society or social unit; belonging to a minority group (frequently with implications of consequent disadvantage). Also: partly belonging to two differing social groups or cultures but not fully integrated into either” (“Marginal”).

To borrow from Gavison’s definition, the marginal seems to reference the public that is unobserved. The “Feminist Manifesto” conforms to that definition with the idea that women are taking part in political matters through the intimate sphere, and the poems help expanding the freedom of the margins. In this subpart, I will, then, focus on the traces of marginality visible in the very construction of the manifesto and the poems.

In “One O’Clock at Night,” the section opening the triptych entitled “Three Moments in Paris,” the woman speaker is falling asleep while reflecting on her lover in relation to gender identity. The poem references conventional gender binaries before unsettling them:

But you who make more noise than any man in the world when
 you clear your throat
 Deafening woke me
 And I caught the thread of the argument
 Immediately assuming my personal mental attitude
 And ceased to be a woman (*LoLB* 15)

The passage opens on the speaker being jolted awake by the sound of her lover’s voice after drifting in and out of consciousness throughout the first part of the poem.

The blank space in the second line provides a separation between the world of the man and that of the woman, which happens to also be a temporal shift. Until “Deafening,” the lines, written in the present tense, are rather oriented toward the male side of the story, whereas, starting at the typographical blank, the poem shifts to the woman’s interiority in the past tense. As a result, the man remains an active figure but the woman is denied agency as she is relegated to the past. Furthermore, at the level of the action itself, the woman does not have a voice since she is supposedly half-asleep. Yet, she does have one for the reader: she is the speaker of the poem, and she reverses the image men may have of her by using an extremely sarcastic and laconic tone in the last lines of the excerpt. Conversely, the man may be the one in charge but his power is undermined by the word “[d]eafening.” Not only does this term imply that the man’s speech can be summarized by the sounds he makes, much like an animal, but the lack of syntactic articulation with the rest of the lines proves that the man uses language in its barest form. He is superior only because he is the louder one. The division between man and woman is enhanced by the indentation on the second line, “you clear your throat.” It gives an indication on the space that both figures – man and woman – occupy.

The creation of a new margin, slightly bigger than the standard one, embodies the very marginality of the female character in the poem. Rosi Braidotti, building on the Deleuzian concept of “nomadism,” claims that women are often pushed to the borders of society: “[t]he-woman-in-me is not a full time member of the patriarchy, neither by rejection nor by acceptance; she is elsewhere on the margin, in the periphery, in the shade (to the delight of Lacanian psychoanalysts) – she cannot be contained in one sentence” (271). In “One O’Clock at Night,” while the main focus is on the man’s action, the woman’s input, relegated to the margins, where society puts

her, is not containable: the margin spills on the space of the line. The slight indentation also makes clear that the line is simply the continuation of the previous one. Breaking a line in two to be able to fit it completely in the frame of the page proves that the space of the page is where the poem unfolds, but also where it is imprisoned. The male figure of the poem tries to be superior to the woman but is restrained by the natural margins of the page, where the woman figure of the poem seems to reside.

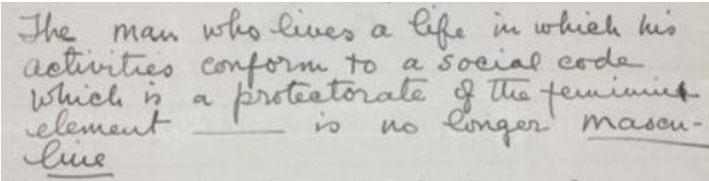
The composition of the poem, with its emphasis on margins and how lineation maps out space, apparently clashes with the prose aesthetic of the manifesto. On the contrary, I argue that the malleability of the page echoes the manuscript of the “Feminist Manifesto.” Loy’s compositional nomadism conveys the tension between men and women visually and upholds the manifesto as a vindication of the marginal woman artist. Jacinta Kelly, in “Purging the Birdcage: The Dissolution of Space in Mina Loy’s Poetry,” sees the “Feminist Manifesto” as a stepping stone for the rest of Loy’s poetry: it “lay[s] the groundwork for an aesthetic that continues to be expounded in radical ways years later” and “undoes the boundaries that circumscribe signification and meaning, but also the linguistic spaces of syntactical units” (2). The limitlessness Kelly describes effectively allows the notion of “women” to spread throughout the text to the point of becoming the structuring force of the manifesto:

Women if you want to realise yourselves - you are on the eve of a devastating psychological upheaval. all your pet illusions must be unmasked - the lies of centuries you have got to go - are you prepared for the Wreck - ? There is no half -

Figure 1.1. Details of Mina Loy’s “Feminist Manifesto.” 1914.

Screen print from The Beinecke Digital Library, YCAL MSS 196, Box 62, Folder 1658, Yale University, New Haven, Connecticut, Yale University Library, <https://collections.library.yale.edu/catalog/2041800>. Accessed July 3rd 2023.

Earlier in the chapter, I studied the second sentence of the manifesto and the way phrases inserted within the main sentence make it harder for the reader to understand the central point of said sentence. In the manuscript, this reading can be refined as lines are not always unfolding on the whole width of the page, as if the poet was trying to make a point in grouping certain ideas together. The blank space, barely visible, under “Women,” is not reproduced in Conover’s version. Yet, Loy could have continued her sentence right under the first line. Instead, “— you are on the eve” is also situated right after “Women.” In that sense, the two parts of the sentence seem to happen at the same time, since they are not connected, as if “Women” were told two things at once, making the whole beginning of the manifesto weave its web around the concept of women. While the manifesto reads as prose and words at the end of lines are often divided in two in order to fit on the page, in the following passage on masculinity and femininity, the lines seem to have an impact on the construction of Loy’s ideas themselves:



The man who lives a life in which his activities conform to a social code which is a protectorate of the feminine element — is no longer masculine

Figure 1.2. Details of Mina Loy’s “Feminist Manifesto.” 1914.

Screen print from The Beinecke Digital Library, YCAL MSS 196, Box 62, Folder 1658, Yale University, New Haven, Connecticut, Yale University Library, <https://collections.library.yale.edu/catalog/2041800>. Accessed July 3rd 2023.

The man who lives a life in which his activities conform to a
 social code which is a protectorate of the feminine element—
 —is no longer masculine

Figure 1.3. Details from Mina Loy's "Feminist Manifesto." 1914.

Scan from *The Lost Lunar Baedeker*, edited by Roger L. Conover, Farrar, Straus &
 Giroux, 1997, p. 153.

Loy's dashes are roughly similar in size except in this very passage where the dash is a lot longer than others, as shown in Conover's edition specifically. Conover's dash is so long that it almost reads as two dashes with the line break. However, in Loy's manuscript, the peculiarly long dash, enables "feminine" and "masculine" to be written right under each other with "masculine" being broken down in two parts due to the format of the page, which would not have been the case if the dash was the same size as the other dashes visible in the manifesto. The placement of the two words and the broken "masculine" create a balance where "the feminine" is complete and intact while men are associated with a partial and incomplete aesthetic. This is even more visible when going back to the second sentence: women are linked with the multiplicity of the sentence that is saying so much at the same time, to the point of blurring the immediate meaning, whereas men are shortened in their excess. Moreover, the poet breaks the word so that "line" is alone at the end of the paragraph, thus referencing the lexical field of writing, or even the linear aspect of dashes that are so present throughout the text. Men, then, are torn from the very act of writing that is embedded in the word "masculine."

The genre of the "Feminist Manifesto" is difficult to pinpoint: in its title, it is a manifesto, and the manuscript can be found in a folder named "writings of others" in Mabel Dodge's Papers at the Beinecke. Yet, it remains a letter. Such instability in the

manifesto's genre makes it even more obvious that the feminist views expressed are not to be conflated with Loy's personal beliefs in feminism since, as mentioned, the document reads as a staging of the narrator's conflicted views on the movement. Sara Crangle, in the introduction to *Stories and Essays of Mina Loy*, makes an excellent point concerning the use of dashes in Loy's manuscripts: Loys's dashes often stand for an incomplete and unedited thought process . . . Although the number of Loy's dashes usually diminishes as editing gets underway, there can be no doubt that the length of her dashes is meant to signify either an extended pause, or on occasion, an unspoken word" (xviii-xix).²⁹ The em dash in the first sentence, "The woman who has not succeeded in striking that advantageous bargain—is prohibited from any but surreptitious re-action to Life-stimuli" (155), highlights the subject and its situation. The comma in the second sentence quoted is placed in such a way that "will" stands out in a way that it would not without the comma, responding to the capital "NO" of the beginning and stressing the assertiveness of the text even more. In both cases, however, the element of typography disrupting the flow of the sentence restructures the hierarchy of the different syntactic elements. The verb is no longer attached to the subject and becomes almost autonomous. In that sense, the core of the sentence is decentered into different syntactic poles that seem equally important:

²⁹ See Sara Crangle, *Stories and Essays of Mina Loy*, Dalkey Archive Press, 2011: "Consider, for instance, the following sentence, which is drawn from the handwritten draft of 'The Sacred Prostitute': 'Love – is a feminine conception – spell't Greed — with a capital G - - this is female – alright!' In the typescript edited in Loy's hand, the same sentence shows a marked reduction in dashes, and a return to more standard punctuation: 'Love is a feminine conception spelt "Greed" with a capital "G" —this is female, all right!'" (xix)

And if you honestly desire to find your level without prejudice—be **Brave** & deny at the outset—that pathetic clap-trap war cry **Woman is the equal of man**—
 She is **NOT!** for

Figure 1.4. Details from Mina Loy's "Feminist Manifesto." 1914.

Scan from *The Lost Lunar Baedeker*, edited by Roger L. Conover, Farrar, Straus & Giroux, 1997, p. 153.

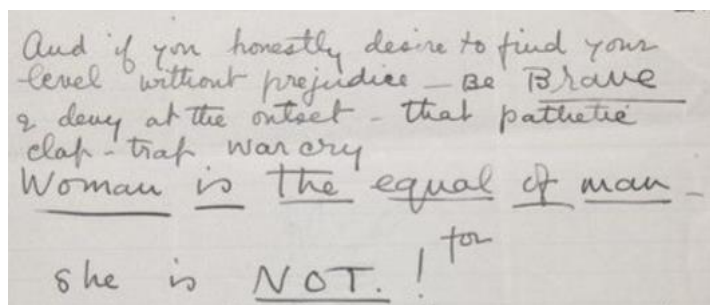


Figure 1.5. Details of Mina Loy's "Feminist Manifesto." 1914.

Screen print from The Beinecke Digital Library, YCAL MSS 196, Box 62, Folder 1658, Yale University, New Haven, Connecticut, Yale University Library, <https://collections.library.yale.edu/catalog/2041800>. Accessed July 3rd 2023.

The full stop after "NOT" and before the exclamation mark is not reproduced in Conover's version yet it almost entails that the committed frustration of the speaker comes with a delay and further intensifies the shattered feel of the excerpt. Loy's syntax is fragmented, not only because of the dashes, but also due the different types of font that make even the small, lonely "for" attract attention and become a core element of the text. The intensity of the ever-changing text keeps the reader's attention focused on what is happening on the page. The multiplication of sentence fragments, creating both an informal tone resembling that of oral speech and little clusters of awkwardly linked ideas, undermines, at times, the force of the manifesto.

The activist stance the speaker takes through the increasingly shorter and jolting rhythm created by the syntax, typography and single underlined words hooks the reader while the pauses intimated by the same textual elements bring a sort of proximity between speaker and reader.

This sense of intimacy is cemented by the history of the document: Loy's "Feminist Manifesto" plays with this division of public and private in its very nature. The form of the manifesto, the way it is written, is very similar to Loy's personal letters, also full of dashes and underlined words of different sizes:

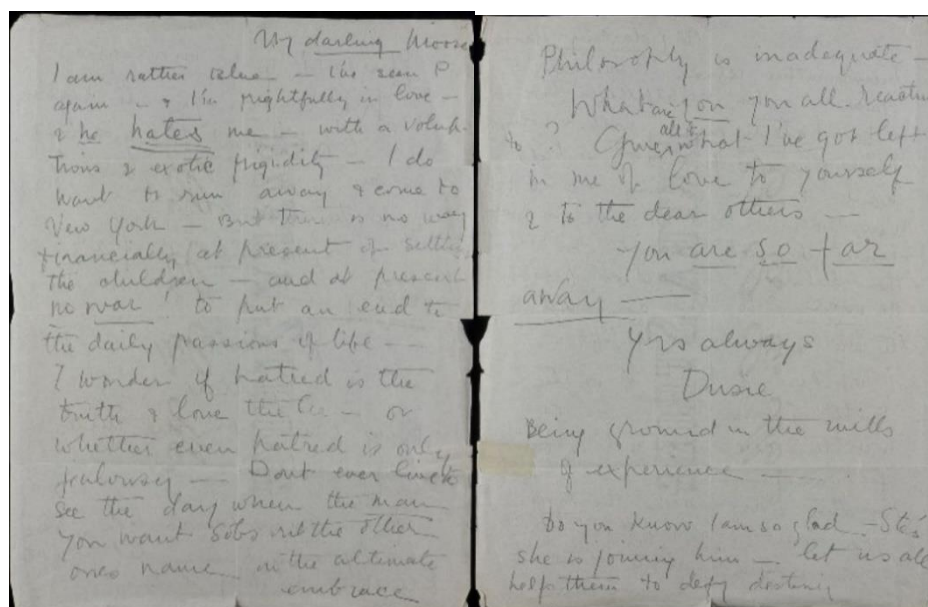


Figure 1.6. Letter from Mina Loy to Mabel Dodge Luhan. 1914.

Downloaded from the Beinecke Library, Mabel Dodge Luhan Papers, Box 24, Folder 664-5, Yale University, New Haven, Connecticut, Yale University Library, <https://collections.library.yale.edu/catalog/2041800>. Accessed July 5th 2023.

The letter's formal similarity to the "Feminist Manifesto" is quite surprising as said manifesto appears performative and loud, while the same use of visual elements, in the letter, is linked to extremely intimate matters: "I've seen P[apini] again — I'm frightfully in love." In this context, the manifesto appears conversational in its writing and it is rather the tone of the poet that grants her authority. The manuscript of the

manifesto is “cleaner” than her sometimes rushed letters, yet it is still very much in touch with the style of her correspondences.

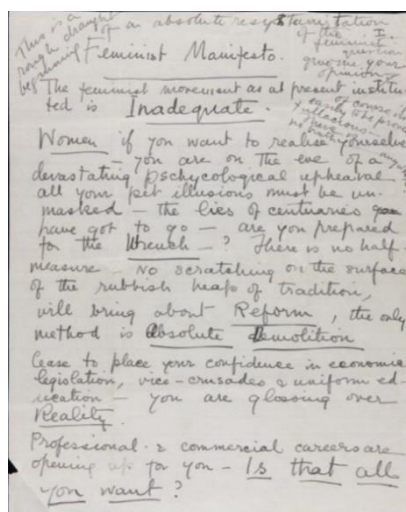


Figure 1.7. Mina Loy's first page to "Feminist Manifesto." 1914.

Downloaded from the Beinecke Library, Mabel Dodge Luhan Papers, Box 62, Folder 1658, Yale University, New Haven, Connecticut, Yale University Library, <https://collections.library.yale.edu/catalog/2041800>. Accessed July 3rd 2023.

A quick comparison of the manuscript with Conover's edition shows that the editor made the decision to make most of the underlined words bigger. It is difficult to understand from the manuscript only whether this was a conscious choice from the poet or if it is just a symptom of the writing momentum that pushed Loy to change the size of her handwriting, just like Crangle seemed to imply for the dashes. Other meaningful differences between the manuscript and the edited text include Conover's choices for lineation and capitalization. The edited text does not follow the author's choice of lineation, opting to let the page itself carry the prose in most instances. Yet, the word "Reality" is placed alone in a line in both the manuscript and the edited text, thus showing that Conover still somewhat follows the overall shape of the manifesto, if not rigorously. As for capitalization, it is worth noticing that some of the words

capitalized by Conover are not clearly capitals in the manuscript. The example of “be Brave” is quite illuminating in that regard:

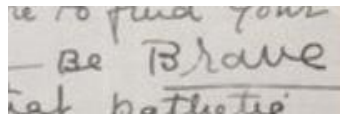


Figure 1.8. Details from Mina Loy’s second page of “Feminist Manifesto.” 1914. Downloaded from the Beinecke Library, Mabel Dodge Luhan Papers, Box 62, Folder 1658. Yale University, New Haven, Connecticut, Yale University Library, <https://collections.library.yale.edu/catalog/2041800>. Accessed July 3rd 2023.

Here, the “b” of “brave,” that Conover decided to capitalize, is virtually matching to the “b” from “be.” The case could also be made for “Woman,” in Figure 1.7, as there is no clear indication that the first letter should be capitalized; Loy’s handwriting is fairly elusive. I read Conover’s edition as an attempt to follow implicit indications from the manuscript that Loy is trying to make a strong statement, as visible in the later capitalization of “Absolute Demolition”:

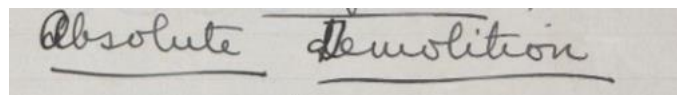


Figure 1.9. Details from Mina Loy’s first page of “Feminist Manifesto.” 1914. Downloaded from the Beinecke Library, Mabel Dodge Luhan Papers, Box 62, Folder 1658. Yale University, New Haven, Connecticut, Yale University Library, <https://collections.library.yale.edu/catalog/2041800>. Accessed July 3rd 2023.

This editing does make sense, then, but also shows the difficulty of translating handwriting into typed material. Overall, Conover’s decisions are in touch with the “extraordinary” (LoLB xi) portrayal of Loy he developed in his editions of her works. In *Mina Loy’s Critical Modernism*, Laura Scuriatti explains that “[d]uring her lifetime she was considered an extremely refined, but cold, cerebral poet: experimental, but, unlike other experimental and avant-garde writers, unfit for both the broad audience

and for the demands of the cultural industry” (2). Conover’s edition of the “Feminist Manifesto” aims to stress Loy’s surprising uniqueness to an audience that is already familiar with modernist experiments and not as easily impressed, but, in doing so, he overcompensates for the manifesto’s timid release to an audience.

The tension between performance and intimacy hints at the nature of Loy’s relationship with Dodge Luhan; the assertiveness of the manifesto clashes with Loy’s private comments to her friend where she undermines her own ideas. The top of the manuscript for the manifesto indeed reads “[t]his is a rough draught beginning of an absolute resubstantiation of the feminist question. Give me your opinion. Of course it easily will be proved fallacious – there is no truth – anywhere” (YCAL MSS 196, Box 62, Folder 1658). Because of Loy’s attempts at avoiding criticisms before they are even formulated, and the gossiping nature of her letters to Mabel Dodge, the manifesto does not appear to be a product of Loy’s fervent commitment to feminism but rather a response to the concerns of her circle of acquaintances. Christina Walter thus insists that the way the poet “distances herself” (669) from the manifesto in her letter to Dodge Luhan shows that she is “aware of the essay’s overweening attachment to individualist modes of social protest and artistic expression, and of the limits of such an attachment.” (668) Loy’s feminism is situated rather than all-encompassing.

Interestingly, the word “feminism” is used in the title of the manifesto, but Loy otherwise rather refers to the woman’s cause, as visible in her letter to Dodge Luhan about her “Feminist Manifesto” – “I feel rather hopeless of devotion to the Woman-Cause” (*LoLB* 216) – or in “Lions’ Jaws” where she mentions “Imna Oly / (secret service buffoon to the Woman’s Cause)” (*LoLB* 49). The term “women’s cause” was very much used at the time: “The Ethics of the Women’s Cause,” written

by Durant Drake and published in November 1914, in the *North American Review*, for instance, is a criticism of any belief that women should have what they want. (771) While the author briefly mentions “the feminist party” (772) with wariness, he also believes that giving women the right to vote would not necessarily be a bad thing since “there are certain evils which more deeply affect women—as the alcohol trade, prostitution, child-labor, inefficient schools, unsanitary conditions—and it may be hoped that it will be easier to eradicate these evils with their help.” (773) By mentioning “child-labor,” among others, Drake seems to imply that the women’s cause cannot only be defined by the political work of feminists, but also concerns the improvement of the private lives of women. Similarly, Anne Boigeol explains that “[d]uring the first half of the twentieth century a number of social groupings took up cudgels on behalf of women’s rights of which, at the time, there were very few indeed: the feminist movement, certain political parties, ideological groups (such as the free-thinkers or the free-masons), and also female members of the legal profession,” (193) thus extending the question of the women’s cause beyond feminism. While the “women’s cause” seems to be a pretty vague term in the early twentieth century, Laure Bereni recently offered a definition in her article about collective protest, though not necessarily linked to the modernist period:

The women’s cause field refers to the relational structure of groups mostly devoted to advancing women/challenging the gender order in a variety of social settings, cutting across the line between civil society and political institutions. Unlike the women’s movement, the women’s cause field encompasses a set of both extra-institutional and intra-institutional collective actors. The term ‘women’s cause’ has a generic meaning: far from designating a unique, unequivocal perspective and/or a single issue, the women’s cause

refers to a wide array of particular causes associated to the advancement of women (gender violence, pay equity, sexual harassment, women's political representation, etc.), and to a variety of (potentially conflicting) definitions of women's interests, beyond the self-identified 'feminist' movement (Ferree & Mueller, 2004). (209)

The term "women's cause" is then not linked with the act of taking a strong position regarding how to achieve a sense of equality but rather covers a multitude of views on the matter and nurses the clashes between different views. Yet, Loy does not really write about "women's cause" but rather "woman's cause" in the singular, hinting at the personal nature of her interest in feminist matters. Scuriatti focuses on the author's professed eccentricity and argues that there is a form of "distance" (*CM* 221) or resistance in everything that Loy did, especially when she participated in avant-garde movements, in subverting language, in feminism. Such a desire to appear withdrawn makes Loy embody the anti-institutional side of modernism while presenting her as outside of the norm. Loy's definition of the artist, later in her career, is structured in a similar way as the "Feminist Manifesto." "The Artist and the Public," one of Loy's more polemical writings, written in 1917, re-emphasizes this comparison between Loy's model artist and women. The text opens with the bold claim that "[t]he only trouble with The Public is education. The Artist is uneducated, is seeing IT for the first time; he can never see the same thing twice" (*Caws* 33) which resonates with the "Feminist Manifesto" in the sense that it invalidates men's superiority because of a good education.

As described throughout the chapter, Loy's "Feminist Manifesto" reads as an aesthetic pamphlet developing the position of the artist within modernity, at the same time as that of women. Loy, then, effectively reverses the power struggle that places

expatriate men as the *de facto* artists to highlight both the mutual dependence of artists independently of gender and how the way women were treated gave them a privileged understanding of modernist artisthood. Instead of presenting female identity free of all the constraints and misconceptions that she sees in avant-garde literary movements, Loy chooses to embrace all those ideas on womanhood thus defining women by their kaleidoscopic nature, by excess. The contradictions and juxtapositions woven in the “Feminist Manifesto” do not invalidate Loy’s feminist intentions but rather constructing a deeply singular form of feminine protest resting on the poet’s input and insight on modernism. Rachel Hollander’s “Indifference as Resistance: Virginia Woolf’s feminist ethics in *Three Guineas*” focuses on Woolf’s “ethics of otherness” to show how she “reclaims modernist aesthetic practice as an opportunity for radical social change” (82). Loy’s manifesto, to borrow Hollander’s phrasing, bears traces of otherness that enable her to reclaim radical social change as an opportunity for developing her own modernist aesthetic.

Chapter 2

Feminism in construction: the gendered body in space

The previous chapter examined Loy's "Feminist Manifesto" to argue that the poet was not actually taking a position within the feminist movement but, instead, built on appropriating and transforming masculinist discourses of the time to prove her worth as an artist. This chapter continues the exploration of Loy's involvement with gender by discussing the various ways in which the poet is openly constructing feminine poetics that are consistent throughout her poetic oeuvre. To do so, I am interested in Loy's treatment of the female subject "in progress." By that, I mean that the poet is constantly shifting the parameters of women's authority, thus creating a subject in flux, always evolving and unfolding, clashing with male figures, who remain fairly static. The chapter's focus on this question of incompleteness spreads to a large array of Loy's literary features but is firmly anchored in the relationship between space and physicality. The association of those two terms is developed beyond the poems. In the short story "Incident," Loy's speaker recalls "a ridiculous little accident" (*SE* 36):

I was hurrying to a tea-party with a friend. We were walking very quickly; arguing humorously, when, laughing, I nodded my head with what turned out to be exaggerated emphasis, which, as I was to realise later, dislocated my cranium from the spinal column.

Suddenly, I found myself "nowhere."

"Fool," I anxiously upbraided myself, "you've gone and let 'it' drop off";

spontaneously, as if it were quite usual for me to look upon my body as merely

an instrument with which to contact one's universe, rather than my whole circumscribe "self." (36)

In this short passage, the speaker's disjointed body has a direct impact on the spatial reality it faces. Deprived of connection between her head and the rest of her body, the speaker is still attached to space (since she is able to "[f]ind [her]self") but is confronted with indeterminacy. This moment of dislocation brings forth a reflection on embodiment: the "incident" changes the speaker's understanding of the lived body, which is no longer the marker of an autonomous identity but a cosmic tool.

The opening of "Incident" is grounded in the idea that the speaker exceeds the boundaries of their body and exists beyond the flesh – a thought that is consistently linked to womanhood throughout Loy's poems. Though the limits of gender boundaries have been thoroughly studied for authors like Djuna Barnes, Gertrude Stein, or Marianne Moore, in relation to queer theories, Loy is more interested in the ability of the female body to be in transition, where the male body is limited. In his article on gender and modernism, Juan Antonio Suárez affirms that

Carolyn Burke (1987: 98-122) has unveiled the gender-based critiques of culture imbuing Gertrude Stein's, Mina Loy's, and Marianne Moore's use of "logopoeia" and collage; these devices had been regarded in purely formalist terms, their feminist cultural politics ignored to fit largely male-informed conceptions of modern writing. (21)

On the one hand, Burke notes the tendency to use theories and frameworks designed by men to make sense of women in modernism, on the other hand, themes and motifs linked with femininity are recuperated by men, like Marinetti's desire to procreate, mentioned in the previous chapter. Loy's poems both reclaim feminine poetics and blur gendered traditions, boundaries between public and private, and masculine and

feminine perceptions of space. To further explore gender and embodiment, I look at the tension between static male characters and the fluctuating female subjectivity that the poet seems to forge in her work.

The theme of pregnancy is what sets Loy apart when it comes to gender construction. Erin M. Kingsley's article on Olive Moore's *Spleen* and Heather A. Love and Jerika Sanderson's work on Sophie Treadwell's *Machinal* both open on a discussion of Loy's "Parturition." The harsh representation of delivery in the poem is identified as the beginning of realistic reflections on motherhood in modernist art. The myth of organic, fulfilling motherhood is openly challenged. Both articles also note Loy's understanding of the complex relationship between inside and outside when discussing the pregnant body. The maternal body is a valuable subject for the field of geography of the body since it adapts to space in different ways from the moment the pregnancy is known to the time the child, product of said pregnancy, is able to navigate space autonomously, without the mother's help. Though it is called "motherhood" studies, I base my study of Loy's maternal body on Andrea O'Reilly's concept of "mothering," as developed in *Matricentric Feminism: Theory, Activism, and Practice*. The verbal form of the word indicates an action that has started but is not yet achieved. O'Reilly further explains that mothering has to do with "women's experiences of mothering and is female defined and centred and potentially empowering to women" (16). Loy's writing of women's lives from birth (in "Anglo-Mongrels and the Rose," for instance) to the threshold of death ("An Aged Woman") evidently examines acts of mothering and their connection to female authority. The act of writing itself seems to theorize the transitional nature of femininity. For this chapter, then, I am attentive to the construction of gender within the poem but I also take into account the ways in which the poetic elements associated with Loy's take on

womanhood spill beyond the categories of gender and into the poet's writing style to propose a global survey of Loy's gender poetics. This chapter, then, considers the appeal of Loy's poetry for different waves of feminist literary criticism developed over the past century.

My analysis opens on the twentieth century obsession with the gaze and how Loy manages to upend the power dynamic that places women as prisoners of the male gaze in the metropolis – which will be discussed as the favored site of modernity. This section is fully invested in the poet's construction of masculinity and understanding of masculinist literary tropes. Femininity, in turn, is formed against men modernists' gender poetics. The second part of the chapter has to do with the ways in which the female subject is fashioned. The goal is not to oppose masculinity and femininity or to restrict gender to those two categories but to show that Loy's poems are particularly attached to the interlocking and division of this gender binary as part of her treatment of female authority. My study of womanhood specifically focuses on the maternal body and the family unit, which often lacks a father figure in Loy's poems. Motherhood, here, stands first and foremost for the destruction of bodily boundaries, which starts with pregnancy before being opened up to all women. Finally, I will broaden this engagement with space and the body to the very reader's experience of the space of the page. If the maternal body is characterized by surplus – as it is carrying another self within oneself – this dialogical structure expands to the page, which becomes the site of linguistic construction *par excellence* as the reader is constantly incited to take part in the act of creation.

2.1. Inverting gender roles through the gaze

The “Feminist Manifesto” provides a point of view on how Loy, by way of her speaker, explores various ideas pertaining to gender politics. The poems appear to be

even more critical of the tensions between genders. Natalya Lusty and Julian Murphet's *Modernism and Masculinity* frames the early twentieth century as a cultural upheaval that destabilizes the masculine subject, notably due to the World Wars, which forced men to rethink their relation to the body, intimacy and community (5). Both femininity and masculinity changed also because of the movement of women out of the household (7), as discussed in the first chapter. The progressive opening of private and public spheres exemplifies how modernity redefines the space allotted to women, no longer restricted to the status of "angel in the house," but slowly spreading toward a more public scene. Yet, Elizabeth Evans mentions the perhaps idealistic view of women's newfound freedom at the time. She notes that, if suffragism launched women into the public and political life of the time, this increase in freedom was not granted at all (5). Indeed, the public sphere of modernity is located in the capitalistic metropolis that leaves enough space for women to contribute to the economic system but not enough to realize themselves as agents. Loy's "Magasins du Louvre" is symptomatic of the modern placement of women within urban consumer culture:

One cocotte wears a bowler hat and a sham camellia

And one an iridescent boa

For there are two of them

Passing

And the solicitous mouth of one is straight

The other curved to a static smile

They see the dolls

And for a moment their eyes relax

To a flicker of elements unconditionally primeval

And now averted
 Seek each other's surreptitiously
 To know if the other has seen. (*LoLB* 18)

The term “cocotte,” suggestive of the extravagant demimonde lifestyle, connects the city and its streets to pleasure – specifically visual pleasure. The women in the poem are fascinated by a shop window displaying dolls, and for the brief moment of delight that the dolls provoke, the two characters are the entertained audience of the street spectacle, being the ones who “see” and “[s]eek each other's” eyes. However, this last motion from the dolls to each other, coupled with the third-person point of view of the poem, crystallizes textually what the reader already knows: that the cocottes are the unaware performers of the real spectacle. The detailed description of their sartorial lavishness outshines the dolls, which are never discussed with precision. The “static smile[s],” either curved or straight, reify the women to the point that the boundaries between humans and dolls blur. The parallel between human and non-human is reinforced by the facts that the two figures are working girls, perused by men like commodities with price tags. The poem is representative of Loy's approach to womanhood, which oscillates between resistant performativity and conformity. She shows the paradoxical side of female public empowerment, already discussed in Liz Conor's *The Spectacular Modern Woman: Feminine Visibility in the 1920s*. Conor argues that women's public lives put them in a position of power while creating a “gender asymmetry of ‘looks’” (134), meaning that their corporeality in the public sphere could still be weaponized by men's voyeuristic gaze.

My analysis revolves around Loy's focus on the gaze as a tool to restore balance between men and women. The poet responds to masculinist commonplaces about gender but rather than reversing literary conventions, she is applying female-

coded tropes to her treatment of male figures. In that sense, Loy's poetry questions the ins and outs of female authority as a reaction to what men, at the time, wrote about gender. While Colleen Lamos explains that "femininity is commonly represented in male modernist texts as a site of errancy, at once externalized as an alternatively dangerous or utopian alterity and internalized as the exciting possibility of freedom from restrictive masculine norms" (10), DuPlessis affirms, in "'Virile Thought': Modernist Maleness, Poetic Forms and Practices," that "masculine norms" are not that "restrictive" since "[t]he main claim, consistent from romanticisms through modernisms (as one historical 'unit' of modes of maleness), is a male-imperial potential for ranging across and deploying a variety of sex-gender stances" (19). The multiplicity of gendered stances in modernism are reflected in Loy's never stable feminist responses. Her own take on gender is contextual but rooted in the relation between space and the body – a phenomenological take on visibility where the body inhabits space rather than is in space. In her poems, she dismantles the belief that gender is constructed as a set of communicating vessels where women are objects of the gaze and men subjects.

In "Songs to Joannes," the poet collects fragments of a deteriorating relationship between two lovers which, no matter the setting, disclose the intimacy between two bodies. Just like women are consumable in the public space of the city, men's relocation into the private sphere of romance is described in rather uncomfortable terms that actually fail to recount the emotional tie between the two characters and leave the male lover exposed in his interest in a superficial love affair. Pavlina Ferfeli even argues that Loy's woman speaker turns the "male gaze" back on men: "[o]pting to offer an ironical equivalent of a 'consumable' male body part, Loy uses her own eye as predatory sexual lens and questions the naturalness of the modern

sexual economy which amounts to the subjugation, marginalization and exploitation of female embodiment” (97).³⁰ Poem X casts a voyeuristic and fetishizing look on the male body:

Shuttle-cock and battle-door

A little pink-love

And feathers are strewn. (*LoLB* 56)

The brief poem is fairly impressionistic in its depiction of heterosexual intercourse, with no overtly crass terms – it is even hard to see human figures in this mingling of images. Yet, with simple hyphens, the speaker transforms badminton terms into the more graphic sexual image of a “cock” trying to get into the “door” of the female body, as a way to describe penetration. Further, the layout of the poem aligns “cock” and “feathers” to play on the various meaning of the first word, which refers both to the man’s appendage and to the animal, as DuPlessis asserts, before noting that the layers of puns visible in the poem transform sex into “a game, a sport, a cartoon” (*GRRC* 63). More than emphasizing the playful, almost ridiculous, nature of the couple’s sexuality, the lack of precision in the three lines of the poem (created by both appending nouns one after the other and indefinite articles) makes it possible for the reader to rearrange the links between the hyphenated terms in various ways, thus drawing the reader’s gaze on the description of male genitalia in a way that borders reification due to the use of synecdoche. The metaphor of the game of badminton is

³⁰ The “male gaze” is a term used by Laura Mulvey in her essay “Visual Pleasure and Narrative Cinema.” She writes: “In a world ordered by sexual imbalance, pleasure in looking has been split between active/male and passive/female. The determining male gaze projects its fantasy onto the female figure, which is styled accordingly. In their traditional exhibitionist role women are simultaneously looked at and displayed, with their appearance coded for strong visual and erotic impact so that they can be said to connote to-be-looked-at-ness.” (62-3) The idea is that cinema shows us a version of the femininity through a masculine point of view. As a response to this, the term “female gaze” has been coined to refer to a perspective that evades heterosexual masculine fantasies.

reversed, since, instead of showing a softer vision of sexuality, the poet lets coarse images ooze from the metaphorical components of the poem.

The page becomes a sort of peephole for the reader, who is offered an almost pornographic view of masculinity, while Joannes's lover, as the speaker of the poems, evades this forced exhibitionism. "Songs to Joannes" is representative of the outward movement of exposing intimacy in a public space, which transforms the body into an object rather than creating a subject. Poem II reduces the male lover to his skin, which further denies him interiority:

The skin-sack

In which a wanton duality

Packed

All the completion of my infructuous impulses

Something the shape of a man

To the casual vulgarity of the merely observant

More of a clock-work mechanism

Running down against time

To which I am not paced

My finger-tips are numb from fretting your hair

A God's door-mat

On the threshold of your mind (*LoLB* 53-4)

The big blank space at the beginning of the poem creates a form of performance with the reader being caught in a state of enforced silence before the text even starts. The fact that the first and last lines are both aligned on the right margin makes them reminiscent of the dashes in "On Third Avenue," where the repetition of the two lines "Such are the compensations of poverty, / to see ——" acts as a curtain, opening and

closing the description of the scene, just like in a play.³¹ Similarly, here, the long spaces at the beginning and the end of the poem dramatize the action described.

Once more, the man of the poem is reduced to a simple “skin-sack,” a thing – rather than a being – “shape[d]” like a man. This objectification is developed through the image of “finger-tips . . . fretting:” the speaker’s act of stroking the ex-lover’s strands of hair is reminiscent of the sensation of the reader’s hand brushing the pages. When discussing the physical book in the context of the emerging literary hypertext, at the turn of the twenty-first century, Christopher Keep remarks that “[t]he codex book is an exemplary fetish object” as it is “[h]eld in the hands, its pages caressed and turned, or even flung away like a lover scorned” (167). In that sense, the man of the poem is objectified and almost manipulated in real time by the reader. The male body is exhibited on the page the reader looks upon and holds close like an intimate and yet unfamiliar object. This reduction of the body to the simple “skin-sack” of sexual organs reads as surrealism before its time. Kinnahan’s “Surrealism and the Female Body: Economies of Violence” ties Loy to photographic surrealism by stressing the visual component of the movement. Kinnahan reminds us of surrealist art “in which representations of women’s bodies are variously mutilated, disfigured, and violated” (89), notably in an effort to push against the sudden visibility given to male bodies torn by experiences of the battlefield. “Songs to Joannes,” however, was composed in its final form in 1917, a few years before André Breton’s 1924 *Surrealist Manifesto*.³²

³¹ “Le long tiret situé à la fin du vers 30 opère un lever de rideau qui théâtralise la scène. La rue est définie comme le lieu d’un spectacle visuel perpétuellement renouvelé, l’espace où se déploie une féerie qui emprunte au surréalisme” (156) in “‘Compensation of poverty’ : la féerie urbaine ou la modernité en question dans ‘On Third Avenue’ et ‘Ephemerid’ de Mina Loy.” / “The long dash positioned at the end of the thirtieth line performs a curtain raiser that dramatizes the scene. The street is defined as the place where the visual spectacle is perpetually renewed, the space where a fairyland that borrows from surrealism unfolds.” My translation.

³² André Breton (1896-1966) is the main figurehead of the surrealist movement. He is notably known for his interest in automatic writing, an unconscious form of art-making in which the artist surrenders

Though Loy's poem could not have been inspired by surrealism at that point of time, the similarities between the two show that Loy anticipated the extreme bodily violence that would come out of post-war artistic practices. Loy contextualizes the fragmented male body in an intimate setting, which turns around the relationship between men and women later developed by the surrealist artistic movement.

Reading the poem as an early example of surrealism enriches the analysis of the power dynamic between the two lovers. Julia Kelly expands on physical touch and strengthens the parallel between Surrealism and "Songs to Joannes." The verb "to fret," supposed to reference the act of petting hair, is very similar to the French *frotter* (scraping or rubbing) that Breton used "to describe the impact between different realities whose rubbing together produces a spark or fire of surrealist revelation" while "the more delicate *frôler* suggests a constant state of arousal without real fulfilment" (80). The two words are encapsulated in Loy's use of "fretting." First of all, the verb brings a strangely anxious tone to the tender gesture described. As a result, the hypersexual beginning is tempered since sexual release appears to be denied to the male lover. Second, Loy's altered view of gender where men are battered muses is reiterated by a nod to how women's sexuality was perceived at the time: the woman is the one who is in charge of the man's fulfilment. Kelly adds that "*Frôleuses* can also be teasing prostitutes whose *métier* is seduction without an eventual amorous outcome. In this way the encounter, as a cornerstone of surrealist erotic experience, is mediated through ambiguity and distance, its tensions and frustrations heightening its sensual and libidinal appeal" (80). The image of women as sex workers, already discussed in "Magasins du Louvre" reappears, proving that Loy

his intellectual control. Carolyn Burke notes in *Becoming Modern: The Life of Mina Loy* that Loy and Breton knew each other (334) but also that the surrealists had much respect for her husband, Arthur Cravan (320).

is not simply inverting the way art, at the time, perceives men and women, but rather subjecting them to the same approach.

Both male and female bodies are equally visible and fetishizable in Loy's poems since space is reorganized in a way that opens up the boundaries between public and private. While the advent of the "new public woman" is perceived as women's encroachment on the male sphere, Loy's poems simply erase borders between inside and outside, or even inner and outer self. When focusing on men characters, the poet often represents space as the thing that has an impact on the body, meaning that the male body has to adapt to its surroundings: it is naked in the privacy of "Songs to Joannes," but adorned by a hat, in the streets of "Virgins Plus Curtains Minus Dots." Conversely, women are inhabiting space and forcing their surroundings to accommodate their bodies. My understanding of the difference between masculine and feminine perceptions of space in Loy's poetry can be summarized by looking at the interconnection between housing and body size in "Aphorisms on Futurism" (1914):

FORGET that you live in houses, that you may live in yourself—

FOR the smallest people live in the greatest houses.

BUT the smallest person, potentially, is as great as the Universe (*LoLB* 149)

Though men claim more space ("greatest houses") they are not able to reach the level of consciousness that make women "as great as the Universe," and that is entirely due to their different bodies.

In "Parturition," for instance, it is difficult to pinpoint where the parturient woman is as she describes the "blurring spatial contours" (*LoLB* 5): the transcendental experience of childbirth rids the mother-to-be of her bodily presence but not of her pain. The speaker is not rooted in space and yet it is somehow implied that this out-of-

body episode happens within a hospital room – which is at the crossroads between public and private, since it is a bedroom visited by doctors. Indeed, in the stanza on the “next morning,” the mother wears “[a] ludicrous little halo / [o]f which she is sublimely unaware” (*LoLB* 7), which seems to refer to the practice of Twilight Sleep.³³ The blurring of public and private is all the more emphasized by the window left ajar:

The open window is full of a voice

A fashionable portrait-painter

Running up-stairs to a woman’s apartment

Sings

“All the girls are tid’ly did’ly

All the girls are nice

Whether they wear their hair in curls

Or –”

At the back of the thoughts to which I permit crystallization

The conception Brute

Why ?

The irresponsibility of the male

Leaves woman her superior Inferiority

He is running up-stairs (*LoLB* 5)

The window does not enclose the woman in the hospital room just like the man that can be heard through the window is escaping the public space of the street to hide in a

³³ Henry Smith Williams’s *Twilight Sleep: A Simple Account of the New Discoveries in Painless Childbirth* (1914) relates the use of a drug called scopolamin in childbirth (14). Depending on the dose administered, the parturient woman under the influence of the narcotic would remain conscious during childbirth, though in a dream-like state, and would forget the event after the child’s birth (18).

“woman’s apartment.” The two characters are trapped in in-between spaces. It is through that very window that the elevated state the mother-to-be reaches through childbirth is interrupted by the down-to-earth preoccupations of the man, running to satiate his flesh in a way that might result in another woman’s unearthly suffering. Loy anachronistically adapts her poetry to Doreen Massey’s concept of “space invaders,” which was specifically created to express the awkwardness of having women in a typically masculine space.³⁴ Massey’s focal points are spaces that are forbidden to certain types of bodies (she underlines, in this respect, that race and gender are two factors that impact the disposition of bodies in space). She also dwells on the irregularities of such divisions in space by identifying those who have access to a portion of a certain space, even though they should not be allowed in it. In the poem, the man is contained in the woman’s space. He intrudes an experience that is only available to women. The space dedicated to women is thus disrupted by an alien presence, which is emphasized by the sudden shift in tone: the man is thoroughly unaware of the struggle of the woman since the description of girls in the song: “All girls are tid’ly did’ly / all the girls are nice” is completely out of tune with the description of the parturient woman.

The body of the man and that of the woman do not belong to the same space nor the same world: “[h]e is running up-stairs” and “I am climbing a distorted mountain of agony” are clearly echoing each other. Both figures execute the same

³⁴ In “Landscape, Space, and Politics: an Essay”, written in 2008, geographer Doreen Massey writes about her time at Oxford University and feeling like a “space invader.” She writes: “These are the wrenchings of a displacement effected by class. They reverse the terms of the usual question of belonging in relation to place and landscape. Rather than that dwelling-saturated question of our belonging to a place, we should be asking the question of to whom this place belongs. Who owns it? Materially, and in terms of power, the ‘national’ working class (of whatever ethnic origin) has no more ownership than does the recent migrant.” <https://thefutureoflandscape.wordpress.com/landscapespacepolitics-an-essay/>. Accessed Aug 11, 2023.

action – going up – yet, the man can do it effortlessly while the woman is striving. As the speaker interrupts the image of parturition to focus on the male counterpart, the poem inverts the *topos* of the woman interfering in typically masculine spaces. The space of the poem itself is just as meaningful for it allows us to compare the man’s perspective of the story to the woman’s, side by side. When the speaker mentions “the irresponsibility of men,” the disposition of the line, with the blank space at the beginning, seems to directly answer the question “Why?” just above. Furthermore, the blank allows the first line about the man to finish exactly where the line about the woman finishes. The blank highlights the fact that something is lacking in the man’s line. Yet, the line is able to be equal to the one above, about the woman. The man becomes as important as the woman by claiming an illegitimate portion of the space of the page for himself. The blank spaces and larger margins do not only group the lines about the male figure together but also make them more visible on the page, enacting a response to Conor’s dualistic view of the public sphere: by loading the line about the man with blanks, they become more striking, obscuring the woman’s. They display masculinity, rather than femininity, as a spectacle. This is made even more evident with the use of the song and the repetition of “running up-stairs,” which reads as a chorus framing the excerpt.

This displacement of the male spectacle within the feminine sphere of birthing does not facilitate a mutual characterization of men and women; if the man is seen as a performer, the mother-to-be is not placed as the audience taking pleasure in the spectacle, unlike in “Sketch of a Man on a Platform,” where the woman speaker is observing the male figure (inspired by Marinetti):

Your movements

Unassailable

Savor of the airy-fairy of the ballet
 The essence of a Mademoiselle Genée
 Winks in the to-and-fro of your cuff-links
 Your projectile nose
 Has meddled in the more serious business
 Of the battle-field
 With the same incautious aloofness
 Of intense occupation
 That it snuffles the trail of the female
 And the comfortable
 Passing odors of love

 Your genius
 So much less in your brain

 Than in your body (*LoLB* 19)

Despite being under scrutiny, the man on the platform is the one “snuffl[ing] the trail of the female” like an animal in heat, searching for a mate. The stereotypical division of gender between predatory men and victim women seems to remain unchallenged. The male spectator inhabits the streets with such ease and detachment that he becomes an architect of modernity whereas women are just byproducts of that culture, unable to exist outside of it. In the poem, the man becomes part of the landscape of modernity. He is associated with the train he is waiting for through references to metal elements such as “projectile” or “cuff-links.” There is no distance between his surroundings and himself: despite his movements, the heavy materials the speaker

compares him to – which are echoed in the guttural consonants of the poem – entrenches him in the transitory place of the station. This heaviness is offset by feminine attributes: he is compared to ballet dancer Adeline Genée, and the last lines of the excerpt imply that he is able to produce an act of non-intellectual creation like the pregnant woman since his “genius” resides in his body.³⁵ The poem, then, does not simply parrot the association of femininity with performativity, so popular among male modernists, but becomes the site of gender ambiguity. Unlike Elsa von Freytag-Loringhoven’s “Ejaculation,” in which the gender vagueness created by the title, connoting the discharging of sperm, and the final portmanteau word “Lovembrace” (43), sealing the impression that the couple is reunited in one person, is seen as liberating, the British poet mixes stereotypical views of masculinity and femininity to point at masculinity’s entrapping nature. Loy uses references to the feminine attributes of a ballerina, at the beginning, to make it more evident that the man is at ease in the landscape, but it is the heaviness of masculinity that roots him in place. The description allows for both gender fluidity and a condemnation of the purely masculine side of the character. In the same way, the line suggesting pregnancy is not masculinizing the act of birth but challenging the macho image of Marinetti thereby flaunting women’s influence on the avant-garde.

2.2. Motherhood or the body “[e]xceeding its boundaries”

The female body often fails to fit in with erotic ideals in Loy’s poetry. It is characterized by excess – we can think of the transvestite circus performer of “Crab-Angel” or the wrinkly protagonist defying time of “An Aged Woman,” among others. While men seem to always lack something, women always exceed the boundaries of

³⁵ Adeline Genée (1878-1970) was a British classical ballet dancer who remained *prima ballerina* of the Empire Theatre of Varieties in London between 1897 and 1907.

womanhood. The merging of the female body with its surrounding space, specifically, is explored throughout Loy's artistic production and reflects the poet's sustained interest in clash between public and private. To explore this idea, I now turn to geographer and phenomenologist Anne Fournand's concept of *corpospatialité*. The coined word reproduces linguistically exactly what it means: it fuses the body (*corps*) with space to define the experience of motherhood. The term is specific to studies on the pregnant woman's navigation of space. In Fournand's work, pregnancy involves a rupture of boundaries between space and the body.³⁶ In that sense, *corpospatialité* can be understood in three main steps: the landscape takes the attributes of the body before the body becomes spatial, which results in the co-construction of space and the body as one entity (qtd in Barthe-Deloizy 60). Fournand affirms that peak moments of *corpospatialité* happen when the body opens while space closes on the body, for instance, when the young mother breastfeeds in public, or during parturition, when the baby is both in the mother's body and in space.³⁷

Before discussing how Loy implements this notion of *corpospatialité* in her own way in the poems, I will quickly outline at the importance of pregnancy and motherhood – or rather, the maternal body, a term encompassing every stage of mothering – in her works. The family unit is often reduced to just the mother and the child, and even then, the focus is on the mother rather than the child, most of the time

³⁶ See Anne Fournand, *Expériences du corps, expérience de l'espace. Une géographie de la maternité et de l'enfantement*. 2008. University of Geneva, PhD dissertation, quoted in Guy Di Méo, "Subjectivité, socialité, spatialité: le corps, cet impensé de la géographie," *Annales de Géographie*, no. 675, 2010, pp. 466-491. *Corpospatialité* is "espace-temps dans lequel le corps et l'espace environnant ne sont plus délimités, où les limites du corps sont repoussées" // "a space-time continuum in which the body and its surrounding space are not longer defined, in which the body's limits are pushed back." My translation.

³⁷ See Anne Fournand, "The pregnant woman, the young mother and her baby in public space." *Corps urbains* no. 70, 2009, pp. 79-98. <https://doi.org/10.4000/gc.2320>. Accessed Aug 15, 2023. "Chaque séance est une rupture des limites corps-espace qui nécessite un 'agencement corpospatial'" // "Each [breastfeeding] session is a rupture of the limits between the body and space which calls for a 'corpospatial arrangement.'" My translation.

– with perhaps the exception of “Anglo-Mongrels and the Rose” since the poet refers mostly to the beginning of her life, that is to say, her time as a daughter rather than a mother. Overall, Loy avoids what Daly and Reddy call “daughter-centricity,” a term used when an author draws attention to “being mothered” rather than “mothering” (2). As mentioned before, Loy’s 1914 poem, “Parturition,” has been extensively analyzed through a feminist lens and still fascinates audiences for its innovative description of birth-giving from the perspective of the parturient woman. For Prescott, “the poem celebrates the act of parturition as an experience worthy in and of itself” (196-7) and, indeed, there is something akin to empowerment in the description of the first-person speaker going through the pains of labour and winning the fight against her own body. The “cosmic” consciousness of the woman in the poem is often understood as an heightened sense of one’s place in the world that enables a connection between heavenly bodies and what is happening down on earth. The repetitions of “cosmos” and “cosmic,” in the poem, resonate in mentions of “the bland sun” (*LoLB* 4), “the contents of the universe” (6), or even “halo” (7). However, amidst those references to the parturient woman’s understanding of the world beyond earthly bonds, the poem emphasizes the mother’s alienation through “the delirium of night-hours” (5). Similarly, the section “Three Early Poems” in *The Lost Lunar Baedeker* contains a prose-like poem from 1914 titled “The Prototype,” which develops this association of the down-to-earth with the celestial or “cosmic.” The speaker of “The Prototype” does not worship a beautiful, healthy “wax baby” (221), but rather takes an interest in the hardship of motherhood:

. . . a horrible little
 baby—made of half warm flesh;
 flesh that is covered with sores—carried

by a half-broken mother. (*LoLB* 221)

Throughout the poem, the speaker is more interested in “social consciousness” (*LoLB* 222) than god for motherhood is seen as the opposite of a miracle. In the quotation, the various enjambments and the simple repetition of “flesh” in strategic positions, link the lines together, creating a downward movement from the child to the mother, even though the use of “a” to define both the baby and the mother does not indicate any love or warmth between the two protagonists. The relationship between mothers and children throughout Loy’s oeuvre is not a happy one. “The Prototype” is firmly anchored in the poverty and grime that is symptomatic of Loy’s Bowery writings. This tension between sacredness and foulness associated with motherhood remains a key anxiety in Loy’s works throughout her life. Her 1935 sculpture modestly named “Maternity” represents a woman crouching on the floor to be able to breastfeed her hungry child.



Figure 2.1. Mina Loy’s “Maternity.” 1935.

Image downloaded from *Mina Loy: Navigating the Avant-Garde*, <https://mina-loy.com/chapters/italy-italian-baedeker/6-poetic-baedeker/>. Accessed 9 Aug. 2023. The construction of the sculpture makes it hard to see where the mother ends and the child begins. The socle, barely wide enough to support both characters, highlights the

intimacy that pervades the scene despite being represented for all to see. The position of the mother hints that the scene is public, and probably happening in a street since there is no comfort in this temporary feeding posture where the child is stretched to be able to reach the woman's breast and the mother hunches low. The woman's clothing, specifically the strange shape of her skirt and her bare feet, the fact that the child is naked, and their position on the ground suggests that motherhood is linked to poverty and desolation. At the same time, the child's extension to reach what is above, and the woman's kneeling position both read as attitudes of worship.

Motherhood, for Loy, humbles women as much as it makes them sacred. This reflects the poet's encounters with child mortality as well as her devotion to Christian Science.³⁸³⁹ While Loy's feminist interests tend to be seen as a reaction to her Victorian mother's censure, the question of motherhood in Loy's art is often associated to the poet's own identity as a mother, just like letters to her daughters include many pieces of advice on pregnancy and finding partners believing in Christian Science.⁴⁰ *Mina Loy: Navigating the Avant-Garde* further develops the idea that, for Loy, maternity is deeply rooted in "the grievous realities of the earthly," by mentioning the numerous artworks representing sides of maternity that Loy produced over the years.⁴¹ "The Mother" is a lost painting that Loy made during her first daughter Oda's short life, "The Wooden Madonna," also lost, was painted the night

³⁸ After Oda's death in 1905, two days after her first birthday, Loy loses her son Giles in 1923.

³⁹ Christian Science is a religion created by Mary Baker Eddy (1821-1910) which Loy followed from the early 1900s to her death. Christian Science posits that praying heals more efficiently than medicine and Loy was particularly interested in that belief in 1909 when her second daughter Joella fell sick.

⁴⁰ Mentioned by Linda Kinnahan during "An Interview with the creators of *Mina Loy: Navigating the Avant-Garde*." All about / Unfolding: Mapping Mina Loy Studies in 2023, online conference, 4 Aug. 2023. Keynote Address.

⁴¹ See *Mina Loy: Navigating the Avant-Garde*, <https://mina-loy.com/chapters/italy-italian-baedeker/6-poetic-baedeker/>. Accessed 11 Aug. 2023.

after Oda passed in 1905 and represented a “foolish-looking mother holding her baby, whose two small fingers are raised in an impotent blessing [340] over the other anguished mother who, on her knees, curses them both with great, upraised, clenched fists, and her own baby sprawling dead with little arms and legs outstretched lifeless, like faded flower petals.”⁴² The two sets of mothers and children in the painting do not frame motherhood in strict terms but rather stress the multiplicity of experiences that the maternal body encompasses, a range that is outlined in the completely contradictory portrayals of maternity as divinity and tragedy, with the idea that one can easily morph into the other.

In its different iterations in Loy’s work, the maternal body exceeds the physical realm, just like Fournand describes it. This displacement of the self outside of its bodily bonds creates a sense of dislocation, of motherhood in transition. The term “*chôra*” (χώρα), mentioned in Plato’s *Timaeus*, is one of the three “forms” *Timaeus* uncovers by going back to the beginning.⁴³ Often translated by “space,” “receptacle” or even “matrix,” this generative “form” is what gives birth to the universe. While Derrida defines it as the “neutral space of a place without place . . . which would be ‘in itself’ unmarked” (*Chora* 23), feminist theorists such as Luce Irigaray or Julia Kristeva discuss the *chôra*, which acts as a womb for all spatial configurations, as a term that is “maternally coded” (Huffer 83). For Kristeva, specifically, in “The Semiotic *Chora*: Ordering the Drives,” “the semiotic *chora* is no more than the place where the subject is both generated and negated, the place where

⁴² From Luhan, Mabel Dodge. *Intimate Memories I-II, Background, European Experiences*. Harcourt, Brace and Company, 1933, pp. 342, quoted in *Mina Loy: Navigating the Avant-Garde*, <https://mina-loy.com/chapters/italy-italian-baedeker/6-poetic-baedeker/>. Accessed 11 Aug. 2023.

⁴³ Plato’s theory of Forms posits that all material objects are imitations of ethereal ideas. *Chôra* would then be the receptacle of those ideas. The Stanford Encyclopedia of Philosophy phrases it as follows: “its role is to provide a spatial location for the things that enter it and disappear from it.” <https://plato.stanford.edu/entries/plato-timaeus/>

his unity succumbs before the process of charges and stases that produce him” (28). Kristeva focuses on a subject’s relation to language and uses *chōra* to distinguish the pre-linguistic “spatial intuition” (26), “anterior to sign and syntax” (29), that “orient[s] the body to the mother” (27). The pregnant woman becomes a literal example of Kristeva’s *chōra* in that the speaking subject is split, in process, always wrestling with otherness. Emanuela Bianchi, in “Receptacle/Chōra: Figuring the Errant Feminine in Plato’s *Timaeus*,” summarizes Kristeva’s take on *chōra* as an experience similar to disembodiment:

For Kristeva, maternity is the place where the self becomes alien, where the alterity within selfhood is manifested as an issue for ethics, but where any moment or event that would found the distinction between self and other, at which self is stretched to its limit and turns into, gives rise to, becomes other, is strictly unthinkable. Her insight shows us that the choric maternal body is not merely that against which the infant finds its separateness or in which the masculine may seek containment, but on the other side of the chiasmus we find receptacle/*chōra* giving figuration to a specifically feminine, though not essentially feminine, modality of being. (139)

This account of Kristeva’s take on maternity as something that pulls the self apart informs our reading of “Parturition.” Kate Shnur, in “Mechanical Labor and Fleshy Births: Maternal Resistance in Mina Loy and William Carlos Williams,” affirms that the poem “still reads as relatively disembodied” (99), despite the first-person perspective that places the reader within the mother’s consciousness. The speaker seemingly transcends her body through pain:

And the foam on the stretched muscles of a mouth
Is no part of myself

There is a climax in sensibility

When pain surpassing itself

Becomes Exotic. (*LoLB* 5)

Structures such as “there is” call back to nothing. The use of such impersonal phrasing separates the “climax” from the body, as if it had no origin. “There is a climax,” then, reads as if the speaker was not experiencing the climax but watching it from afar, and pointing at it. Pain becomes an element exterior to the woman, which is already induced at the beginning of the poem. The use of the indefinite article “a” in “the stretched muscle of a mouth” triggers the idea that the body described by the persona is unknown (Karabulut 172). Yet, the woman suffering and the persona are the same person according to the first-person pronoun at the beginning of the poem: “I am the centre.” As the poem unfolds, the woman becomes more and more like an alien in her own body. She is no longer an active agent of her feelings. What belongs or not to the woman’s body is blurred. Indeed, the “foam” probably refers to the saliva produced by the woman, but she is not able to recognize her own body fluids, and such detachment is reinforced by the final word of the passage, “Exotic,” which etymologically refers to something coming from the outside.

In this passage, the transcendental movement outside the body is a moment of *bathos* reminiscent of the English Rose’s reaction to Ova’s birth in “Anglo-Mongrels and the Rose,” “[h]er face / screwed to the mimic-salacious / grotesquerie of a pain / larger than her intellect” (*LaLB* 130). Despite the ascension of the speaker’s consciousness, the “foam” of the saliva presents an ignominious view of the catatonic body that can no longer be regulated. The speaker is then outside of her body but not necessarily described spatially at that point. The association of the body with space happens more clearly in the previous stanza:

I am climbing a distorted mountain of agony
 Incidentally with the exhaustion of control
 I reach the summit
 And gradually subside into anticipation of
 Repose
 Which never comes
 For another mountain is growing up
 Which goaded by the unavoidable
 I must traverse
 Traversing myself. (*LoLB* 5)

The “mountain[s]” the speaker is tasked to climb, at first, appear to be external to the body and part of different temporality and reality caused by the speaker’s pain. However, the last two lines hint at the idea that they are in fact part of the speaker’s being. The polyptoton “I must traverse / Traversing myself” directly points at this idea. The use of the verb “to traverse” is rather surprising as one could expect the verb “to cross” to be more natural in English. The word “traverse” can be interpreted as a metatextual comment as it is composed of “verse,” a term directly referring to the art of poetry, and “tra,” which is Italian for “between.” The movement in space implied by the verb “traverse,” the reference to a formal poetic element, as well as the fact that the speaker mentions “[t]raversing [*herself*],” all seem to point out that the space of the page is also an extension of the woman’s body.

Tuğba Karabulut notes the phenomena of “contraction and expansion” (163) running through the passage and mirroring the movements of the cervix during delivery: the succession of long and short lines visibly performs the speaker’s contractions on the page. Rhythmically, the interest lies in the length of the lines and

the position of the line breaks. The long line “[a]nd gradually subside into anticipation of” is not finished, and forces an unnatural emphasis on its last word. The reader is then eager to discover what is going to happen and the next line provides a possibility of calmness with “Repose.” After reading the long line, the reader also finds “repose” in the line composed of only one word. However, this “repose” is underwhelming for the next line is already undermining what has been said: “which never comes.” The rhythm of the lines induces a form of breathlessness for the reader, who is somehow experiencing the very bodily contractions through the space of the page and panting like the pregnant speaker because of the line breaks. In a paradoxical movement, the reader is experiencing the pregnant body by mirroring its labored breath while the speaker herself seems to be disconnected from her very embodied experience. The way lineation impacts the reading of the poem seems to suggest that the spatial body is not as liberating as it seems. By the end of the poem, the woman has delivered the baby and as soon as she is back within the boundaries of her physical envelope, she is downgraded from her brief cosmic position:

I once heard in a church

—Man and woman God made them—

Thank God. (*LoLB* 8)

That last line can be read as a moment of ironic relief: the persona is pretending to be spared to do this task even though she was the one doing all the work earlier in the poem. Yet, it can also be understood as an injunction from the voice of the man asking the woman to thank god for creating human beings, oblivious to the woman’s role in that process.

Loy’s strange conception of the maternal body as painful-divinity-in-self is consistently associated with sounds: the man from “Parturition” sings under the

woman's window, "The Prototype" is constructed through repeated lines, "Child Chanting" confounds childhood with a series of nursery rhythms. All those references to musicality and repetitions are fairly mechanical and not thought through: just something happening to the back of one's head, which links the maternal body to an altered state of consciousness, just like Freud was exploring at the time. The regular use of melody to describe instances of motherhood is, in any case, recurrent enough to be examined. I analyze "Birth of Melody" as a theoretical point of reference for Loy's understanding of pregnancy, both entrapped and freed by sounds:

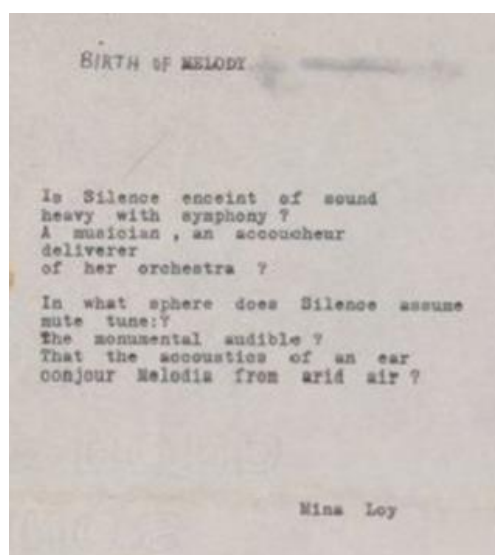


Figure 2.2. Mina Loy's "Birth of Melody." N.d.

Downloaded from the Beinecke Digital Library, YCAL MSS 6, Box 5, Folder 78, Yale University, New Haven, Connecticut. *Yale University Library*, New Haven, Connecticut. *Yale University Library*,

<https://collections.library.yale.edu/catalog/11699200>. Accessed 15 Aug. 2023.

Here, Loy supposes that music is the product of silence, which she describes in maternal terms. Silence is said to be both "accoucheur" (the French term for a male midwife) and "enceint," a word that could mean both male pregnancy and "surrounded by." Indeed, the etymology for the French word pregnant (*enceinte*) is

ceindre (encircle). Pregnancy is then a state of immobilization and enclosure but the term *enceinte* refers also today to a speaker that enables the free circulation of disembodied music in space. Music is incorporeal and thus ungraspable. Interestingly, in “Birth of Melody,” the French references to pregnancy are all male gendered while music, the supposed baby, is gendered female as the speaker talks about “her orchestra.” Loy does not let femininity be reduced to silence or stasis. Even as the speaker asks “[i]n what sphere does Silence assume mute tune:?” the lexical field of noiselessness is disturbed by the assonances and alliterations in [s] and [ju:]. The colon slipped between “tune” and the question mark is not a typo; Loy has included it in multiple drafts of the poem. In the International Phonetic Alphabet, a colon made of two triangles – often written like a normal colon for abbreviation – means that the preceding vowel is long, further emphasizing the importance of sound even in the line about silence. Furthermore, a colon, in punctuation, enables two independent clauses to be linked, the second one expanding on the first one, while still indicating that they are autonomous. In Loy’s poems, I understand pregnancy as life lived in the colon: entrapping yet freeing, always transitional.

If mothers, in Loy’s oeuvre, are often categorized in different archetypes – the most widely used one being “madonnas,” who are “everlastingly mothers in ecstasy” (*LoLB* 115), meaning that they represent a kind of constant state of maternity – this use of “types” is not defining strict contours to motherhood. Motherhood and womanhood bleed into each other through the co-construction of space and the body. Even the figure of the “virgin,” that keeps reappearing throughout the poems, does not escape motherhood since “Lions’ Jaws” offers the possibility of procreating without male penetration by mentioning the flabbergast (futurist) manifesto “notifying women’s wombs / of Man’s immediate agamogenesis” (*LoLB* 47). Although, in the

poem, “agamogenesis” seems to mean that men are able to reproduce on their own, Loy reverses that idea since the very definition of the word indicates that this kind of asexual reproduction specifically does not involve fertilization by a man. Michael Davidson writes that “[m]odernist cultural representations of the pregnant male foreground the spectacle of reproduction loosed from its putative organic site in the female body and displace it elsewhere - the test tube, the surrogate womb, the male body, and, not insignificantly, the novel” (210). While the association of womanhood with motherhood is often seen as traditional and backward, the early twentieth century is captivated by the question of maternity but tends to forget the figure of the mother. The reference to Marinetti’s hope for motherless reproduction in “Lions’ Jaws” is only one aspect of avant-garde movements’ investigation of maternity. For Rabaté, modernism is “haunted” by the past and the search for an origin, an idea that James Martell recycles to affirm that “modernism has as one of its distinctive features—if not of its foundations—a self-creation of the writer that implies an obliteration of the mother and maternity, this modernist matricidal tendency ultimately entails extinction as well” (36-4).⁴⁴ By all accounts, modernism is obsessively forgetting, corrupting and annihilating mothers.

Loy is reversing that tendency by positing that women have a naturally maternal body even without being actual mothers. In “Chiffon Velours,” the speaker takes in the appearance of an old homeless woman “at rest against the corner-stone / of a department store” (*LoLB* 119). The woman is as “rigid” as the building supporting her and almost becomes a mannequin that “model[s] / the last creation” in her immobility. Her old age cements her belonging to the very corner of the street she

⁴⁴ See Jean-Michel Rabaté, *The Ghosts of Modernity*. UP of Florida, 1996.

is inhabiting. She is no longer human but compared to the fabrics sold at the department store and her own outfit is described at the apex of the poem. Even the “wrinkles” on her face are no longer human but become creased fabric in this context. This association with cloth expands to everything around her: at the end of the poem, the “gutter” is paralleled to “a yard of chiffon velours.” It is through this discussion of the reified body that the speaker links the old woman with creation and recreation: the woman’s age is so advanced that she is described as already dead, “[c]lothed in memorial scraps / skimpy even for a skeleton.” The lexical field of sewing echoes the stitching of Frankenstein’s creature when the speaker notes that “[t]he site of [the woman’s] vanished breasts / is marked by a safety-pin.” At that point of the poem, the speaker has not started discussing fabrics yet and the “site of vanished breasts” could be marked on the top the woman is wearing or on her very skin. The post humanist after-death image of the homeless woman becoming her surroundings fits in Loy’s overall take on maternity, from the removal of virginity onward, which sees the maternal body as futuristic technology. In *Posthuman Glossary*, Rodante van der Waal dedicates a few pages to “The Pregnant Posthuman,” mentioning that

[p]regnancy isn’t a moment, it is waiting until something forms within me and while I am waiting my thinking evolves and changes around it. Pregnancy is between an act and a state, it is conscious and unconscious within an intimate involvement with the world to come. *Being with* child is being with the always not-yet of the world. It is the search for the world after the promise of engagement, after the affirmative choice for the world. (369)

According to this definition, pregnancy lies more in “waiting” than in the being – it is a state of transition and formation, “the always not-yet of the world,” which is what Loy is also doing by presenting the female body as always more than just a body.

“The inhuman is something in the structure of the human that stretches beyond itself” (370); as the women in the poems reach beyond the boundaries of their bodies they become more than human. The Pregnant Posthuman is not whole yet always “plural” (370) since pregnancy implies carrying another being within oneself, or exhausting one’s individuality. The definition is helpful when it comes to understanding how womanhood and pregnancy sometimes fuse within the poem and shows how Loy works against the appropriation of pregnancy by male authors while also evading the idea that women are simply mothers and nothing else. On the contrary, gravidity is seen as a power that liberates women from simple domestic roles. This sense of plurality and otherness that Loy ties with womanhood spreads out to the very construction of the poems, where the poet reasserts such definition textually.

2.3. Poetics of an embodied encounter

In *Maternal Impressions: Pregnancy and Childbirth in Literature and Theory*, Cristina Mazzoni claims that “[p]regnancy and childbirth both bring language and the body to their limits” (174). Similarly, if the components of maternity revolve around formation and construction, so does language, in Loy’s oeuvre. The trope of the “pregnant poet” is one that endured during the early modern period, and is often associated with men writers.⁴⁵ Indeed, the “pregnant poet” is a poetic exploration of the creator’s inner workings. The trope accentuates the genius of the male poet. This parallelism between creativity and gravidity is expanded in modernism as Ezra

⁴⁵ Ruth Connolly, in “Hester Pulter’s Childbirth Poetics,” asserts that “the example most widely known to modern readers is probably Philip Sidney’s witty description of his poetic persona as ‘great with Childe to speake, and helpesse in my throwes’” (282) in *Sir P. S. His Astrophel and Stella* (1591).

Pound's "Sage Homme" (literally: wise man but also male midwife) opens on the following lines:

These are the poems of Eliot
 By the Uranian Muse begot;
 A Man their Mother was,
 A Muse their Sire (551)

The chiasmus of the last two lines insists on the male gendering of the act of creation – though it is still "sire[d]" by a woman – whereas Loy's description of femininity as something "in progress" spreads to the very language experiments she undertakes in her poems. The next few pages explore how Loy's language develops the feminine poetics that she is constructing in other aspects of her works. The poetic text becomes a matrix for linguistic formation and questions the notion of creation in which the reader is sometimes co-creator, sometimes new to language itself.

Identity construction through language

To begin this analysis of language, I take the example of "Anglo-Mongrels and the Rose," and specifically the triangular relation between the traditionally Victorian mother, Ada, the wayward daughter Ova and their ways of apprehending linguistics. Goody expresses that Ada is necessarily out of the conversation about bodily functions because she is trying to be proper, emphasizing, at the same time, the poet's view of femininity, opposed to stereotypical accounts of daintiness and delicacy (71). One particularly striking example is the mention of "Iarrhea." Young Ova hears the word as her mother is sick. She deforms the actual word "diarrhea," yet this new word opens up lots of possibilities to play with reality. "Iarrhea" is said to be "quite green" and in that sense, Ova is able to compare this word to many other components of the reality she evolves in:

And instantly
 this fragmentary
 simultaneity
 of ideas
 embodies
 the word
 A
 luscent
 iris
 shifts
 its
 irradiate
 interstice
 glooms and relumes
 on an orb of verdigris

In the centered column, all the words are more or less echoing “iarrhea.” The child experiences a sort of epiphany as she is now able to recognize the different sounds and syllables of “iarrhea” within other words and within the experience of language as a whole. The fact that the poem shifts from what seems to be a horizontal reading to a vertical one exacts from the reader to be constantly eager to adapt. The column of words, because of its indentation, stands out even more in the text. The vertical aspect of the extract is quite reminiscent of acrostic poems without being one. Loy’s focus on one of the base body fluids opens a poetic reflection on words and sounds, showing that the body, in its more embodied, corporeal form, is an incentive for speech. For from being an instance of the abject, as Kristeva defines it, the poem and

its exploration of body waste informs the creation of a poetic “I,” or “the intertextual unification of body and word” (Ferfeli 70-1). The speaker exhausts the ways in which the very physical phenomenon of “diarrhea” can be transformed into other words.

Ova’s position as a child trying to understand how language works already gives us an idea about what is at stake with the question of embodiment in Loy’s poetry:

She must
 make her a rose
 out of red thread
 but red-
 ness is inadequate
 to the becoming of a rose

The red reel rolls (137)

As the colour “red” is repeated throughout the text, it is difficult not to hear it, especially when there is an alliteration in [r] sounds. The last line, in particular, seems to progressively spread the meaning of “red” to the other words through sounds. “The red reel rolls” shows a succession of three words composed of only one syllable, which all have similar sonorities. The margin of the line, wider than in the rest of the poem, implies a conclusion, a summary almost, of the poetic text in terms of sounds. The words are so intricately linked by sounds that they seem to also be so by meaning. The pigmentation induced by the polyptoton on “red” merges with the roundness evoked by “reel” and “rolls.” Furthermore, the proximity of “red” and “reel” is reinforced by the fact that “red” can be heard in “thread.” What the poem is doing is creating a link between two notions that would not usually be linked. In the same way, in the text, Ova loses a red ball, and tries to relive this moment through

colour, by creating a rose out of red thread. There are not many points in common between the ball and the rose, except that she tries to construct the rose in the colour of the ball. This confusion between the different elements is mirrored in the language. The reader is also subjected to this moment of disorientation because of the work on language and sounds. The typographical blanks between the words of the last line are particularly meaningful as they slow the rhythm of the sentence down, which accentuates the playfulness of the language for the reader. Just like Ova, the reader is also discovering – or rather, rediscovering – language through the movements of the text and its sonic patterns. By making the reading of her poems an embodied experience, the reader enters a power dynamic in which the speaker always has the upper hand. The reader is at the speaker's mercy as the latter is in control of the reading process.

The reader's call

In *The Life of Poetry*, Muriel Rukeyser interrogates the role of the audience by questioning the appropriateness of the very word:

At this point, I should like to use another word: "audience" or "reader" or "listener" seems inadequate. I suggest the old word "witness," which includes the act of seeing or knowing by personal experience, as well as the act of giving evidence. The overtone of responsibility in this word is not present in the others; and the tension of the law makes a climate here which is that climate of excitement and revelation giving air to the work of art, announcing with the poem that we are about to change, that work is being done on the self.

(175)

By using "witness," Rukeyser insists on the involvement of the reader who becomes a participant of the literary work. While the word "witness" opens interesting

perspectives on the role of the reader on the page, Rukeyser's definition of the term fails to mention the unwillingness that is also at the heart of "witnessing." I suggest that the word "witness" applies to Loy's framing of the reader in that the latter is invited to cross the boundaries of the page to engage with the poetic text. In "Hot Cross Bum," for instance, the sonic and spatial richness of the poem calls upon the reader to reconceive language:

a silly smile immune to meaning
 streaming the static transit of the street
 to indecision's crossroads

where zest for zenith
 zig-zag to zero

meet:

the egoless eagerness
 of priestly patience
 for laic participance. (*LoLB* 138-9)

The repetitions of the same sounds in the lines almost seem to be due to the persona's associating words in her mind. This game of association is also done through space as "meet" and "meaning" are somewhat aligned in the same axis. Language engenders itself on the page, through the voice of the persona, who is actually trying to solicit the reader through language. "Patience" and "participance," because they are one above the other and show some similarities in spellings also give this impression that one line is trying to outshine the previous one: "patience" seems to expand into "participance." Similarly, the word "meet," isolated on the far right of a line, is the most visible feature of the excerpt. The poetic text is directing and monopolizing the

reader's attention with its abundance of textual aspects. The persona is subjecting the reader to the powerful language of poetry, leaving them both disorientated with such a variety of poetic practices coming together in just a few lines. Language is clearly highlighted: in this context, the reader may try to guess what the next line is going to be, in a movement that resembles the activity of the poet.

Loy's poems tend to romance the readers, in the sense of both putting them at the heart of the poetic action and inciting them to take in the voluptuousness of the page. In Poem V from "Songs to Joannes," for instance, the speaker is lost in the city at night, abandoned by her lover and unsure about where to go next:

Midnight empties the street
 Of all by us
 Three
 I am undecided which way back
 To the left a boy
 —One wing has been washed in the rain
 The other will never be clean any more—
 Pulling door-bells to remind
 Those that are snug
 To the right a haloed ascetic
 Threading houses
 Probes wounds for souls
 —The poor can't wash in hot water—
 And I don't know which turning to take
 Since you got home to yourself—first (*LoLB* 55)

The presence of the pronoun “us” does include the reader – perhaps vicariously – in the poetic realm and links them to the speaker. Yet, the passage from “us” to “you” acknowledges the individuality of the “you” as a separate entity from “I.”

Interestingly, this tension between “I” and “you” is over-emphasized throughout the poem. If the final line is addressed to the deserting lover, then said lover is probably already absent at the beginning of the poem, when the speaker thinks about going back to them. In that sense, the opening “us” increasingly includes the reader as the poem unfolds. There are three figures in the poem: a speaker, a lover, and an unnamed character. The complete textual absence of that third presence hints at the fact that it is an observer, a poetic placeholder for the reader themselves. However, Loy complicates this reading by forcing the reader to become speaker. The reader goes through the movement from a form of anonymity to individualisation: the vagueness of “us” is reduced by the number “three.” Eventually, the idea of a group is abandoned with the passage from plurality to “I.” As the text on the page takes shape in the eyes or in the voice of the reader, the “I” of the speaker is always somehow the “I” of the reader, who pronounces it. The poem makes the reader aware of their complicated place in the speaker-addressee relationship through words and finally acts out that tension completely through the movements of the body. The alternation between lines starting at the beginning of the line, and others starting farther on the line forces the reader’s eyes to travel on the page from left to right, mirroring the movements of eyes of the woman who is hesitating between two paths and effectively embodying the “I” of the poem by enacting its indecisiveness.

Ellen McWhorter, in “Body Matters: Mina Loy and the Art of Intuition,” writes: “[t]he gesture of pulling the reader close to the speaker suggests more than just the potentially subversive nature of the ‘something’; it provides for the possibility that

physical presence subtends the act of speech. As readers, we are asked to, in the words of Damasio: ‘use the whole body as a yardstick’ (7). However, this statement is a little too naive. If the poems make it clear that the reader has to use the body as the cornerstone of the poetic experience, the speaker uses the comfort of empirical knowledge to trick the reader. In “Giovanni Franchi,” for instance, when the reader is confronted by Loy’s unexpected vocabulary any attempt to understand what is said is doomed to fail:

Still where Giovanni Bapini was cymophanous
 Giovanni Franchi was merely pale

 His acolytian sincerity
 The sensitive down among his freckles
 Fell in with the patriotic souls of flags
 Red white and green flags filliping piazzas. (*LoLB* 28)

The unreadability of that passage comes from the various very specific words which seem borrowed from scientific fields – or at least, that is the case of “cymophanous.” If ordinary words like “pale” or “sincerity” make perfect sense on their own, the use of “cymophanous” in the same poem already tints the text with opacity and makes the reader’s deciphering harder. As the poem continues, other archaic words, such as “filliping,” may blur its meaning. In the midst of all those unfamiliar words, the term “acolytian” is a particularly good example of the speaker obfuscating the reader’s logic. The mention of this strange word at the beginning of stanza, without any explanation, does not allow the reader to cling on to the previous or following lines to get a grasp of what it means. It almost sounds like it is the adjective formed on the noun “acolyte” but it is actually invented by Loy for the purpose of the poem. As the

beginning of the word is so similar to “acolyte,” this made-up term appears to be a lot more digest than the complex, yet existing, associations of syllables found in “cymophanous.” Although Loy is known for her use of very unique and archaic terms, the concentration of so many of them in few lines, and the fact that a word that does not exist is slipped between them, help to construct an ironic image of Futurism as a conceited movement, while also belittling it through the lexical mastery of the poet, but it also encourages the reader to reflect on the mechanisms of language as a system and to recognize its failures. The page becomes the place where the reader faces language but it is a language that they are not intimately familiar with and that seems to go against embodied language processing.⁴⁶ Why is Loy thwarting the reader’s efforts to rely on both perceptions and usual linguistic patterns for deciphering, then?

I read Loy’s attempt to either confound the reader or draw their attention as an interest in constructing language through a dialogue. In his *Phenomenology of Perception*, Merleau-Ponty defines “dialogue” as follows:

In the experience of dialogue, there is constituted between the other person and myself a common ground; my thought and his are interwoven into a single fabric, my words and those of my interlocutor are called forth by the state of the discussion, and they are inserted into a shared operation of which neither of us is the creator. We have here a dual being, where the other is for me no longer a mere bit of behaviour in my transcendental field, nor I in his; we are

⁴⁶ Embodied language processing rests on the idea that “[r]ecent years have seen an increasing body of experimental evidence suggesting a tight relation between language and action” (23). Pastra, Katerina. “Embodied Language Processing: A New Generation of Language Technology.” Language-Action Tools for Cognitive Artificial Agents, Association for the Advancement of Artificial Intelligence Workshop, 7-8 August 2011, San Francisco, California.

collaborators for each other in consummate reciprocity. Our perspectives merge into each other, and we co-exist through a common world. (317)

Merleau-Ponty suggests that there is no identity in itself but that individuals are shaped by the language they use and in the relationship language enables one to have with another. The “I” comes in to being through sharing with the other and this act of sharing only mingles self and otherness more evidently. The fact that dialogue erases a sense of authorship and, instead, praises otherness promises that the form of fracture stemming from dialogue is not alienating. In her study of language and movement, Florentien Verhage uses Merleau-Ponty’s theory of dialogue and the “*écart*” (gap) it produces “first to explain that divergence *is* the very structure of meaning itself, second to further understand the important *disrupting* quality of language” (92). Verhage links otherness to the very crux of modernist language; inviting a dialogue with the other appears to be the way to experiment with the materiality of language. In this light, Loy’s interest in the reader becomes a criticism of men modernists’ refusal to acknowledge the otherness of femininity and of the woman genius. Conversely, Loy’s unfinished aesthetics leaves her poems open to all sorts of dialogues with the reader. In Poem VII from “Songs to Joannes:”

The wind stuffs the scum of the white street
 Into my lungs and my nostrils
 Exhilarated birds
 Prolonging flight into the night
 Never reaching — — — — —. (*LoLB* 229)

The impressionistic feel of this passage created by the movement of the wind within the speaker and then back in the open air with the mention of birds reaches its pinnacle with the final dilation at the end of the poem. The reader is never given the

object of “reaching,” therefore the sentence is left unresolved. The very poem is acting up what is written: the line of dashes results in nothing, the language is “never reaching” its complete form, just like the birds are “never reaching” their undisclosed destination, and the reader is unable to finish the reading of the poem. The dashes at the end of an unfinished poem are a recurring pattern in Loy’s collection of poetry and it clearly goes against the reader’s expectations while, at the same time, fulfilling them: the aborted ending of the poem, while frustrating, is the most logical conclusion in the context of the last line. As there are no archival traces of “Songs to Joannes” in its handwritten form, it is impossible to say if the line of dashes was actually what Loy intended to have published, but the effect of such typographical signs is very much rooted in visual arts. The line reads as a mark of the horizon and the fact that it is broken up in multiple dashes evokes a minimalist drawing of a flock of birds, seen from far away. In that sense, the last line plays on sensual memories while encouraging the reader to commit to an act of creation.

Unfinished Archives

There are limits to the richness brought by marks of plurality and otherness in the poet’s body of works, especially when it comes to how the poems are stored in the archives. Loy’s idiosyncratic use of language crafts an aesthetic of incompleteness that matches the poet’s many unfinished drafts, so specific to her artistic process. Even her published collections undermine the status of the codex as a solid, unified whole and point at the limits of print when it comes to capture the manuscripts left. Conover’s attempt to regularize spellings in *The Last Lunar Baedeker* is emended in *The Lost Lunar Baedeker*, a collection which evidences the lack of consistency in the way Loy apprehends language. The collection, more precisely, is a problematic format in itself according to Benjamin:

What is decisive in collecting is that the object is detached from all its original functions in order to enter into the closest conceivable relation to things of the same kind. This relation is the diametric opposite of any utility, and falls into the peculiar category of completeness. What is this “completeness”? It is a grand attempt to overcome the wholly irrational character of the object’s mere presence at hand through its integration into a new, expressly devised historical system: the collection. (204-5)

If the collection is somehow creating links and meaning between pieces of writing that have been severed from their original context, then the archive is a better way of apprehending the body of texts of an author. Arlette Farge, in *The Allure of the Archives*, notes that “[t]he archive is born out of disorder” (26), which sounds much more fitting to discussions of Loy’s work. For Farge, working in the archive is an embodied action; an idea that is not well translated in English but very much present in the original title of her book, *Le Goût de L’Archive*, that “refers both to a taste of the archive, and a taste for the archive” (Deslauriers 304). It is on that core impression that her work exists only if they are under construction that I would like to focus for this final part. I am particularly interested in the relevance of Loy’s archives as a site of composition and assembly. An archive is first and foremost a space of preservation but this metaphorical or physical space is extensible, always open to add more documents to its collection. In her own study of Loy’s archival space, Crangle implies that an archive is a “vestibulum” that is “increasingly interrogated, expanded, and reinvented” (247). This plasticity of the archive is what makes it a good feminist tool. From the 1970s onward, specifically, going back to the archives has become an important step in the research processes of scholars and historians alike. After all, the archive can be seen as an indiscriminate record of all that has been written, which

means that it is the place where women's voices, silenced in the public sphere for a long time, are recorded. Kate Eichhorn speaks about *The Archival Turn in Feminism* as the archive "strengthens contemporary feminism" (15).

In their "About the Project" section, the team who built the website *Mina Loy: Navigating the Avant-Garde* notes that the motivation behind their interest in creating a "feminist design" for their online archive was "accessibility."⁴⁷ Yet, the archive – and the digital archive specifically – is often seen as something fragmented, "diasporic," and even full of "split[s]" (7) according to David Sutton. Loy's archive is both physical and digital and its digital counterpart is hosted on the Beinecke Digital Library. In "Of Archives and Architecture: Domestication, Digital Collections, and the Poetry of Mina Loy," Jacinta Kelly makes it clear that "[b]oth manuscript and archive, therefore, are characterised by unfinished, openness, and the contingency of meaning" (173) but uses this argument to praise the archive as a way to create new paths between different documents and to associate ideas that otherwise would not have been associated. Conversely, Churchill, Kinnahan, and Rosenbaum criticize the digital archive:

The digitisation of "the Mina Loy Papers in their entirety" may make users think they have access to all of her work in one digital collection, but even within the Beinecke digital library, much of Loy's writing lies in the papers of Carolyn Burke, Carl Van Vechten and Mabel Dodge Luhan, and still more of her work remains scattered in other archives and private collections. Even when users can access Loy's papers in the Beinecke's digital archive, they

⁴⁷ "Crucial to our principles of feminist design and our aim to make Loy's work accessible to a diverse readership is a commitment to meeting standards for web accessibility." <https://mina-loy.com/about-us/project/>. Accessed Aug 14, 2023.

may have difficulty finding specific items or making sense of what they find.

(65)

The archive, here, is depicted as a matrix difficult to navigate. As mentioned in the quotation, Loy's papers are scattered in the archives of many other writers she was in contact with. Perhaps the most explicit example is that the manuscripts for her most famous poems – such as "Parturition" or "Love Songs," among others – are cramped in one folder entitled "Poems and Plays," and part of Carl Van Vechten's archive. While these papers could easily be included in Loy's digital archive as well, and might eventually be, the online version of the Beinecke Library seems to strictly follow the organization of the analog archive. Similarly, the prototype for the "Alphabet that builds itself," mentioned earlier on, presents a problem in the filing system as it is not indexed by its name as it is part of a file storing many different documents. In "Prototyping Mina Loy's Alphabet," Konkol indicates that the document can be found in the section entitled "other papers," and, within that section, in the folder called "Inventions." However, the document has been switched to the "Designs" folder, demonstrating the porousness of those categories and the frustrating elusiveness of the ever-changing archive. Loy's archive is a living and breathing one; it has wear and tear. Even though, in many ways, its obscurity confounds the researcher trying to be at home in it, the archive evades its user just like the poems.

Susan Howe, in *Spontaneous Particulars: The Telepathy of Archives*, explains that "[a]s they evolve, electronic technologies are radically transforming the way we read, write and remember. The nature of archival research is in flux; we need to see and touch objects and documents; now we often merely view the same material on a computer screen – digitally, virtually, etc." (9). The physical documents – and especially the handwritten manuscripts – are products of the body and though the

computer screen seems to be detached from it, Loy's digital archive and its chaotic nature somehow put in the limelight the need for embodiment. While the Beinecke Library makes the manuscripts available, those documents still need to be sorted in a way that would not be possible physically. For instance, the folder for the poem "America_ a Miracle" shows a discrepancy between the will to show the unity of each piece of paper by recording its recto and verso sides, and the fact that the physical unity of one piece of paper does not correspond to unity in its content:

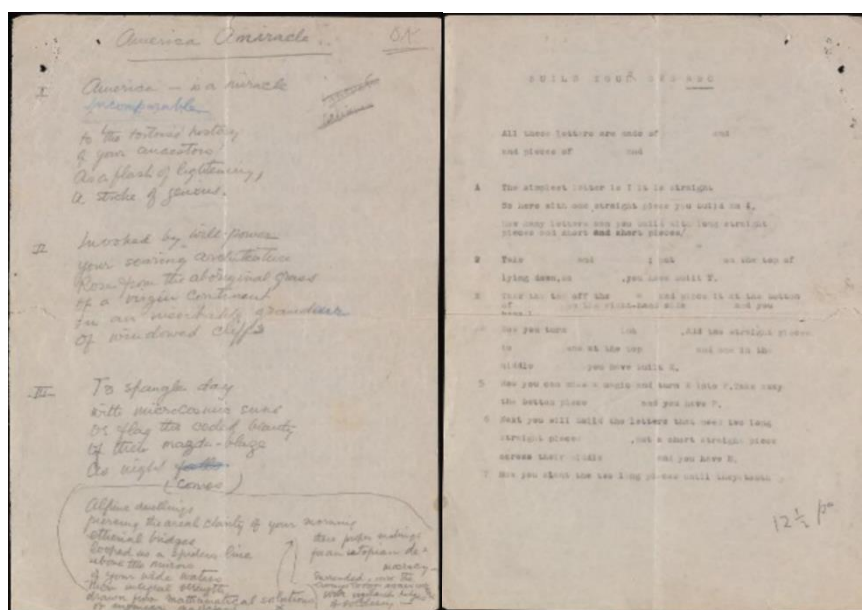


Figure 2.3. Mina Loy's "America_ a Miracle" and the verso "Build Your Own ABC," manuscript details. Image downloaded from the Beinecke Digital Library, YCAL MSS 6, Box 5, Folder 74, , Yale University, New Haven, Connecticut. *Yale University Library*, <https://collections.library.yale.edu/catalog/11871646>. Accessed 6 Dec. 2022.

The physical archive recognizes Loy's papers as historical documents that make sense in their singularity. There is an effort to make the online experience as similar as possible to the in-person task of scavenging through boxes. Yet, the split nature of the archive that Sutton talks about is an essential component of archival work, especially

in Loy's case as it reflects the parcelling out of the self visible in the poems discussed throughout the chapter.

Beyond Loy's writing, then, the unfinished aspect that she associates so often with her depictions of women stretches to the current storing of her work within the archive. It only makes sense that this aesthetic "in progress" is all the more noticeable in her drafts and impacts the rediscovery of the poem. Throughout the chapter, we identified the woman's body as the place of excess, construction, and dialogue. In all those instances, constructing womanhood implies the presence of someone else, a sense of engagement coming from what is outside the fluid boundaries of womanhood. The focus on the reader in the last few pages of the chapter remains hypothetical since it engages with what the poem seems to try to do but real readers' experiences can only be guessed. Archival work, however, evidences actual interactions between readers – or editors – and the texts. Derrida, in *Archive Fever: A Freudian Impression*, sees it as a place of "commencement" (9) and this fusion of division with inception is once more connecting the textual with the maternal: "[t]he fever that archives generate is, in part, the insatiable desire for a return to origins, a desire writ large in psychoanalysis, where it is aligned with a longing for a return to the womb" (Crangle 253). In the next chapter, I am thus interrogating how Loy's engagement with femininity is translated in editing practices: thinking of the editing and publishing tools adapted to Loy studies give us a better grasp on what is so specific about her poetry.

Chapter 3

Mina Loy's Publication History and Editorial Resistance

Archives are of great interest in feminist studies as they are a site of preservation for women voices but also point at possible exclusion of certain papers and ideas because they are written by women and do not fit in literary canons. The current taste for exploring the work of women in crafts, for instance, engages with a wider definition of arts that seeks to reclaim the central place of women in artistic spheres. This chapter focuses on Loy's published poems and *avant-textes* to reflect on the challenges of publishing women authors, especially those experimenting like Loy. In his Introduction to "Representing Modernist Texts: Editing as Interpretation," George Bornstein affirms that modernist writers are known for trying "to control the process of textual production" in a way that "involved not only authority over the text itself but also determination of the form in which it appeared to the public" (2). Mike Chasar develops this idea by mentioning that modernist poets

increasingly sought to claim the modernist editor's cut-and-paste authority by composing texts that were themselves cut and pasted from other source texts. This perspective sheds new light on the "fragmentation and collage" effects often associated with modernist poetry, which can be read not solely as the innovations of individual talents but as a defensive response to another force in the field of cultural production. (176)

Chasar uses this citation to introduce the chapter on women writers and how questions of edition could help them become more authoritative. Conversely, Mina Loy's modernist aesthetics do not create an opportunity for the author to have more control

on her own production. Her work is plagued with a form of illegibility due to both the lack of manuscripts for some of her poems and the convoluted character of her writing. Before the poems can even be published, one is uncertain whether some lines were written by the poet or added later, by mistake. Roger L. Conover, in the “Editorial Guidelines and Considerations” of *The Lost Lunar Baedeker*, notes that “Mina Loy understood something about the dubious nature of textual production and the anxiety of authorship well before Roland Barthes announced the death of the author and Michel Foucault evoked an authorless world” (*LoLB* 169). The example of Poem XIX from “Songs to Joannes” is paradigmatic of the illegibility at work within Loy’s poems. In the first stanza, the published version shows:

Nothing so conserving

As cool cleaving

Note of the Q H U

Clear carving

Breath-giving

Pollen smelling

Space⁴⁸

The line “Note of the Q H U” has been at the heart of many questions as it diverges from the pattern created by the common ending sound of the other lines. If “Note of the” is phonetically reminiscent of the initial word of the poem, “Nothing,” the following letters seem completely misplaced as the poem would still make sense without them. Conover himself confesses that, if many possible interpretations have been expressed, none of them is satisfactory (*LoLB* 192); the meaning of “Q H U” is

⁴⁸ For lack of manuscript, the reference for this poem is from *Others* vol. 3, no. 6, April 1917 (16).

still unknown.⁴⁹ For him, one of the most plausible explanations for those letters would be that they appeared out of a simple printing mistake that remained unnoticed or uncorrected, yet his notes on the poem still offer multiple possibilities as to what those letters could be, whether they are an acronym or an anagram (*LoLB* 192). Even if the legitimacy of “Q H U” is greatly discussed, editions of Poem XIX never remove the scattered letters as an official version of the poem without them has yet to be uncovered, but also because, even as a printing mistake, they are part of the history of the poem’s publication. In a way, if the three letters are indeed an “etaoin shrldu,” as Conover phrases it, they are also very much traces of the body marking the space of the page.⁵⁰ James Thorpe, in *The Aesthetics of Textual Criticism*, reminds the reader that “[s]ometimes misprints become, in effect, a permanent part of the text” (471). In that sense, the presence of the letters on the page makes anyone who handles the text critically aware that “any history of the book . . . must be a history of misreadings” (McKenzie 25).

Editions of Loy’s works, far from being actual “misreadings” of the poems, still subtly differ in content depending on the version of the poems editors decided to, thus inscribing themselves in the debate about finding the most authoritative copy-

⁴⁹ Roger L. Conover is a former executive editor at MIT Press. While having edited and published more 1500 books, he is specifically famous for his work on Arthur Cravan and Mina Loy. He has notably advised Marisa Januzzi and the creators of *Mina Loy: Navigating the Avant-Garde* on ways to improve their editions of Loy’s works. In the “Editorial Guidelines and Considerations” for *The Lost Lunar Baedeker*, Conover noted the difficulty to find “authoritative texts for many poems” (170): as a result, he chose to use the first published text as the basis of his edition whenever there was no manuscript. The editor also notes that his goal was to produce “a reliable text” (169) even though he did not manage to quite reach that goal due to the nature of Loy’s writing. Conover mentions in the Q&A following his introducing lecture to “Mina Loy: Strangeness is Inevitable” that a lot of his early research on Loy included interactions with people who knew her and were still alive in the 1970s. See “Opening Lecture: ‘Mina Loy: Strangeness is Inevitable’” with Roger Conover, *Youtube*, uploaded by Bowdoin College, 3 May 2023, https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=BbW1Ac_1FZI&t=1128s.

⁵⁰ “Etaoin shrldu” is defined in the Oxford English Dictionary as “[t]he letters set by running a finger down the first two vertical banks of keys on the left of the keyboard of a Linotype machine, used as a temporary marking slug but sometimes printed by mistake; any badly blundered sequence of type.” (“etaoin shrldu, n.”) Here, the meaning is extended to any kind of letters printed by mistake.

text. While G. Thomas Tanselle mentions that “the aim of the editor is to establish the text as the author wished to have it presented to the public,” (EP 172) I argue that Loy’s work is perhaps better captured through genetic criticism, a field of textual research that makes use of the multiple variants of a text. Instead of taking into account all the versions ever published of her poems, I rather want to make Loy’s archives stand out in the midst of many re-workings of her poems, instigated by, primarily, male editors. Suzanne W. Churchill explains that Ezra Pound himself, when he edited some of Mina Loy’s poems, decided to erase parts of “The Effectual Marriage” – effectively reducing the poem to one fifth of its actual length – to remove the passages commodifying the character named Gina (208). Pound even renamed the poem “The Ineffectual Marriage,” as if to make Loy’s irony stand out more clearly. Nevertheless, through this modification, Pound made the work of the reader somehow easier while cleaning the text of Loy’s acerbic sarcasm. Ironically, in *Instigations*, Pound writes about Loy’s logopoeia while citing his own take on her poem: “Mina Loy has been equally subject to something like international influence; there are lines in her ‘Ineffectual Marriage’ perhaps better written than anything I have found in Miss Moore.”⁵¹ Yet, if, according to *The Literary Essays of Ezra Pound*, logopoeia refers to “the dance of the intellect among words” (25) or the act of “employ[ing] words . . . in a special way of habits of usage, of the context we expect to find with the word, its usual concomitants, of its known acceptances, and of ironical play” (25), Pound’s simplified version undermines the logopoetic tone of the poem. By coming

⁵¹ Pound, Ezra and Ernest Fenollosa. *Instigations Together with an Essay on the Chinese Written Character. Project Gutenberg*. 24 Sept 2012, <https://www.gutenberg.org/files/40852/40852-h/40852-h.htm>.

back to the archives, the poetic texts multiply, but the speaker's idiosyncratic voice in relation to the page becomes more evident and freer from editorial disruptions.

New Modernist Editing, a project led by a team of researchers at the University of Glasgow, seeks to identify the challenges of editing modernist texts today. On its website, one of the first core components that the project mentions is “[s]cholarly awareness of the particular set of challenges and opportunities presented by the editing of modernist texts, such as preserving the spirit of fluidity and uncertainty which permeates modernist aesthetics, and taking account of the self-conscious process of revision undertaken by many modernist writers” (newmodernistediting). Such an endeavour is admittedly reminiscent of the very cornerstone of textual studies, that is to say, the fact that a text is necessarily unstable. However, New Modernist Editing accommodates the fact that the ungraspable nature of modernist writings can complicate the editor's task: if letting the shifting quality of the text shine seems to imply a lesser involvement from the editor, that same unsteadiness makes the uncovering of authorial intentions harder. The website also mentions that “[r]ecent developments in the modernist literary critical field” play a major role in New Modernist Editing. Indeed, Loy's poems mostly suffer from the lack of current substantial editions. Conover's takes on the matter are respectively forty-one and twenty-seven years old and no other official edition has been offered to readers since then. The field of textual studies has changed with the rise of technology, prompting a shift toward the question of which medium is more adapted, rather than focusing on the involvement from the editor in regard to emendations.

This chapter focuses on how we read Mina Loy depending on different editing styles. Thereby, it takes a critical stance on the way Loy's poems have been edited until now and proposes to improve those editing practices by taking the advice of

New Modernist Studies of staying on top of recent literary progress. The idea of “improving” editions can seem simplistic as different editions are used for different purposes. Nevertheless, if this chapter takes into account the overall goal of each studied edition, it also seeks to provide potential solutions to give readers the most complete version of the poems. Here, I intend to look at the manuscripts from Philip Gaskell’s perspective, that is to say, as “a means of composition, not an end,” (340) but a means of composition that still informs our reading. Layouts and typography, in particular, are thoroughly discussed as they seem to be elements that are often forgotten or modified during the process of editing. In the wake of new editorial practices, I propose to look at the editing of the poems through a feminist lens that, paradoxically, highlights the poet’s experimentations rather than her identity as a feminist figure. Overall, the study of editing in the context of Loy’s poetry is a useful topic to further discuss the state of modernist studies and the question of canonicity.

3. 1. A Survey of Recent Editions

Editing is a major step in recovering an author’s work. There are layers to the editing process where one edition influences the next through trials and errors. When Marisa Januzzi presented her critical editing of Loy’s poems in her 1997 dissertation entitled “*Reconstru[ing] Scar[s]*”: *Mina Loy and the Matter of Modernist Poetics*, she outlined the uniqueness of her work with respect to Conover’s latest edition of Loy’s poems, released the same year: “Conover bases his edition mainly on first published appearances, while my approach generally favors (for reasons I outline below) Loy’s ‘final’ manuscript versions, when they exist, as copy-text” (101). The copy-text, and, more specifically, the question of which version of a text is more authoritative, has been a major component of textual scholarship since it was coined

by R.B. McKerrow in 1904.⁵² At the heart of the debate, G. Thomas Tanselle favours the manuscript, untouched by foreign hands, Fredson Bowers, Philip Gaskell, and James Thorpe argues that a first edition is closer to the author's intentions while Walter Greg takes a more nuanced position, advocating that the editor should follow the earliest printed version of a text when it comes to "accidentals," but still conceding that the author's revision of a work post-publication has legitimacy.⁵³ Wanting to recover the final authorial intentions for a text is legitimate, but it is especially the case for women authors such as Loy, whose agency might be drowned among male editors and publishers. Januzzi points out how editing a text can become trickier when "the authorial 'he' is a she," when there is a gap "between the confident writer and her culturally feminine, poorly educated self" (103). As a way to partake in Januzzi's effort to both override a masculinist view of textual scholarship and offer the most meaningful version of Loy's poems, the following pages examine the history of editing Loy's poems through a quick survey of available published collections and poems.

The only collections available during Loy's life, *Lunar Baedeker*, published in 1923, and *Lunar Baedeker and Time-Tables*, published in 1958, as well as the numerous publications in little magazines are not central to this study.⁵⁴ While Sandeep Parmar and Carolyn Burke both emphasize the fact that Loy had some sort of editorial authority over those two books, they are mostly concerned with which poems

⁵² Introduced in *The Works of Thomas Nashe*, 5 vols., London: A. H. Bullen and Sidgwick and Jackson, 1904–10, i: xi as "the text used in each particular case as the basis of mine."

⁵³ Accidentals refer to alterations in editing that concern "spelling, punctuation, word-division, and the like, affecting mainly [the text's] formal presentation" as opposed to "substantives," which are alterations "that affect the author's meaning or the essence of his expression." See Walter Greg, "The Rationale of the Copy-Text." *Studies in Bibliography*, vol. 3, 1950-1, pp. 21.

⁵⁴ See Mina Loy, *Lunar Baedeker and Time-Tables*, edited by Jonathan Williams, 1958 and *Lunar Baedeker*, edited by Robert McAlmon, 1923.

Loy decided to publish and which ones were not deemed worthy of being included (*MMW* 15 & Burke 322). Few poems got published in those two books; this chapter focuses mostly on the poems that were not published in those collections. I am interested in the works of the poet that have been edited and published after the poet's death, as an act of rediscovery, starting with Conover's two collections. While both constructed with a different *modus operandi*, the two books seem to be oriented towards casual readers. Indeed, *The Last Lunar Baedeker*, published in 1982, is perhaps not as easily transportable as *The Lost Lunar Baedeker*. Its format is thick with *avant-textes* and other reading apparatuses contextualizing both the poet and her works, but the editing technique at work makes it easily readable – or at least more fluent – for a reader unfamiliar with Loy's writing. Yet, the desire to make the text more accessible to a potential readership implies editorial changes that can mar the complexity of the original text.

This desire is quite evident in the *Last Lunar Baedeker*'s editing of "Mexican Desert:" in this twelve-line poem, the series of full stops at line three and twelve are removed (Figure 3.4.). This editorial decision is detrimental to the unfolding of the poem, which loses its most obvious formal component. Michelle Wallace Gunn mentions that "'Mexican Desert' finally concedes through a trailing and defeated aposiopesis the uncertainty of heterosexual love with Loy's lost husband" (112).⁵⁵ More than that, the poem's two series of full stops mark the presence of the lover slowly fading away while somehow mirroring the effect of footprints on sand. In that sense, "Mexican Desert" is paradigmatic of Conover's "regularization" of the poems in his first collections. Similarly, on the last line, "belabour" becomes "belabor" as the

⁵⁵ By "trailing aposiopesis," Gunn refers to the few dots at the end of lines 3 and 12 that seem to suspend the reading of the poem.

editor emended the British words into American ones, perhaps to give a sense of coherence throughout the collection. Yet, Loy's mingling of vernaculars and localized spellings is a testament to her identity as a linking figure between Europe and America in terms of poetic experiments. The importance of the poet's unique spelling becomes quite crucial in Conover's second edition of Loy's work where he points out that Loy subtly shifts between different versions of a same word throughout various poems, or even within the same poem.⁵⁶ In Poem XI of "Songs to Joannes," the poet writes:

Our Universe
 Is only
 A colorless onion
 You derobe
 Sheath by sheath
 Remaining
 A disheartening odour
 About your nervy hands

Within a couple of lines, two different spellings of the same sound are used. This is the case of "colorless" and "odour." The "u" in "odour" indicates a typical English spelling, conversely, the lack of "u" in "colorless" suggests that the poet followed the American rules of spelling. That duplicity might appear even clearer when one compares Poem XI to Poem I of the same long section, "Songs to Joannes." In the last line of the first poem, "Coloured glass" contrasts with "colorless" as the opposition between the two similar yet contradictory terms is enhanced by the difference in

⁵⁶ See "Editorial Guidelines and Considerations" from *The Lost Lunar Baedeker*: "Imposing a dictionary's uniform standard of on her polyglot handling of the English language would distort the surface of her work" (170).

spellings. The tension between the English and the American spellings surfaces constantly in Mina Loy's poems, thus suggesting a lack of consistency in the way language is apprehended. Those slight shifts in the way of writing words are not changing the course of the poem but they are usually avoided so as to present a coherent textual unit. In the case of "Coloured" and "colorless," the spelling does not alter the pronunciation of the word; however, it contributes to the feeling of division pervading the poem. Ellen McWhorter mentions that, in this poem, "the world, for Joannes, is a thing to be disassembled" (13). Indeed, words such as "onion" or "sheath" already convey the image of small parts being unified to create a complete entity. In the same way, Mina Loy's English seems to be created from different forms of that same English language.

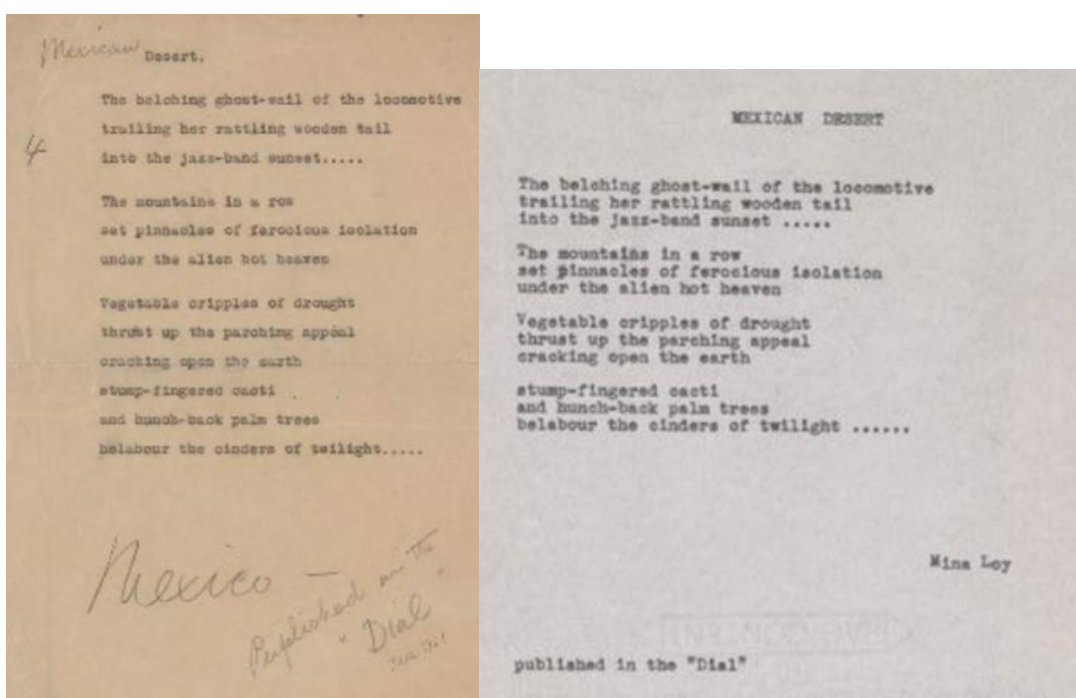


Figure 3.1. and 3.2. Mina Loy's "Mexican Desert." N.d. Beinecke Digital Library, YCAL MSS 6, box 5, folder 104, Yale University, New Haven, Connecticut. *Yale University Library*, <https://collections.library.yale.edu/catalog/11699617>. Accessed 24

[July 2022](#). Screen print.

MEXICAN DESERT

The belching ghost-wail of the locomotive
trailing her rattling wooden tail
into the jazz-band sunset.....

The mountains in a row
set pinnacles of ferocious isolation
under the alien hot heaven

Vegetable cripples of drought
thrust up the parching appeal
cracking open the earth

stump-fingered cacti
and hunch-back palm trees
belabour the cinders of twilight.....

Figure 3.3 Mina Loy's "Mexican Desert." N.d. *"Reconstru[ing] Scar[s]": Mina Loy and the Matter of Modernist Poetics*, edited by Marisa Januzzi, 1997, p. 319.

MEXICAN DESERT

The belching ghost-wail of the locomotive
trails; her rattling wooden tail
into the jazz band sunset

The mountains in a row
set pinnacles of ferocious isolation
under the alien hot heaven

Vegetable cripples of drought
thrust up the parching appeal
cracking open the earth

Stump-fingered cacti
and hunchback palm trees
belabor the cinders of twilight

Figure 3.4. Mina Loy's "Mexican Desert." N.d. *The Last Lunar Baedeker*, edited by Roger L. Conover, 1982, p. 17. Photograph.

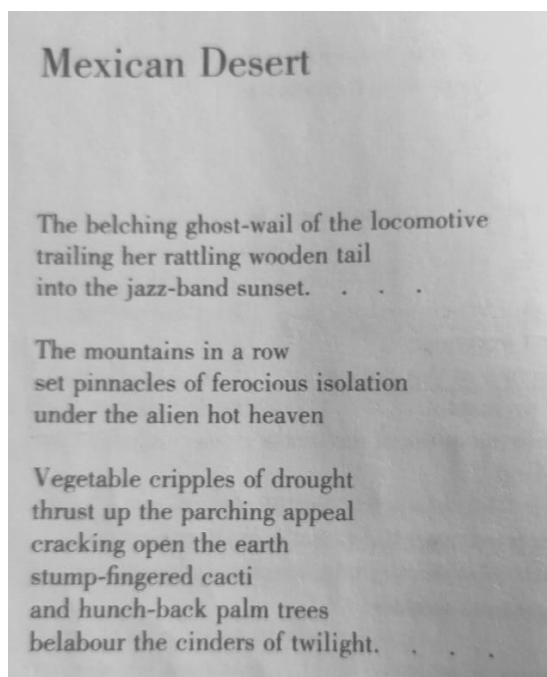


Figure 3.5. Mina Loy’s “Mexican Desert.” N.d. *The Lost Lunar Baedeker*, edited by Roger L. Conover, 1997, p. 74.

The impression that Conover is “cleaning up” the original texts in *The Last Lunar Baedeker* goes beyond typography and orthography; their syntax is also at stake. The editor chooses to follow the version of the poem that is composed of four tercets and reconstructs the first stanza.⁵⁷ Thus, while the manuscript reads

The belching ghost-wail of the locomotive
trailing her rattling wooden tail
into the jazz-band sunset

Conover’s 1982 version of the poem introduces a few changes that go against the grain of the text:

The belching ghost-wail of the locomotive

⁵⁷ As visible on figures 1 and 2, there is one version of the poem that is constituted of two tercets, and one big stanza of six lines, whereas the other version of the poem is composed of four tercets, making it more “regular” or, at least, giving it a stronger sense of form.

trails; her rattling wooden tail
 into the jazz-band sunset. (17)

This first stanza is inherently problematic in that it is constructed as a sentence fragment or a simple snapshot of a moment. The aposiopesis, here, gives all the more the impression that the stanza is left unfinished, as if the speaker lost track of what they were saying and moved on to the next image in the following stanza. Conover's 1982 version tries to recreate some sort of logic within the stanza by conjugating the verb "to trail" in the present tense and adding a semicolon that seemingly indicates that the second part of the stanza is simply a way to further describe the image introduced at the beginning. The addition of the semicolon also acts as a caesura separating the stanza in two halves of twelve and thirteen syllables. Loy's present participle, "trailing," and the absence of punctuation inside the stanza lengthen the latter, as a verbal iteration of the "locomotive / trailing." "[T]rails," then, does not only deprive the line of one meaningful syllable, but also impacts the sonic patterns at work. While the alliterations and assonances in [l], [ai] and [ing] are still visible, the verb "to trail" in the present form makes the impression of repetition and stasis weaker. Conover's editing process in *The Last Lunar Baedeker* can be understood as an effort to make the poet more palatable for an inexperienced reader but ultimately ends in impoverishing the poetic text itself.

So far, then, only Conover's *The Lost Lunar Baedeker* and Januzzi's critical editing seem to be offering a relatively successful, accurate edition of the poems. They both try to respect the integrity of the poems by focusing on either manuscripts or first published versions of the material, and provide notes and explanations for all their choices, often informed by the numerous versions of each poem available at the Beinecke Library. In a way, Januzzi's editing is more efficient due to her reluctance to

emend words spelled wrong when said spelling makes sense in the context of the poem, as visible in “Giovanni Franchi,” where she notes that writing “fillipping” instead of “filliping” might be a nod to Filippo Tommaso Marinetti (238), and the fact that she places her notes right after the poem in question, almost as an extension of said poem. She often discusses her choices in editing by very carefully referencing the manuscripts – the precision of her work is best visible, once more, in the notes for “Mexican Desert,” in which the physical appearance of the page on which Loy writes is scrutinized: “Msl is a carbon copy of a missing ms, typed on a worn and tape-repaired half-sheet of paper which is covered with handwritten sums on the verso” (319) – even if the notes alone do not always allow the reader to visualize the pages she mentions.

The visual quality of Loy’s work is something too often overlooked by editors. More than the already essential elements of punctuation, when it comes to Loy’s poetry, the question of page layout is also crucial, informing as it does their meaning and rendering their replication difficult. Januzzi, once again, affirms the importance of the blank spaces peppered in Loy’s pages while admitting that she did not attempt to reproduce them exactly:

No attempt has been made to replicate the exact measurements of spaces between words and at stanza breaks in the present edition. I have, however, preserved the relative size of spaces between words and at stanza breaks within any given poem. Attention has also been paid to the relative sizes of words in manuscripts, where such variation comprised a graphic, textually significant element of the manuscript (see, for instance, “Feminist Manifesto”). (112)

As Loy introduces blank spaces even within the lines, it is difficult to make a perfect translation of those blanks from manuscript or typed document to today's digital medium. When Januzzi mentions "measurements," she opens the discussion on how those visual, typographical spaces should be handled: is it important to follow the exact number of inches she left between the words, even though we know that it means nothing since spaces between the words are always different in handwritten form, or is leaving roughly more space than one normally would good enough? Januzzi and Conover's position, as I understand it, is in accordance with the second suggestion. This option seems to be the safe one, less difficult to implement than measurements, and, if clearly discussed beforehand as Januzzi did, unveils the difficult decision process of editing to the reader. In *Digital Scholarly Editing*, Matthew James Driscoll and Elena Pierazzo shatter the possibility of a utopian perfect edition:

Texts change over time and across media, and in spite of the early conviction of editors that the uncovering of the lost original (the Urtext) was an achievable goal, the reality of texts demonstrates how this belief cannot be supported: texts are never perfect (in the philosophical sense), but can always be perfected. Electronic texts have an even larger degree of changeability, and digital editing therefore forces editors finally to embrace textual variation as a defining feature of textuality. (10)

Driscoll and Pierazzo put their finger on the obvious, yet too often forgotten, fact that editing darkens layers of the text, especially when, as is the case with Loy, the text is transferred from one medium to another. In that sense, a good edition is one that tries to render the organic feel and flow of the original text as closely as possible given the unavoidable hindrances that plague each text. In light of such an objective

understanding of editing, the criticisms I have ventured thus far may seem unfair.

While I agree that Conover's *The Lost Lunar Baedeker* and Januzzi's critical edition must be praised for the agility they demonstrate in choosing which words to emend to facilitate the reading of the poems, and which words to leave as they are to let Loy's voice shine, I argue that their view of the page layout can be improved by further examining how the poet defines reading patterns through her work on sounds and silence.

In "Parturition," the linearity of the poem is compromised since the beginning when the poet writes:

Locate an irritation without

It is within

 Within

It is without (*LoLB* 4)

As mentioned by several critics, the reader does not really know if the lines are supposed to be read horizontally or vertically. The layout mirrors the confusion of the parturient woman. This extract embodies the constant tension in the poem between the woman, lying down, about to give birth, and the way she describes her pain, as a "mountain of agony" she stands up to. The twisted temporality of the poem, triggered by the woman's experience, is then reflected in the typography of the text and comes from the different ways the poem can be read. Because of the syntax, it can either be read: "Locate an irritation / without / It is / within / Within / It is without." In that case, the reading of the lines shows the hesitation of one, who no longer knows what is happening to her. Yet, the lines also make sense when read in the following way: "Locate an irritation / It is / without / within / Within / It is without." With this last possibility, the reader is almost facing a multiple-choice questionnaire, as the

typography works with the imperative “locate.” The last line could then be seen as a final answer. Loy’s poem also echoes medical scenarios in which a doctor would map the body of a patient, trying to “locate” the origin of pain, thus expending the body of the parturient woman to a “cosmic process” (RS181) that becomes visible in the print.

This disruption in linearity is then difficult to forget throughout the rest of the poem. A few lines later, the massive blank in the line “The conception Brute” allows the word “Brute” to be placed right above “The irresponsibility of men,” and “Inferiority” which would not have been possible either without the blank space at the beginning of the line (Figure 3.6). The disposition of the line, with the blank space at the beginning, seems to directly answer the question “Why?” just above. At the same time, the blank allows the first line about the man to finish exactly where the line about the woman ends, underlining the word “leave,” which characterizes the man’s attitude. The blank space highlights the fact that something is lacking in the man’s line. Yet, the line is able to be equal to the one above, about the woman. The man is able to be as important as the woman by interrupting her in her own space, in which he has no legitimacy.

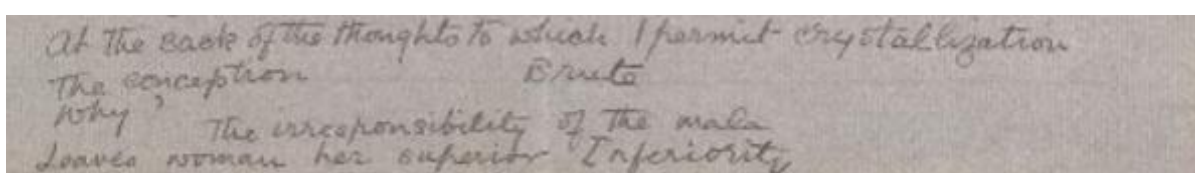


Figure 3.6. Mina Loy’s “Parturition.” 1914. Beinecke Digital Library, YCAL MSS

1050, box 188, folder 2508, Yale University, New Haven, Connecticut. *Yale*

University Library, <https://collections.library.yale.edu/catalog/2112213>. Accessed 24

July 2022. Screen print.

The same spacing process is at work in other poems like “Anglo-Mongrels and the Rose.” In the first part of the poem, dedicated to the character of Exodus, the reader faces blank spaces that pull the lines apart:

(The) unperceived
 conqueror of a new world
 Exodus lifts his head
 over the alien crowds (*LaLB* 117)

The reader can be tempted to read vertically because the typographical spaces are regular enough that they organize the poem not only in lines but also in columns. However, “(The) / conqueror / Exodus” does not constitute a perfect column, thus showing a displacement between “the conqueror” and the name of the character, Exodus, as they are not aligned on the same margin. Reading the poem vertically, then, expands what is already established horizontally: putting the definite article “the” into parentheses implies that the lines can be read in two different ways, somewhat mirroring a biblical textual shape in which words can be added in the margins. On the one hand, reading “The unperceived conqueror” means that Exodus has been identified as an actual “conqueror” – that he has the “title” of conqueror, one could say – but it contradicts the meaning of the following adjective, “unperceived.” Parmar remarks that, by naming him “the unperceived conqueror of a new world,” Loy points at “his ancestral nobility” (*MMW* 122). On the other hand, putting “the” in parentheses could imply a metaphor; Exodus is then acting like an “unperceived conqueror.” Without a definite article in the sentence, the official aspect of “conqueror” is undermined. Nothing is left of a potential dignity; rather, it is quite the opposite, meaning that the reader can feel the irony in stating that Exodus is a conqueror. Loy does not give a definitive answer, but instead, plays on the ambiguity and leaves the two options open. The reader is hanging between two visions of the same character.

I insist on the way blanks are used to create different meanings to recommend editing the blank spaces in a way that enables words that are “grouped” together to stay together. To show exactly what I mean by that, I take the example of “Giovanni Franchi,” published in 1916. The first two lines of the poem already show how the manuscript is different from the edited version. Indeed, in the holograph, “threewomen” on line one and “the same dress” on line two are perfectly aligned, whereas the blank space on line two in Conover and Januzzi’s versions set “the same dress” too far. While the poem gives a name and a surname to its two male figures, the “threewomen” is represented as a singular entity. The word’s coinage fuses two separate words, and the speaker’s use of “she” as its pronoun reduces the female figures of the poem to one singular being. In this way, the speaker seems to ironically concur with character Giovanni Franchi’s view of women. Placing the word “threewomen” right above “the same dress,” then, reinforces the notion that this entity shares the same identity, but it also conflates women with their dress, effectively objectifying them. I believe that linking those two phrases together enriches the meaning of the poem. Furthermore, it is clear that Loy’s use of blank spaces is not trivial: later in the manuscript of the same poem, the line “But NOit is a city with stones on the street” is crossed and rewritten leaving a bit more space between “NO” and “it” so that the second segment of the line ends up exactly under “it is a woman with flowers in her hair.” Januzzi respects this layout in her edition while Conover’s version seems to be influenced by the crossed out line, despite the evidence that the author was not satisfied with it (Figure 3.7).

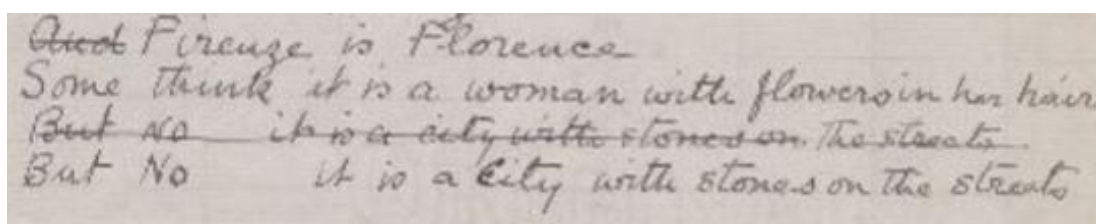


Figure 3.7. Mina Loy. "Giovanni Franchi." c. 1916. Image downloaded from the Beinecke Digital Library, YCAL MSS 1050, box 188, folder 2508, Yale University,

New Haven, Connecticut. *Yale University Library*,

<https://collections.library.yale.edu/catalog/2112213>. Screen print.

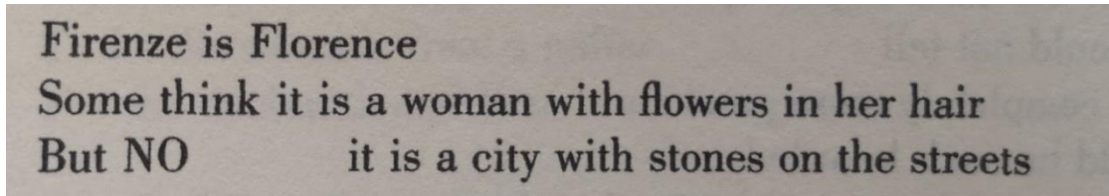


Figure 3.8. Mina Loy. "Giovanni Franchi." c. 1916. *The Lost Lunar Baedeker*, edited

by Roger L. Conover, 1997, p. 30. Photograph.

Conover's edition of the poem evidently is less precise and rigorous than Januzzi's but not completely uninteresting for all that. One could understand Loy's reiteration of the line as a way to align the repetition "it is," which, in this case would mean that Conover is leaving too much space. The misplacement of "it is" in Conover's final version mirrors the space that Loy leaves between the first crossed out line and the second, rewritten one. Along with the way he changes the series of dashes present throughout "Giovanni Franchi," those changes prove that the editor has an interest in the construction the poems, or rather, the way they appear to be *in construction*. "Giovanni Franchi" is the rare example in which Conover replaces the dashes with a complete line. It is almost more of a "drawing" than a typographical sign:

He listened to the elder's lips
 That taught him of earthquakes and women
 Of women —————
 His manners were abominable
 He would kill a woman. (*LoLB* 30)

This typographical line does echo the manuscript anyway since it mirrors the many crossed out lines and the overall aspect of draft. With this change, Conover emphasizes the impression that Loy's poems are either in the process of being written, even when finished, or have been recovered after being damaged. Colbey Emmerson Reid affirms that there is something Sapphic about Loy's relationship with writing, as her poems are conceived like scraps (125). Yopie Prins, in *Victorian Sappho*, reminds us of the importance of the "fascination with the fragmentation of the Sapphic corpus" (3) in the late 19th century. "Songs to Joannes" embodies this idea with its succession of short, visual poems. In Poem XXXIII, both the shortness of the poem and the fact that the sentence is left unfinished depict what looks like a failed attempt at writing, or "scraps:"

The prig of passion — — — —

To your professional paucity

Proto-plasm was raving mad

Evolving us - - -. (*LoLB* 67)

What is intriguing in this poem is the choice of lining up multiple dashes. This could mean that the reader is invited to commit to an act of imagination, to sustain the life of the poem by playing with the multitude of endings that those lines suggest. Not only does the connection between the first two poetic lines have to be reestablished, but the next two lines leave the reader on an "open ending" since the poem is cut short by the dashes, without much being said. The poem's brevity contributes to its overall truncated aspect, yet the dashes seem to be the most prominent feature of those lines. First of all, there is no regular number of dashes as the first set contains four, while the poem ends on three. One could wonder if the number of dashes gives any

indication on the length of the rest of the line that the reader was expecting to read and that the poet decided to cut, just like, as Lucia Pietroiusti assumes, “in a parody of a game of hangman” (34). It is as if the reader is immersed into the creation process and notices the illegible stage before the final product, a moment in time in which the poem is not yet finished. The latter is then invited to cross the boundaries of the page and to participate more actively in the process of creation: as the last link of the poetic chain, they are given the task of filling those omissions.

Conover’s editing of “Giovanni Franchi,” then, raises the question of whether the archives of Loy’s holographs are perhaps a better way to experience the poems than print editions that mediate the reader’s first encounter with the text. If Loy’s poems are to be appreciated in the long term, to be able to lift the primary opacity that the poet works so hard on, perhaps the texts are acceptable in their unmediated forms. Jean-Michel Rabaté discusses his concept of “genreader” in *James Joyce and the Poetics of Egoism*, saying that:

we can only tell whether readings are better or worse (they will please us better) but that we cannot ever condemn “bad” readings. We shall simply not use them if they do not accord to our priorities. The “genreader” should not be afraid of misreadings: because all the variants return as kaleidoscopic stereotypes, the “genreader” starts learning a textual process . . . Facing an expending archive, the “genreader” progresses through an excess of intentions and meanings that never adequately match each other. Therefore the “genreader” . . . is always becoming, and transforming the text whose intentions are to be ascribed to a whole instable archive, and *generic* because always poised in some sort of textual and sexual undecidability. (207)

The finely crafted instability that pervades Loy's poetry makes it the perfect body of work for a "genreader," and perhaps the only way to truly approach the text is, indeed, as a treasure hunt among the different versions and variations of the lines. Therefore, there is a gestational drive operating in Loy's poems. Here, I use "gestational" in a figurative way, meaning that the page displays and encourages poetics of elaboration and pondering to be able to create as many "offspring" connections or interpretations as possible. In this context, offering the reading an archival experience might highlight the way Loy interacts with the page.

3.2. Editing in Process: The Reader in the Archive

Though it would be wrong to assume that the archives represent the raw texts without interventions, archival research is an important step in locating the female subject. Working in a woman author's personal archives offers a perspective on her writing free of some editing regulations and it is also a way to reassert the too often forgotten significance of women in literature. In *Orality and Literacy: the Technologizing of the Word*, Walter Ong posits that "[p]rint encourages a sense of closure, a sense that what is found in a text has been finalized, has reached a state of completion . . . The printed text is supposed to represent the words of an author in definitive or 'final' form. For print is comfortable only with finality" (132). The study of the different print editions of Loy's poems, published after her death, proves that there is nothing "finalized" in the way language and the space of the page are handled. Yet, Ong has a point when he says that the codex cements the text in one specific, immutable form. If Loy's text, then, slips away from the utopia of "final intentions," the different versions available of her poems should all be taken into account when studying her. Louis Hay's view of what a text is give us clues on how to edit and publish Loy when he insists that

we should consider the text as a necessary possibility, as one manifestation of a process which is always virtually present in the background, a kind of third dimension of the written text. In this open (or half-open) space, the work is fatefully tossed between impetuous forward movements and calms of exhaustion, between stammerings and lacunae, from interruptions to unachievements that keep bringing us off course. (75)

When Hay mentions that the text is to be seen as one moment in the bigger picture of the writing process, he is referring to genetic criticism, the study of textual history, or, as defined in the introduction of *Genetic Criticism: Texts and Avant-Textes*, “instead of a fixed, finished object in relation to which all previous states are considered, a given text becomes – or texts become – the contingent manifestations of a *diachronous* play of signifiers.” (5) The idea that different versions of one poem have a dialogue together is best visible in the manuscripts, in which one poem can be rewritten multiple times, sometimes on the same page, as a sort of rumination where one version gives way to another.

This impression that the poet is in the midst formulating her final work is all the more important since, as it is the case in genetic criticism, Loy’s work is deeply rooted in history. The speaker in the poems seems to perfectly know what they are talking about, while the reader, and specifically, the modern reader, can be at a loss. The puns on names such as “Giovanni Bapini,” in the poem “Giovanni Franchi,” or “Danriel Gabrunzio,” in “Lions’ Jaws” very much refer to real people with whom Loy interacted yet the reader is not necessarily familiar with Papini and D’Annunzio. The poems appear to be overly specific, personal and politicized. Similarly, intertextuality is at the heart of Loy’s work: with poems entitled “Gertrude Stein” or “Nancy Cunard,” the specificities of the early twentieth century literary scene are something

that the reader is forced to be familiar with. In “An Aged Woman,” Loy signs the poem with her name and the date “July 12th 1984.” As Loy actually died on September 25th 1966, the depth of poem can be lost on the reader who does not know the poet well enough to understand that the speaker is reflecting on her life post mortem, and, instead, believes it is “a self-portrait as an old woman who looks at herself in the mirror and sees the ‘excessive incognito / of a Bulbous stranger’” (Bozhkova *ITA* 33). The date is also reminiscent of George Orwell’s book but since the poem was written sometime between 1942 and 1949, without a precise date, it is difficult to see in this date a meaningful intertextual connection. Using a date in the future indicates that the poet may have been anticipating the moment she would consider herself “an aged woman.” When readers face Mina Loy’s signature on the page, they are brought to the boundary between the poem and the poet’s life. Maera Shreiber and Keith Tuma talk about Mina Loy’s “signature elusiveness” (10-1) and I would argue that it is not only true for the poems in general but also in this context in particular. Andrew Michael Roberts affirms that “since a signature is a mark of identity, a ‘signature elusiveness’ simultaneously identifies the self and evades such an identification.” (100) This is exactly why the signature on “An Aged Woman” is problematic: readers first recognize it as an element belonging to the paratext, as something related to the poet herself, until they read the date and understands that it cannot be part of the text. As a result, we see that Loy’s poems are inherently historical – while expanding the space of what constitutes the historical – prompting us to read them in context.

The archive brings contextual precisions to the reading of the poems. Jacinta Kelly, in “Of Archives and Architecture: Domestication, Digital Collection and the

Poetry of Mina Loy,” focuses on the manuscript for the poem entitled “Mother Earth.” She mentions:

In both physical or digital form, Loy’s ‘Mother Earth’ makes it clear that the manuscript is not only a document that is preserved and classified, and that the archive is not only a preserver of evidence, but that the document and the archive collectively act as sites of meaning-making. Indeed, viewing archived documents as both evidence and meaning-contingent at once is precisely what enables literary texts to be so productively read in the archive, for in literary analysis, the word is often evoked as evidence for an argument even as the contingency of its meaning is recognised. (176)

With this citation, and in the article as a whole, Kelly emphasizes the importance of the archive, as a site where new connections can be made thanks to hyperlinks or simply in the way documents are grouped together (175). She also highlights that the page of a manuscript itself helps understanding the meaning of a poem by showing the process that brought it from one form to the next, thus making the reader able to see less obvious links between different parts of a poem. If Kelly focuses on “Mother Earth,” “An Aged Woman,” titled “An Old Woman” in an earlier draft, then we see that this approach is exemplary of how the archival manuscript is more productive than the edited text. With this example, I wish to demonstrate that the material on which the poem is written, as well as the movement of the poet’s hand on the page shape its creation. The first surprising element in the Beinecke Digital Library’s storage of the manuscript is that there is a total of four pages, two of them have both a recto and a verso, yet pages two and three do not seem to belong there. Indeed, if the layout of page two is similar to that of page one in the way the poet rewrites the same lines next to each other, the overall direction that the lines take is not completely in

line with the tone of “An Aged Woman.” At first sight, mentions of “agonies” and “God” could work in the context of the other lines of the poem, which is about the suffering of aging. Yet the question “ungreat men,” visible at the beginning of the second page, and the pointed agency of each line would definitely be surprising in this poem about an old woman. Moreover, the drawing of a palm tree at the verso of the first draft page seems to be a sign that the poem is finished, which is later confirmed on page four: it follows the lines of page one but in a cleaner and clearer writing. The added date and signature appear to confirm the idea that the poet was satisfied with the poem as it is.

For the study of this poem, then, I will focus on page one, recto and verso. We encounter multiple rewritings of some lines; in fact, the recto brims with lines and phrases crossed out while the verso is somewhat cleaner. The layout of the page makes it hard to view exactly what the poem looks like in its earlier forms. The first paragraphs are centered on the page and take space, whereas the end of the poem is indeed written on the recto page, but seems to be an afterthought, as the poet creates a side bubble that encroaches on the lines from the beginning before being better written on the other side of the page. Interestingly, page four – the clean draft – shows that the first ten lines of the poem are spaced out on the page whereas the second half of the poem is one massive stanza of nine lines. The distribution of the poem on the page seems almost dictated by the size of the page itself. In the manuscript’s first page, some of the text is squished onto its right side, and even bleeding into the first stanza. That said, the poet apparently tries to fit all the poem on one side of the manuscript’s fourth page. In that sense, the very word “dilation,” in the poem’s final stanza, somehow echoes the layout of the manuscript, specifically page one. The space allotted to the poetic lines widens out through Loy’s inclusion of a margin on

the left side of the poem. The inclusion of the word “dilation” also happens after the poet reconfigured the page, in the rewriting of the poem. The lexical field of containment and expansion runs throughout the poem and variations of different words connoting the same image are particularly interesting when the poet is trying out what sounds best:

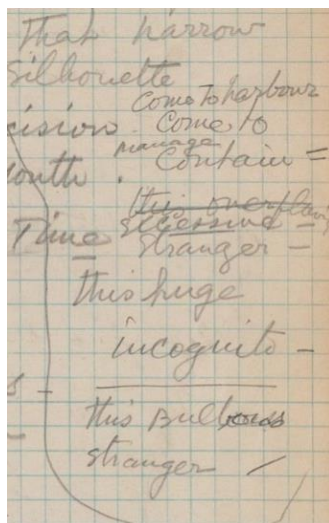


Figure 3.9. Mina Loy. “An Old Woman.” N.d. Image downloaded from the Beinecke Digital Library, YCAL MSS 6, box 5, folder 110, Yale University, New Haven, Connecticut. *Yale University Library*, <https://collections.library.yale.edu/catalog/11700446>. Accessed 24 July 2022.

Manuscript details.

The repetition of “come to,” followed by a different verb, turns into “contain” as if the curved line creating a pocket within the bigger page was directly influencing the formation of the poem. This, along with the word “stranger” on the next line, seems to organically invoke the word “storage” later used on the verso of the page because of their sonic and visual similarity:

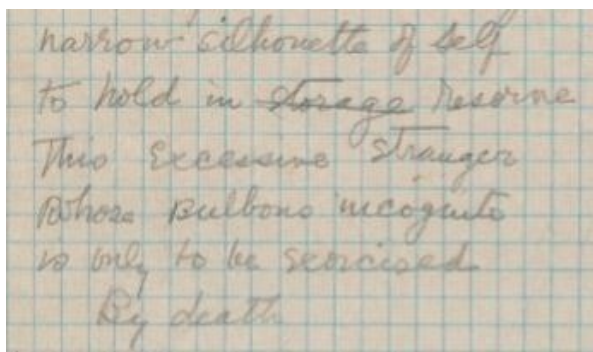


Figure 3.10. “An Old Woman.” N.d. Image downloaded from the Beinecke Digital Library, YCAL MSS 6, box 5, folder 110, Yale University, New Haven, Connecticut.

Yale University Library, <https://collections.library.yale.edu/catalog/11700446>.

Accessed 24 July 2022. Manuscript details.

The different versions of the poem rearrange more or less the same ideas and the same words, as it is the case with the lines “this huge incognito / this bulbous stranger,” which becomes “this excessive stranger / whose bulbous incognito” in the second writing of the poem before reaching their final form “this excessive incognito / of a Bulbous stranger.” If the way the words are variously reworked simply shows that the poet is trying to find the most meaningful version of the poem, one that sounds and looks best, the absence, in the final version, of certain erstwhile terms definitely changes the reader’s experience of the poem. In the first two instances of the poem, “the future is a seedless pod,” as opposed to the final version, in which “the future” becomes “inexploitable.” On the one hand, “inexploitable,” the French spelling of “unexploitable,” gives the idea of something that cannot be accomplished, but also connotes taking advantage of something. There is a natural dimension in the term as it can refer to natural resources being extracted for gain. Using this word in regard to the future seems to indicate that the speaker cannot make the future whatever they want but rather have to suffer through it. On the other hand, the “seedless pod” also relates to the natural world, but has other, more complex meanings. First of all, it reinforces

the lexical field of containment since the seeds are supposed to be inside the pod. Moreover, it not only indicates that the future is empty but also that the future is barren. More importantly, “seedless pod” seems to be the key to understanding the anachronistic date under Loy’s signature. Indeed, the whole poem is about the woman’s physicality so “seedless pod” could signify that, in the future, the woman is only a physical envelope that has lost its interiority and its reproductive “seeds”. The poet operates a reversal of that idea with the fake date: she proves that, even if her body is no longer there, her genius remains.

Loy’s reader has better tools to understand the poems if they read as an editor. In “Editing, Fast and Slow,” Susan L. Greenberg claims that “the editor embod[ies] the absent reader” (557), conversely, the reader, here, embodies the absent editor to work against the “oppressive” (563) nature of editing that would force-feed the audience of one specific reading of the poems. However, according to D. F. McKenzie, for textual criticism, “some notion of ‘the text in a form its author intended’ [is] indispensable.” (36) Focusing on the archive, then, would confront the reader with what the poet did not want the reader to see. In a 1915 letter to Carl Van Vechten, Loy writes twice her desire to show some of her poems only to him: talking about “The Sacred Prostitute” she says “I may send it to you for your eyes alone,” and then later in the same letter she expresses, again, her wish to forward him “Love Songs” “for [his] eyes alone.”⁵⁸ While the letter indicates that the poet is both cherry-picking who can see her writings and catering to her audience, the poems she mentions are ultimately published, if, perhaps, in more complete forms, and thus available for anyone to read. Van Vechten, here, is asked to act as a representative of

⁵⁸ YCAL MSS 1050, Carl Van Vechten Papers, box 76, series I: Correspondence, Beinecke Digital Library. <https://collections.library.yale.edu/catalog/2043789>.

all the potential readers while impacting the poem with his comments. Focusing on archival work, in the context of Loy's poetry, implies thrusting the reader into the poet's private sphere, making them aware of the mechanisms behind literary production. If this method goes beyond "authorial intentions" because the poet has no longer any control on what the reader does read, it is as valid as letting one official editor guide one's reading, especially since Loy is so interested in the social intimate and, with her poems, targets a catered audience of friends. Furthermore, a slow reading of the poems, combined with engaging with the texts in their intimacy, reinforces the relationship between poet/speaker and reader already visible in the poems, where the speaker is positioned as the one having all the keys of the poem and archly pointing the reader in different directions.

Perhaps the only problem with the Mina Loy archive, as available on the Beinecke Digital Library, is that the documents are simply on their own, presented virtually without context. More than that, Loy's manuscripts and letters are scattered in other archives. Kelly mentions:

Descriptive notes also indicate where other writings might be found: correspondences between Loy and her contemporaries, for instance, can be found in the boxes of Carl Van Vechten, Mabel Dodge Luhan, and Julien Levy. In this way, description creates pathways for the scholar to follow in order to locate further work. Pathways between documents are thus created within the archive through finding aids, descriptions, inventories, databases and bibliographic records. These tools act as guides that scholars use to traverse the archive. (174)

Kelly qualifies what she says in this citation by adding that the digital archive, with its hyperlinks, definitely helps the reader to make connections that could not be made by

just looking at the boxes of documents (173). Yet, what can be seen through her article is that the digital archive only is a translation of the physical archive in another medium. The material is completely raw and already difficult to piece together for a scholar, let alone a simple reader. This chapter, so far, has argued for the importance of the manuscripts, however a certain amount of organization is still needed to let the reader spend time in the pages. In that sense, I propose a mixed model where the manuscripts are curated, historicized, legible and easily available to any reader, much like the website for The Pulter Project.⁵⁹ In “Textual Instability and Editorial Idealism,” Tanselle writes “[o]ver the past decade and a half there had been a notable shift of emphasis in the writing about textual matters, from a concern with authorial intention to an interest in the collaborative or social aspects of text-production. As the discussion has evolved, there has come to be an increased concern with textual instability and the significance of versions” (1). The question of the multiplicity of the text is at the heart of manuscript culture in general, but Loy’s case is particularly concerned with the ways in which the text can slip the author’s grasp: she mentions the question of editing and how little control she has over it multiple times in her letters to Van Vechten and to Robert Vas Dias in a 1965 interview.⁶⁰ In that sense, the manuscripts and their productive exploitation would thrive in an edition model that “seeks to pull back the editorial curtain to reveal to the reader the often invisible decisions underwriting the making of poetry and poets” (The Pulter Project, “The Project”). Following Elena Pierazzo and her assertion that digital editions “embrace

⁵⁹ See <https://pulterproject.northwestern.edu>. Accessed 12 July 2022.

⁶⁰ See Vas Dias, Robert. Interview with Mina Loy and Paul Blackburn. 1965. *PennSound: Center for Programs in Contemporary Writings*. University of Pennsylvania, <https://writing.upenn.edu/pennsound/x/Loy.php#loyinterview65>. Accessed 12 July 2022.

textual variations as a defining feature of textuality” (10), I would like to look at how a digital edited archive could be efficient to the study of Loy’s poetry.

I chose the example of *The Pulter Project* since it is an open-access project that would be replicable and suitable for the study of Loy’s work. The website offers access to all the poems found in the only manuscript of Lady Hester Pulter (1605-1678), which was rediscovered at the Brotherton Library in 1996. On the website, it is possible to know more about the poet herself and the circumstances in which the manuscript has been found, but the most interesting feature is the different ways in which a selected poem can be viewed. Once the reader clicks on one of the poems, there are headnotes offering context and interpretation of said poem, and curations at the end that lead the reader towards academic articles and hyperlinks that relate to the poem in question. When reading the poem, the reader can click on obscure turns of phrase or expressions for definitions and lexical help. At the beginning of each stanza, the reader can also view a facsimile of the manuscript and really zoom on it. Finally, the website has a tool called “compare editions” which enables the reader to do just that. Thanks to that tool, it is possible to see the manuscript, the “elemental edition,” which targets first readers who want a basic understanding of the poems, and the “amplified edition,” that is more annotated, changes spellings, and overall allows for more in-depth analyses of the poems, at the same time, side by side.

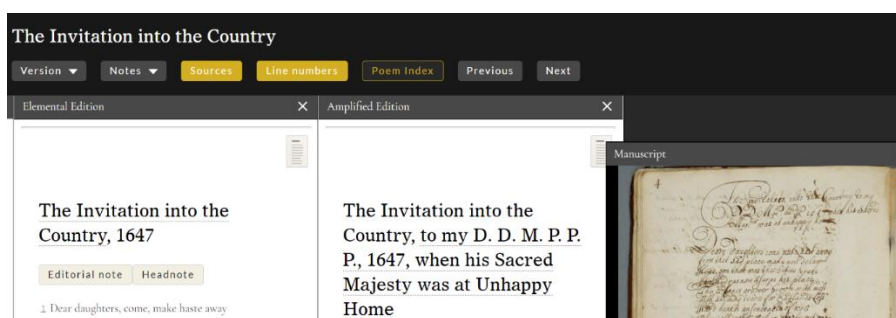


Figure 3.11. Hester Pulter. “The Invitation into the Country.” 1647. In the “Compare Editions” tool of The Pulter Project. *The Pulter Project: Project in the Making*, edited by Wendy Wall and Leah Knight. Northwestern University, others, 2018, <https://pulterproject.northwestern.edu/>. Accessed 25 July 2022.

In Loy’s case, it is necessary to define complicated words and turns of phrase; they would provide a lexical safety net without damaging the reader’s first reaction to the poems. Indeed, expressions such as “goggle of death” in “Time-Bomb” or “street-corner smile” in “Poem XXIV” do not really make sense: the poems link together words that can be understood separately but which, once associated, create images that cannot easily be interpreted. In the case of “Time-Bomb,” the words “goggle” and “death” are associated in a relationship of belonging. The reader is more familiar with the term “goggles” in the plural than with the singular form, which already creates a gap in understanding the poem. Even if the reader understands the word “goggle” as an archaic term meaning “a glance,” the rest of the sentence is not very explicit: there is nothing that is commonly referred to as a “goggle of death.” The association of those two perfectly common words forms a concept that the reader cannot fathom. The “goggle of death” leaves the reader without a real idea of what the poem is trying to describe. A brief literary analysis would open the realm of possibilities for the reader trying to make sense of it.

The headnotes should be replaced by footnotes so that the reader can have a first experience of the poems free of editorial meddling. As opposed to The Pulter Project, in which the amplified edition gives more context about the poem and the time it was written, I believe that this type of knowledge should be left to the elemental edition, so that a casual reader can decide whether to use it. It would function as a support available if the reader feels like abandoning the reading of the

poems. Questions of editing should also be mentioned in the elemental edition, and perhaps further developed in the amplified one. If, in the case of Hester Pulter's poems, the amplified edition is also the one which is most edited, it must be noted that Loy's manuscripts have such a unique conception of the space of the page that a strict, lineated edition is perhaps better adapted to a casual reader. Indeed, the editor's endeavour makes the reading of the poems more fluent; an experienced reader might be more inclined to face moments of hiccups in the text, or even the sometimes illegible nature of the manuscripts.

The tool allowing readers to compare editions is evidently what, I think, is specifically useful to the study of Loy's poems. I would add another function to the comparative tool which would make audio recitations of the poems available for accessibility purposes but also so that the reader can experience the visual and the aural experience of the poems and the tension between the two, which would help highlighting the importance of typographical marks. In Poem XXVII from "Songs to Joannes," for instance, the description of a former love affair in a cold and distant manner rests on a number of visual typographical practices:

Nucleus Nothing

Inconceivable concept

Insentient repose

The hands of races

Drop off from

Immodifiable plastic

The contents

Of our ephemeral conjunction

In aloofness from Much
 Flowed to approachment of----
 NOTHING
 There was a man and a woman
 In the way
 While the Irresolvable
 Rubbed with our daily deaths
 Impossible eyes. (*LoLB* 63-4)

The poem displays various typographical elements that cannot be vocalized, such as capital letters or even the simple layout of the words on the page. Listening to the poem without visual medium would exclude the listener from a layer of meaning. In the first line of the poem, the pause between “Nucleus” and “Nothing” could be understood as the effect of changing lines for the listener who does not see the written version of the poem. This is problematic in the sense that “Nucleus” is defined as something self-contained; it is the one thing that cannot be separated in distinct parts. However, here, it is separated by the following blank that divides the two words of the line. The blank space is even more striking because the two words are working together and echoing each other in sounds and length. The gap after “Nucleus” mirrors the failed union between two persons that is described in the poem. This emphasis on the visual aspect of typography seems to be an answer to Ellen McWhorter’s idea according to which the “inconceivable concept” of the second line suggests the need for another mode of articulation in the poem through “what is not said” and “what triggers a pause” (18).

If we take a look at the capital letters, what is noticeable is that they are mostly triggered by the beginning of a line. Yet, three exceptions are to be found: “Nothing,”

“Much,” and “Irresolvable” start with a capital letter even though they are used at the end of their respective lines. Interestingly, they all more or less refer to a quantity. If “Nothing” and “Much” present opposite quantities, “Irresolvable” somehow denotes emptiness since something irresolvable does not have *any* solution. These words of quantities starting with uppercase letters balance the unsaid, the impression of void given by the typographical blank, among other features. The counterpart of the blank spaces can be found in those words which are filling the poem while still inducing a form of void, especially when they connote non-existent quantities like “Nothing.” In this perspective, it is difficult to miss the mention of “NOTHING” in the second stanza. Although this word already appears in the very first line of the poem, the two instances are viewed differently because one is written entirely in capital letters. The different choices of typography raise the question of how the two words are supposed to be vocalized. In a reading, “Nothing” and “NOTHING” would need to be pronounced differently, but then, how differently can they be pronounced and how can one make sure that one’s vocalization of capital letters is indeed understood by an audience composed of multiple people? The disruptive quality of the lines in Poem XXVII resides not only in the difficulty to vocalize typography but also in the way the rest of the poem has to be pronounced: the poem subverts the rhythm of natural spoken English. You can hear that on line eight, the word “Of” is stressed because its position at the beginning of the line forces the reader to emphasize it, which would have been unlikely if the poem were not lineated. The end of line ten echoes the same problem. Once again, “of” is underlined by its position. What is interesting is that the role of “of,” as a preposition, is to connect different elements of a sentence, and in line ten, this role is even reinforced by the use of dashes which is also supposed to link words together. Ironically, by subverting the natural pattern of stresses and

focusing on syntactical links, Loy points out the lack of connection between the couple of the poem, already suggested in the first line of the poem.

To make all the elements mentioned above more obvious in a digital archive I would put the version of the poem available in the magazine *Others* side by side with Conover's version of it and Januzzi's as they are the ones that are most often used as ur-texts. A comparative editing of this poem would not be very problematic as there is no manuscript of the text available and the typed versions available are conservatively following the edition from the magazine *Others*.⁶¹ The latter should then be considered the original text. The question of typography and what to make of it should be triggered by the different way dashes are handled in the magazine version and in Januzzi's editing:

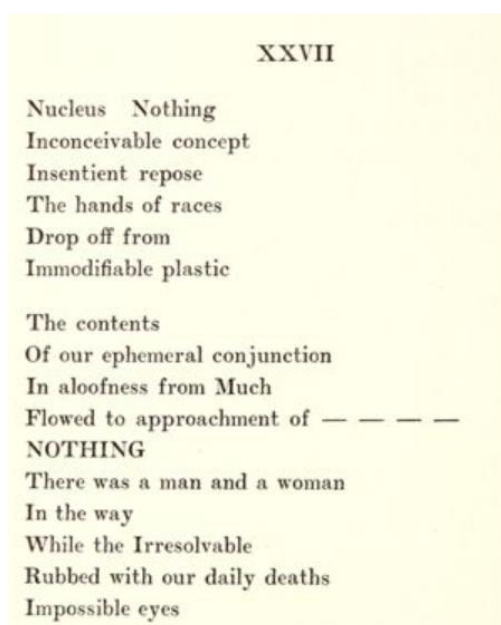


Figure 3.12. Mina Loy. "Poem XXVII." *Others*, vol. 3, no. 6, April 1917, p. 16.

Modernist Journals Project, <https://modjournal.org/issue/bdr523494/>. Accessed 21 July

2022. Screen print.

⁶¹ See "Songs to Joannes." *Others*, vol. 3, no. 6, April 1917, pp. 3-20. *Modernist Journals Project*, <https://modjournal.org/issue/bdr523494/>. Accessed 15 July 2022.

XXVII

Nucleus Nothing
 Inconceivable concept
 Insentient repose
 The hands of races
 Drop off from
 Immodifiable plastic

 The contents
 Of our ephemeral conjunction
 In aloofness from Much
 Flowed to approachment of -- -- -- --
 NOTHING
 There was a man and a woman
 In the way
 While the Irresolvable
 Rubbed with our daily deaths
 Impossible eyes

Figure 3.13. Mina Loy. "Poem XXVII." 1917. "*Reconstru[ing] Scar[s]*": Mina Loy and the Matter of Modernist Poetics, edited by Marisa Januzzi, 1997, pp. 268-269.

Screen print.

Januzzi uses double small dashes instead of long dashes visible in *Others*. This detail opens the conversation on the difficulty to edit marks that are not words on the page, and everything that asks the reader to acknowledge the space both around and supporting the poems. The footnote for this poem would revolve around the way in which the poem echoes Loy's reality at the time, before moving on to the lack of manuscript and thus having to rely completely on another editor whose work was performed over a hundred years ago.

The digital medium is increasingly explored since it provides a platform that gathers multiple voices, which, in turn, bring collective endeavour at the forefront of textual studies. In "The Rationale of Hypertext," McGann mentions his work on the Rossetti Hypermedia Archive, which enables readers and contributors to infinitely expand the site as more documents concerning Rossetti are discovered and filed⁶².

⁶² See The Complete Writings and Pictures of Dante Gabriel Rossetti: A Hypermedia Archive, <http://www.rossettiarchive.org>. Accessed 17 July 2022.

McGann affirms that the archive “has escaped bibliographical limitation” (27) specific to books. Tanya E. Clement, in “*BaronessElsa: An Autobiographical Manifesto*,” argues for what she calls “social-text network theory” (140).⁶³ Such theory is at the crossroads of genetic criticism, biographical work and digital scholarship as Clement focuses solely on the Baroness’s autobiographies. Here, I discuss how Clement’s editorial theory of autobiographies fits Loy’s poetry. The Baroness Elsa Von Freytag-Loringhoven’s poems present some of the same challenges explored with Loy’s work in this chapter. Both women were very closely tied to Marcel Duchamp and other avant-garde artists, published in some of the same little magazines, and Loy’s time in Munich, Paris, or even New York overlaps with that of the Baroness. In *The Passion Projects*, Melanie Micir points at Djuna Barnes’s overwhelming editorial work as she inherited from her friend’s literary drafts after her death in 1927: “[us]ing the Baroness’s autobiographical fragments alongside the archive of their correspondence, Barnes worked intermittently on the biography while she continued to pursue her own creative work” (57). This piecing out together of scraps is the result of Barnes facing the same limitations that scholars are confronted to in Loy’s archives, a parallel that is all the more relevant as both poets share an inclination for instable typography:

⁶³ “Social-text network theory” refers to an editorial practice that takes into consideration all the voices that had or have an impact on the work of a said author.

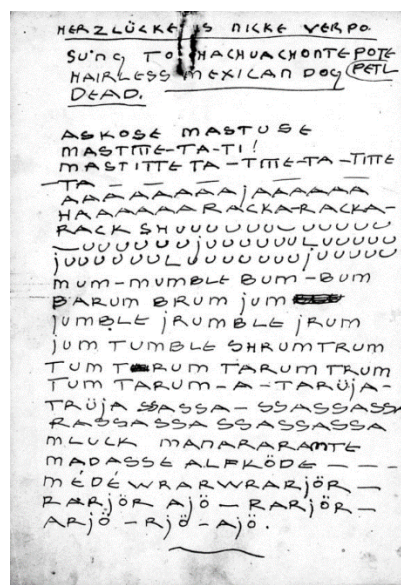


Figure 3.14. N.d. Elsa Von Freytag-Loringhoven's Paper, Series III, Box 2, Folder 36. The University of Maryland Digital Collection, College Park, Maryland. *University of Maryland*, <https://digital.lib.umd.edu/resultsnew/id/umd:65298>. Accessed 10 July 2023. Screen print.

On line 8, the series of dashes after “TA” is in itself problematic: the dashes get longer and more spaced out as the lines unfold. Is the editor supposed to regularize the line or to highlight the longer spaces? Further, Clement, focusing on autobiography rather than poetry, notes that “[t]he Baroness calls her writing ‘half mad in syntax’ and cites the ‘damage’ this state does to her expressions and her sentences. As such, she indicates the important story these errors can tell about her cross-cultural, multilingual experience. By cleaning these errors, the editors erase that aspect of her ‘spiritual reality’” (145). In order to respect the Baroness’s own vision of writing, Clement supports a form of editing in which problems “are foregrounded instead of erased” (150). Thus, the different solutions to those problems, developed throughout the years, are all equally represented in a multivocal diversity of “alternative narratives” (144).

In a way, redesigning an online archive for Loy's manuscripts and the various editions of her poems is an attempt to go beyond limitations. By providing contextualization and analyses of the edited poems, digital archives work toward a pedagogical and hermeneutic goal. Even as I tried to explain the value of digitalizing the poems, I used the word "tool" multiple times, proving that, even if the archive ultimately presents a richer experience of the poems, such a medium necessarily excludes first-time readers who would have, perhaps, only encountered Loy's work by browsing books in a library. One singular, perfect – so to speak – edition of Loy might be utopian but this discussion on how to exhibit textual instability on a digital medium opens a direct dialogue with issues concerning the creation of a paper edition.

3.3. Canonicity and Codex

It is obvious from the way Mina Loy scholars and editors speak about her that, even though she is now part of the modernist canon now, she is still talked about in marginal terms for diverse reasons – such as the rather small amount of poems she produced, or, as Parmar infers, the fact that her official editors were not prominent modernist figures (*MMW* 109). Conover, in the very beginning of his introduction to *The Lost Lunar Baedeker*, writes about Loy's friendship with Duchamp, affirming that the way she is remembered is always "[a]s part of a group. As slightly out of focus" (xi). Conover could not be more correct – even though he characterizes Loy in this way himself; her portrayal as an outcast seems to be the main stance of the scholars who work within the archive. Sara Crangle's "Feminism's Archives: Mina Loy, Anna Mendelssohn, and Taxonomy" directly links archival work with the canonical view of the poet:

Within the porous, limited confines of this archival sample there is much to glean, not least Loy's pervasive resistance to taxonomies, her much-touted

subversion of stable identities, which prompts her to use six different names in the valedictions of just over a dozen letters. This is the Loy we have come to know so well, the figure who strategically remained on the edges of paternalistic kinship groups – Futurism, Dada, Surrealism – that were never going to fully admit her into their inner circles. (254)

Interestingly, while Loy is always deemed to be part of many sub-movements within the *avant-garde*, as Crangle describes above, the surrealist or dadaist intentions of her poems are rarely discussed while her inclusion in the Futurist movement is completely acknowledged and almost canonical. In that sense, the poet's marginality is persistently discussed, but rarely demonstrated. When Susan Rosenbaum writes a close analysis of "Ceiling at Dawn," she shows that the poet uses some of the surrealist techniques such as juxtaposition, for instance, to explore the unconscious but ends her commentary on the idea that Loy "would depart from and criticize Surrealism" ("Surrealist Poetics: Ceiling at Dawn (1930)").⁶⁴ As a poet writing in English, even as she borrows techniques, she is still embedded in mostly Anglo-American contexts of the time. If anything, the way Loy is talked about, as a writer fluttering around multiple literary styles and currents, shows that the boundaries separating different *avant-gardes* are manufactured, which should lead scholars to redefine the state of modernist studies.

Susan Stanford Friedman in *Planetary Modernisms: Provocations on Modernity across Time* mentions the issue with modernism making clear boundaries between canon – which would traditionally be Western, turn-of-the-twentieth-century

⁶⁴ See Susan Rosenbaum's analysis of "Ceiling at Dawn" (1930) on *Mina Loy: Navigating the Avant-Garde*, <https://mina-loy.com/split-texts/surrealist-poetics-ceiling-at-dawn-1930>. Accessed 18 July 2022.

poetry, even if Friedman works against this idea – and margins (38). If the author focuses mainly on temporality as well as the geographical East/West binary to explain the importance of expanding the term “modernism” to literatures beyond Europe and America, her point according to which “the pluralization of modernity and modernism runs the risk of covertly reinstating a center/periphery pattern in which a hegemonic norm is covertly privileged over marginal variations” (45) is useful to explore what happens within the canon itself. Since Loy’s poetry is always categorized as not reducible to any one school or signature, it becomes difficult to discuss it on its own. Instead, the poems are often defined as a subcategory, necessarily tied to something bigger. In this context, an archival project for Loy could cement her identity as a marginal figure. At first sight, it seems like such a digital medium actually proves the poet’s interest in a scholarly world, but considering the very few editions of the poems, the endeavour is more similar to something akin to the Victorian Women Writers Projects which groups multiple authors on one platform to make sure that the poems are shared with an audience in one way or another.⁶⁵

The website *mina-loy.com*, created by Suzanne W. Churchill, Linda Kinnahan and Susan Rosenbaum, embraces the marginality seemingly natural to women writers by describing their editing methodology as *en dehors garde*:

Taking a cue from classical ballet rather than warfare, we offer the term *en dehors garde* to describe the strategies of writers and artists whose mode of experimentation does not conform to the oppositional stance associated with the modernist avant-garde. *En dehors* means “coming from the outside” or

⁶⁵ See *The Victorian Women Writers Project*, edited by Angela Courtney, et al. The Trustees of Indiana University, 2023, <https://webapp1.dlib.indiana.edu/vwwp/welcome.do>. Accessed 29 Aug. 2023.

“turning outward.” Rather than assuming a militant position at the forefront of culture, women and people of color often came from the outside and operated on the margins, working strategically to transform gendered, racialized literary traditions and visual cultures. (249-50)

The three scholars summarize this stance on their website, hoping that digital humanities will shake up the field of reading Mina Loy by encouraging “collaboration” and “concentration” on issues of “diversity and intersectionality.”⁶⁶ The manifesto they write in itself is interesting as it tries to build an ideal reader that would take time to appreciate Loy’s modernity and cheekiness. The poems proposed on the website are carefully edited and often followed by close analyses and other documents enabling a deep engagement with the text. Andrew Pilsch’s *Mina Loy Online* website, which Churchill, Kinnahan and Rosenbaum cite on their own website, definitely influences *mina-loy.com*.⁶⁷ This older digital version of Loy’s poems was created in hopes of offering a clean, precise rendition of Loy’s punctuation and typography in a digital medium. This goal is also one that seems to be at the heart of the close readings of the poems offered in *mina-loy.com*. While both websites only present the digital editing of few of Loy’s poems, the way they present them is widely different. Pilsch’s website is dedicated to the reading of the poems themselves. The three women scholars, however, constructed their website as a road map to unveil any doubts or misunderstandings the reading of Loy’s poems could cause. It is a pedagogical tool that gathers topics and documentation primarily for scholarly purposes.

⁶⁶ See <https://mina-loy.com/manifesto/>. Accessed 24 July 2022.

⁶⁷ See *Mina Loy Online*. Andrew Pilsch, <http://oncomouse.github.io/loy/>. Accessed 18 July 2022.

On the one hand, the website, while helpful, can be overbearing in its urge to explain the poems to ease the difficulty of reading them. Here, academic work on the poems takes the position of Loy's speaker who both influences and challenges the reader. The contributors to mina-loy.com strive to propose a platform to digital humanities which "invite[s] a closer, more informed engagement with her work" ("About the Project") but fail to provide enough space for the reader or scholar to resist the text.⁶⁸ If the notions of "actual reader," as mentioned by Hans Robert Jauss, or "implied reader," defined by Wolfgang Iser, are often used when it comes to study the act of reading in a literary text, Judith Fetterley suggests a feminist alternative: the "resisting reader."⁶⁹ The latter reads the text against what is written, refuses to take part in the patriarchal narrative that some literary works showcase. In that context, Mina Loy seems to present the exact opposite: poems in which the figure of the resisting reader would not be needed, since the figure of the woman is given a voice. However, the need to mention this concept is not completely irrelevant when it comes to Loy's poetry. The poet's voice, through the persona, seems to be directly interested in how the reader processes the poems. There is a kind of playfulness, even during the reading of said poems, which makes the reader take different positions in regard to the poetic text, including one of resistance. The text resists the reader and vice versa. Stein's writing also forces a form of resistance from the reader, but Isabelle Alfandary notes that this resistance to the text does not come from its obscurity but rather from its materiality.⁷⁰ Far from Stein's foregrounding syntax or Marianne Moore's interest

⁶⁸ See <https://mina-loy.com/about-us/project/>. Accessed 24 July 2022.

⁶⁹ The "implied reader", as Wolfgang Iser defines it, is the image the author has of their reader. Wolfgang Iser, *The Implied Reader: Patterns of Communication in prose Fiction from Bunyan to Beckett*, The Johns Hopkins UP, 1974.

⁷⁰ See Isabelle Alfandary, "Gertrude Stein ou l'illisible comme condition." *L'Illisible*, edited by Liliane Louvel and Catherine Rannoux, Poitiers and Rennes : Maison des sciences de l'homme et de la société Presses universitaires de Rennes, 2006, pp. 87-88. "Ce qui arrête la lecture n'est pas l'hermétisme du

in technical aspects of the line, however, Loy's poetry seems founded on a form of elusiveness that does not really point back at the poet's mastery with language and formal practices but reimagine the poem as a place of discomfort, outside of reading and writing habits of the time, which position readers in a space of artistic and cultural alternative. At first sight, this resisting reader appears to be the opposite of the model reader, theorized by Umberto Eco.⁷¹ Indeed, instead of complying with the persona, the resisting reader does the exact opposite. Yet, Mina Loy's poetry seems to put those two notions in tension. Paradoxically, it seems that resisting the text is actually what the reader is supposed to do. What the persona expects from the reader, or rather, from the text itself becomes resistant and the reader is encouraged to follow accordingly.

This resistance that is almost demanded of the reader is best visible in the treatment of gender in the poems. The women in Mina Loy's poems are not able to be free from the male gaze. They are prisoners of their statuses in society. In the following extract from "Café du Néant," the poem at the middle of the section entitled "Three Moments in Paris", the description of women as objects causes a movement of resistance from the reader:

The woman
 As usual
 Is smiling as bravely
 As it is given to her to be brave. (*LoLB* 16)

texte, mais bien le texte lui-même dans sa matérialité concrète, sa réalité typographique" / "What holds the reading back is not the opacity of the text, but the text itself, in its concrete materiality, in its typographical reality." My translation.

⁷¹ The "Model Reader" is a reader "able to deal interpretively with the text in the same way as the author deals generatively" (68). See Umberto Eco's *Lector in Fabula*. Translated by Myriem Bouzaher, Paris: Grasset et Fasquelle, 1985.

In this extract, the female figure has a fixed role: she must be pleasing to see as she smiles, “as usual.” In that sense, the woman is becoming a doll, always giving the best image of herself in case people look at her. The last two lines are particularly interesting as they leave space of the reader to resist what is said. Indeed, “as bravely as it is given to her to be brave” could be understood in two different manners. First, the reader can see the traditional image of the woman as weak. She smiles bravely but she cannot be too brave. Yet, the lines can also be read as the woman having to comply to the role she was given by men, which then would be a criticism of feminine stereotypes. The reader is all the more invited to refute the cliché depicted in the poem since the objectification of women is linked to the theme of death. We encounter this theme in the first stanza, when women are reduced to “baited bodies” waiting at “coffin tables.” The emphasis on death that pervades the text can be extended to the implied reader’s point of view. The reader is encouraged to refuse the stereotypes, to perceive that such description of women has to stop, to die.

In the extract, the typographical blanks enable the polyptoton on “brave” to be especially visible to the reader, as if linking women with bravery was the most important part of the poem. The poem both offers the reader the dominant view on women and the seeds to resist what the poem tells, to find a way to turn the outdated stereotypes presented into a case for woman’s freedom. In “Three Moments in Paris,” the reader is faced with multiple occurrences of women being trapped by the male gaze, and yet, as the persona seems to be gendered as female, there is a reversal: the men are actually the ones being trapped by the female gaze. One of the main examples would be from “One O’Clock at Night,” in which the woman is nothing but “a mere woman.” The reader has to pay close attention to the poem, for the “I” in the poem indicates that the female character is also the persona. The reader has to refute

the mention of “a mere woman.” Such a strong statement is supposed to provoke a feeling of rejection in the reader who cannot agree with how low women are placed. Jacinta Kelly affirms that Loy’s language produces contradictions by “reprimand[ing] the reader for attempting” to define women (*CB* 85). Here, Kelly focuses mainly on the construction of women and how the reader may perceive them.

Yet, this insistence on resistance does not only concern the way the reader naturally reacts to Loy’s treatment of gender. In the close analysis of the poem “Time-Bomb,” Cristanne Miller writes a fascinating commentary. She starts with the question of warfare, which is, actually, the structuring element of her analysis.⁷²

While this topic is definitely at the heart of the poem, the analysis undercuts the natural reaction to such a poem. The spacing between words and punctuation marks is what first captures the reader’s attention. If the words themselves are important, they seem to come in second place, meaning that the creation of a specific temporality on the page through the layout makes the reader momentarily forget about the poetic narrative. If “Time-Bomb” is a typographical exception in the midst of Loy’s poems, it is important to notice that the reader is trained to resist any type of expectation.

Victor Erlich explains that, “in prosaic discourse – except for rhythmical or poetic prose, which is clearly a borderline case – so-called isochronism, that is, a tendency toward equal time intervals between ‘rhythmical signals,’ is the exception rather than the rule” (213). He then proceeds to quote Roman Jakobson: “the time of verse language is the time for expectation” (213). Loy’s poems seem to work in that way; she follows then undermines the regularity of certain rhythmic patterns in order to

⁷² See Cristanne Miller’s analysis of “Time-Bomb” from *Cultures of Modernism: Marianne Moore, Mina Loy, and Else Lasker-Schüler*, reproduced in *Mina Loy: Navigating the Avant-Garde*, <https://mina-loy.com/split-texts/time-bomb-1946>. Accessed 17 July 2022.

create a false sense of expectation in her reader. In those cases, typography is especially supported by slight alterations in grammar rules. For example, in the poem entitled “On Third Avenue,” a simple apostrophe is missing in the poetic text as the persona invites another figure of the poem to “share the heedless incognito” of the people walking by on the street:

to share the heedless incognito
of shuffling shadow-bodies
animate with frustration
whose silence ’ only potence is
respiration. (*LoLB* 109)

The mark of punctuation is supposedly placed after the word “silence” in order to show a relationship of belonging, but in that case, an “s” is needed after the apostrophe. Without it, the apostrophe seems to be related to nothing and it is difficult to see its function in the line. Furthermore, the typographical blank following the apostrophe brings out the use of the punctuation mark even more. The reader is forced to notice the apparent uselessness of the apostrophe. Without that “s,” the last syllable of “silence’s” cannot be pronounced, which illustrates that notion of silence, especially since the word is followed by a physical gap in the line. The reader’s gaze is particularly drawn to the apostrophe and has to slow down his or her reading to try and understand the role of the punctuation mark in the context. The apostrophe in that extract is rarely commented upon, it seems to be considered part of Mina Loy’s elusiveness: she writes just enough for the reader to have the clues to reconstruct what she is intending to say. By suppressing the “s” following the apostrophe, and cutting a syllable off, the regularity of the two parts of the line: “silence” and “potence” are two rhyming trochees, but the rhyme is compromised by the lack of “s” that would have

been echoed in the final verb “is.” Here, Loy twists the regularity expected by the reader, which, it seems, reinforces the impression of simultaneity. The reader has a pre-conceived idea of what a harmonious poem should look like but Loy reverses these conventions and the reader has to adapt as they read. When *mina-loy.com* makes it easier to face the poem, the website seems to resist resistance.

On the other hand, the website tries, and largely succeeds, to follow Loy’s style and intentions. The manifesto that is at the heart of the digital platform is heavily influenced by Loy’s own “Feminist Manifesto” in the way it is written and the image of the Baedeker travel guide is what organizes the whole website, thus mapping Loy’s travels and the poems she wrote along the way. Moreover, what is distinctly specific to the website is its engagement with editing the poems following the few cues that the poet herself gives. In a now often quoted letter to Carl Van Vechten, the poet requests a particular editing for “Songs to Joannes:”

If you want me to be a happy woman for five minutes or more; you would get Songs for Joannes published for me – all together – printed on one side of each page only – & a large round in the middle of the blank reverse of each page – & one whole entirely blank page with nothing on it between the first and the second parts – (pause in between moods) – the dedication – ‘TO YOU.’⁷³

References to this letter in scholarly work do not mean that the changes Loy mentions are implemented in any print edition. Leah Mell, in her “Digital Remediation” for “Songs to Joannes,” available on *mina-loy.com* is perhaps the first time someone edits the long series of poems according to the letter presented above.⁷⁴ While being a

⁷³ YCAL MSS 1050, Carl Van Vechten Papers, box 76, series I: Correspondence, Beinecke Digital Library. <https://collections.library.yale.edu/catalog/2043789>. Accessed 28 July 2022.

⁷⁴ See “Songs To Joannes,” edited by Leah Mell, Davidson College, 2016, <https://eng373.leahmell.com/digital-exploration/>. Accessed 28 July 2022.

digital edition, Mell's "Songs to Joannes" is presented like a book. Little arrows on each sides of the front cover – a geometrical design reminiscent of the "large round" Loy asks Van Vechten to print – enable the reader to turn pages and have a similar to experience to that of reading a physical book. If the semi-circle the paper page makes when it is turned cannot be reproduced digitally, which potentially changes the reader's experience of those rounds on the verso of each page, Mell's edition is the only one that attempts to bring out the visual elements that Loy wished to be included. Since Tanselle asserts that "[s]cholarly editors may disagree about many things, but they are in general agreement that their goal is to discover exactly what an author wrote and to determine what form of his work he wished the public to have" (EP 167), it seems strange that Loy's intentions are not regularly taken into account when editing her work, especially since such a comment on editing gives us a clue on how to, perhaps, better edit paper collections of her poems.

In her comments on editing "Giovanni Franchi," Januzzi explains one of her typographical choices: "[a] striking feature of the manuscript is Loy's use of black-inked, half-inch rectangles to separate the stanzas; using the nearest Mac equivalent I have attempted to preserve this graphic feature of the work. These, and never page breaks, signal stanza divisions" (238). This equivalent turns out to be three black squares side by side, mirroring the length of the rectangles visible in the manuscript. Januzzi's solution is quite good, even though less fluid than the traces in the manuscript, that are thick lines rather than rectangles. Januzzi publishes her critical edition in 1997 and is, therefore, not working with the same technology that is now available. There are many details of the manuscript that are important but the strokes of the pen on paper could not be replicated digitally. For instance, the first two lines of "Giovanni Franchi" read:

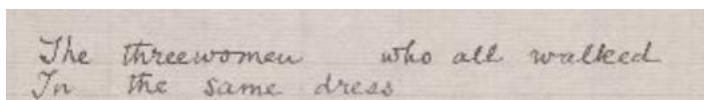


Figure 3.15. Mina Loy. “Giovanni Franchi.” 1916. Beinecke Digital Library, YCAL MSS 1050, box 188, folder 2508, Yale University, New Haven, Connecticut. *Yale University Library*, <https://collections.library.yale.edu/catalog/2112213>. Accessed 24 July 2022. Screen print.

These two lines insist on similarity, as we already mentioned. Yet the question of sameness is reinforced by the way the poet naturally shapes her letters, making the “T” of “The” and the “I” of “In” very similar. The visual component of writing is more and more taken into account in poetry: Gabrielle Calvocoressi, in her 2017 collection *Rocket Fantastic*, replaces some pronouns by the symbol S .⁷⁵ This sign, also known as *dal segno*, a musical term that is added on sheet music to indicate to the musician that one part must be repeated, is at border between printed font and drawing, showing that there are ways to bring out the visual elements of a poem. In the same way, printed collections of instapoets often revolve around text and drawings, or even text printed as handwriting. These solutions could be used to make a definitive paper edition of Loy’s poems while acknowledging her manuscripts’ instability. It would require much work on how to design a font that somewhat echoes important elements of the poet’s handwriting but it would help giving the reader a better idea of how Loy conceptualizes the space of the page.

Would this kind of editing be an extrapolation of the author’s intentions, specifically since it is based on only one comment made in a letter? Or would it even

⁷⁵ See Gabrielle Calvocoressi, *Rocket Fantastic*, Persea Books, 2017.

be considered *plagiat par anticipation*?⁷⁶ While I believe that this sort of editing would be useful and best suited for Loy's poetry, some questions remain. Among all of them, the most important one is how we decide which strokes of the pen should be reproduced and which ones should stay a manuscript feature? For instance, in the manuscript of "Mother Earth," the page is full of rewritings, lines crossed out and drawings. All of those elements show that the poet expands the boundaries of the page but reproducing them in a paper edition would result in a facsimile.

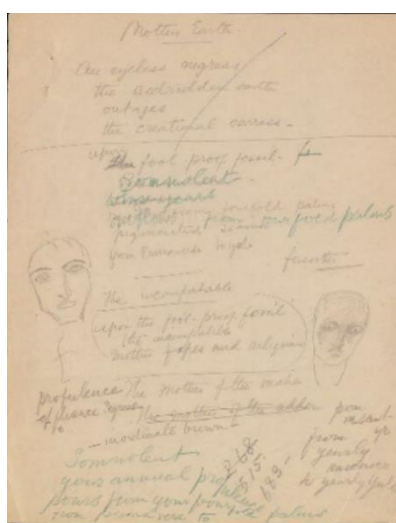


Figure 3.16. Mina Loy. "Mother Earth." N.d. Beinecke Digital Library, YCAL MSS 6, Box 5, folder 106, Yale University, New Haven, Connecticut. *Yale University Library*, <https://collections.library.yale.edu/catalog/11699726>. Screen print.

Loy's tendency to go beyond the limits of the page could be hinted at by adding a final list at the end of the collection that would show some specific words or turns of phrase that Loy uses multiple times throughout her poems and how each mention of the word echoes the others. For instance the word "cymophanous," used in "Giovanni Franchi" is repeated in "Poem XXVIII" of "Songs to Joannes." If, the repetition of the

⁷⁶ In *Le Plagiat par Anticipation*, Editions de Minuit, 2009, Pierre Bayard claims that when a writer uses, in their writing, a specific style, or literary element that is recognized as the specificity of another writer who has written after them, then it can be considered plagiarism by anticipation.

same words in a collection of poetry is bound to happen, it is interesting to note that a word such as “cymophanous” is usually rarely used and quite specific in itself. In that sense, it is difficult not to notice that Loy uses it in multiple poems. In both poems, the poet uses this term in relation to other terms that are somewhat contradictory in meaning but less impressive than “cymophanous,” for instance, “pale” in “Giovanni Franchi” (“where Giovanni Bapini was cymophanous / Giovanni Franchi was merely pale”) or “white” in “Songs to Joannes” (“But a white towel / Wipes the cymophanous sweat”). Without modifying the visual appearance of the page, such a list would imply that Loy is working beyond the page through echoes while enabling the reader both to make quick connections between poems and have a better understanding of the poet’s way of apprehending language. A word such as “ecstasy” could also be part of this list as Loy seems to never spell it in the same way. In “Aid of the Madonna,” Loy spells it “ecstasy,” then “exstacy” in “The Biography of Songge Byrd.” Many other poems include this word and its fluctuating spelling.⁷⁷

Once again, giving tools to the reader to make them follow changes occurring to Loy’s spelling could help creating an engagement with not only one poem or poetic page, but with the body of work as a whole.

As I mentioned earlier, implementing this kind of paratextual help to the reader, would then encourage a closer reading of the poems while forcing the reader to make connections between poems. In that sense, I think that the drawings that Loy uses within her poetic pages in the manuscripts should be considered as drafts or

⁷⁷ Loy, Mina. “Aid of the Madonna.” 1943, Beinecke Digital Library, YCAL MSS 6, Box 5, Folder 73, Yale University, New Haven, Connecticut. *Yale University Library*, <https://collections.library.yale.edu/catalog/11699147>. Accessed 4 Aug. 2022.

Loy, Mina. “Biography of Songge Byrd.” 1952, Beinecke Digital Library, YCAL MSS 6, Box 5, Folder 130, Yale University, New Haven, Connecticut. *Yale University Library*, <https://collections.library.yale.edu/catalog/11700590>. Accessed 4 Aug. 2022.

elements proving the peripatetic movement of Loy's writing. Moreover, the poems in themselves are already extremely visual in the way they are constructed. Typography can be more visual than oral – or have both interact with each other: it adds a pictorial dimension to Loy's poems. It could even be argued that the space of the poem somehow performs the meaning of the words on the page. At the scale of a line, the poem "Parturition" highlights this importance of mingling the textual with the visual in the following line: "For consciousness in crises races." Here, the typographical blank just before "races" gives the impression that the verb is farther on the line because it was indeed racing. The reader's eyes have to "catch up" with the last word to be able to finish the line. In that sense, the space of the line encapsulates the signifier and the signified. Such importance of space is easily understandable in a poem like "Parturition," for the body of the pregnant woman seems to coalesce with space as the baby is delivered. In the same way, the action of racing is inscribed in the layout of the poetic line on the page. In Poem XXXII, the whole poem takes on a pictorial aspect:

XXXII

The moon is cold

Joannes

Where the Mediterranean — — — — —. (*LoLB* 67)

At first sight, both the shortness of the poem and the fact that the sentence is left unfinished seem to depict a failed attempt at writing. However, one could see the image of the moon reflecting itself into the sea in the layout of the poem. If we take the title into account, every other line gets slightly longer, creating a curve. This movement of the line is reminiscent of the moon at stake in the first line. Eventually, the dashes, more than expressing missing words, suggest the gentle waves of the sea,

especially as they directly follow the mention of “the Mediterranean.” Although for Suzanne Churchill, the dashes are a proof that the poem is decaying just like the speaker’s love for Joannes, it seems that there is a sort of fluidity between the dashes and the mention of the “Mediterranean” (199). They are equal in length, as if they were the counterpart of each other. More than depriving the poem of its end, the dashes work organically with the rest of the line, showing, rather than saying. Without going as far as calling it a calligram, Poem XXXII somehow reproduces the essence of the main two elements discussed – the moon and the sea – in its structure. The simple fact of mentioning the moon in the first line of the poem and the sea in the last line already frames the poetic text visually: each element is strategically placed as they would be if the reader was looking at the image the poem conveys instead of just reading its description. Thus, even without editing Loy’s poetry in a way that is reminiscent of “instapoetry,” the brevity of some of the poems, as well as the movement of typography on the page strongly echo recent poetic practices.⁷⁸

The study of Loy’s editorial history is then placed in a double resistance: it resists the classic schema of definitive editions and the overarching authority of the editor while also stressing the need for mediating as the poems resist straightforward reading. Discussions on how to best handle those problems to make the text shine have happened before; scholarship on editing women or editing modernism has already listed many of the techniques that escape editorial control. The case of the Baroness von Freytag-Loringhoven, discussed earlier, is a great example of the tensions at the heart of textual studies. Loy’s specificity, however, lies in her conceptualization of the page in her draft, as if the intimate space of the draft was

⁷⁸ See chapter IV for a thorough definition of instapoetry. For now, instapoetry can be concisely defined as the type of poetry that is produced on social media.

completely different from the “finished” page and there was no direct translation between the two, and, most importantly, the way in which the texts have been handled by editors until now. Loy’s manuscripts offer an alternative: the resistance in which editors run into cannot be surpassed, only embraced and replaced in its historical context. Just like Margaret Anderson and Janet Heap’s *The Little Review*, which stresses the multimedia editorial and textual work of women and their fight against censorship, Loy’s archival papers effectively put the work of women modernists in the limelight.⁷⁹

⁷⁹ *The Little Review* (1914-1929) was a controversial little magazine, famous for publishing James Joyce’s *Ulysses*, and being censored for it.

Chapter 4

The multimedia artist in the social sphere

In “The Library of the Sphinx,” Loy presents a dialogue between Havelock Ellis and the female-coded Sphinx that points at the shortcomings of modern literature, notably the lack of recognition for women writers. During the modernist period, Loy argues, women are given visibility but only through what was “written by men” (*SE* 254). The gender imbalance presented by Loy in the essay resonates with the poetry emerging from Instagram. Praised as a platform that gives equal opportunities to all its users, the application serves as the home base of amateur poets who share their works and grow their networks and popularity without the help of publishing houses. The myth that instapoetry is an outlet to unheard voices too often obscures the profit-based design of the platform; Instagram’s foundations find their roots in capitalistic beliefs and corporate control. The alleged silenced poets who find their voices on the application are still confined within the realm of a stifling system; worse still, they participate in its hegemony. Taking as a starting point Loy’s understanding of a male-controlled literary sphere as an illuminating contextual insight into instapoetry, this chapter identifies the modernist problems Loy understood to show that they return in the new digital medium. Throughout the dissertation, I scrutinize the intersections of otherness and intimacy and, here, I claim that Loy’s social media-like interest disrupts the monological and masculine narrative of modernity by making community the very condition by which modernist identities can be constructed. Instapoetry reproduces the same dialogue because similar conditions surround textual production and publication today.

Social media based poetry is both outside of traditional reading patterns and always recuperating techniques that make the reading process as simple as possible so that a large number of readers can feel invested in the poems. As such, community-building and multimedia experiments are at the heart of instapoetry as much as they are part of Loy's poetic interests. This chapter is invested in the triangular relationship between those two elements and the ramifications of Loy's feminism today. On the one hand, the stakes of putting Loy's poems in touch with instapoetry enables us to really pinpoint the poetic techniques that are linked with a contemporary understanding of feminism and to place Loy in a feminine poetic tradition that still is very influential to this day. On the other hand, there are pedagogical merits to this combined study: reading Loy at the same time as instapoems produced by women emphasizes the importance of focusing on the questions of editions and manuscripts described in the previous chapter. The double status of instapoetry as both images and texts is particularly meaningful when it comes to the didactic inspection of Loy's multimedia endeavours and the problems that may arise from such artistic practices. Overall, this compare and contrast exercise will highlight certain aspects of Loy's feminism that have not been discussed yet, thereby offering a more in-depth understanding of Loy's appeal today, while making it possible to reflect more closely on instapoems as byproducts and artistic expressions.

There are limitations to the comparison of Loy's poems and instapoetry. Jacquelyn Ardam's *Avidly Reads Poetry* conspicuously opposes modernist poetry and instapoetry in terms of overall effect; modernist poets are not trying to make their audiences feel better, quite the opposite, whereas Instagram poems are "soothing" (121) and "worth reading and thinking about for their popularity alone" (122). Once more, Instapoetry is only magnified by such a presentation since optimistic stances

may be motivated by an obsession with success and shareability. To achieve those goals, instapoems have to appeal to the largest number of people possible. Though this tension between platform capitalism and artistic creation will keep being reiterated in the following pages, the analysis offered in this chapter does not have the vocation to judge the quality of instapoetry rather than commenting on the efficient ways digital multimedia techniques respond to Loy's feminist anxieties.⁸⁰ Here, I want to briefly acknowledge that affirming a clear line of descent between Loy's poetics and instapoetry's would be far-fetched. This chapter only aims at suggesting that echoes between modernist and instapoetic modes of distribution and poetic production shed light on Loy's feminist practices and how they fit current reformulations of the term "modernism." To develop this parallel, the chapter will take the particular examples of Rupi Kaur and Noor Unnihar – two racialized women engaging with visual arts as a part of their poetic *modus operandi*. Those two poets never reference Loy as a possible inspiration and, as far as the public knows, they are not readers of Loy's works. However, they are part of this study because they combine many of the canonical instapoetic trends. Before going back to the ways in which these poets reflect Loy's view of modernism, I would like to expand on the similar contexts that saw the emergence of modernism and instapoetry.

Though Ardam clearly refutes any link between modernism and instapoetry, many scholars try to make sense of the latter through comparisons with modernist poetry. Mike Chasar, for instance, affirms that instapoets practice "retrofitting" (185) by adapting themes and techniques that are associated with the modernist movement

⁸⁰ Nick Srnicek calls "platform capitalism" the way emerging technologies deal with "economic issues around ownership and profitability" (8).

to new digital media. He then comes to the conclusion that instapoetry is very much a “back to the future” moment:

There is more than enough in these and the preceding remarks to make me feel uncomfortably as if we have traveled back in time to 1942: a moment when the futures of poetry as a multimedia or multimedia-friendly genre were more than ever before being put on display; a moment when the possibilities of those futures were being demonstrated by a woman poet writing about female creativity and circumventing traditional literary gatekeepers or tastemakers to leverage the transmedial resources and logics of the multimedia landscapes and reach audiences of millions around the globe; a moment when that work was received with praise for its authenticity and disdain for its fraudulence; and a moment when the potential nuance or complexity of that work went overlooked. (193)

This passage of Chasar’s analysis underlines how paradigm shifts influence ways of writing. Indeed, Chasar focuses on the rise of little magazines culture and the development of other media platforms, such as the radio, as a way to link Edna St. Vincent Millay’s creation of *The Murder of Lidice* to Rupi Kaur’s successful first collection, *milk and honey*. Market economy and mass communication developed throughout the twentieth century and affected the public’s perception of modernism. In his book, *Re-Covering Modernism: Pulp, Paperbacks and the Prejudice of Form*, David M. Earle undermines the idea of modernism as an elitist movement by reminding his readers that before Ezra Pound reclaimed the term, modernist writers massively published their works in pulps and paperbacks. Citing Baudelaire’s famous quotation, “by ‘modernity’ I mean the transitory, the ephemeral, the contingent, the half of art whose other half is the eternal and immutable” (13), Earle explains how

trashy pulps capture the ephemeral aspect of the capitalistic world in which modernism expands. Mostly produced and consumed by working classes and women, stories published in pulps rest on sensationalism in order to appeal to the masses. The beginning of modernism as a popular movement definitely resonates with the current taste for instapoetry – poetry that emerges from and is adapted to both the cultural context of social media consumption and the structure of the eponymous digital platform.

Loy was also invested in little magazines culture, often published by *Others* or *The Little Review*, among others. Victoria Bazin, in her seminal work, *Modernism Edited: Moore and the Dial*, describes the phenomenon of “periodical form” to explain how magazines had an impact in the way poems were written. She writes: “[t]hat form must be understood not only in terms of heterogeneity but in terms of seriality, of how the editor has in mind not only the current issue but also previous and future issues, of how each decision is related to previous decisions and future decisions. The form of the periodical itself shapes the ways in which issues are produced and consumed” (167). Here, Bazin’s focus on magazines trying to avoid repetition while making sure that there is a certain familiarity in what is published from one issue to the next unveils the logic of Instagram’s boundless structure. There is a clear parallel between periodicals and Instagram that has to do with time:

No single issue exists in isolation but instead is haunted by the larger serial of which it is a part. This larger serial structure is invoked through the repetition of certain formal features, issue after issue. It insists on formal continuity, repeated from the past and projected onwards into the future, providing a mediating framework whose purpose is to reconcile difference by presenting

new content in a form already known to readers. (Mussell 347, qtd in Bazin 167)

Mussell's investigation of temporality and repetitions informs my definition of instapoetry, discussed later in the chapter, and identifies the root of instapoetic aesthetic and of Rupi Kaur's quick success.

The importance of discussing Kaur's work stems from her contribution to establishing the main characteristics of instapoetry as a genre: all the poems belonging to instapoetry somewhat reproduce Kaur's poetic style – quick, palatable lines followed by an unfinished drawing. Here, I mainly use Kaur's poems as framework to understand the challenges and specificities of writing on social media. Her Instagram page counts 4.5 million followers and 1777 publications, as of June 2023. The instapoet posts poems – which harbour reactions rather than close-readings – occasional political statements, pictures of herself in the different cities she visits during her tours, as well as advertisements for her merchandise – books, clothes, home décor, temporary tattoos, or even honey. Her Instagram page effectively conflates the young artist with the lucrative brand. Oddly, even though she is marketing herself as more than just a poet, Kaur's manufactured identity equates that of the artist as a God-like figure oppressed by “the censor's scythe” (*LoLB* 78) in “Apology of Genius.” Indeed, the origins of Kaur's success lie in a picture of herself lying on white sheets, stained with leaked period blood, that was forcefully removed from Instagram years ago because it did not abide to the rules of decency of the platform. By contesting the “stigmas around menstruation,” Kaur saw her fame rise.⁸¹

The feigned casualness of the picture now clashes among other staged pictures of the

⁸¹ See Rupi Kaur's women history month post, <https://www.instagram.com/p/Cpd-aUYJ0Uc/?hl=fr>. Accessed 6 June 2023.

instapoet, often taken in low-angle shots, or presenting the artist lying in a white sheet on an altar like some Christ-like figure.⁸² Like in Loy's poem, Kaur advertises herself as a downtrodden deity, not necessarily in the way she writes but in the way she presents herself.

Noor Unnahaar, by contrast, presents herself in a much more modest fashion. The Pakistani artist has a decent – yet minor, if compared to Kaur's – audience of 134,000 followers, as of June 2023. Her first published collection, *Yesterday I was the Moon*, is very much in keeping with Kaur's aesthetic whereas her Instagram grid makes an effort to stray from the usual format of brief, sharp, and clean poetic lines alongside some sort of image. On her website, Unnahaar is described as a “poet + visual artist,” a very business-related stance reflected in the two main goals of the website: advertising her published collections and acting as her visual art portfolio.⁸³ Unnahaar's various artistic interests are all part of her digital bubble but she uses different platforms for different purposes. To focus on her Instagram presence, the biggest portion of her posts includes pictures of her journals, open on a double-page containing both a short poem and drawing or a collage – the classic instapoetic move, except that the square image is not treated as paper. There is a clear distance allowing the viewer to see what is around the journal but also forcing said viewer to zoom in on the picture in order to see the words in a decent size. Those posts reveal glimpses of the author by letting the viewer peek through her personal journal, while still keeping most of the pages concealed. Whether it is under or within a piece of visual art (a photograph or a pastel drawing), Unnahaar's poetic lines are usually handwritten. The few poems entirely typed are either quite subversive in their use of the “page,” in that

⁸² See Rupi Kaur, <https://www.instagram.com/p/BZb5CEYAGrM/?hl=fr>. Accessed 6 June 2023.

⁸³ See Noor Unnahaar's website, <http://www.noorunnahaar.com/>. Accessed 6 June 2023.

they are more similar to Mallarmé's works than to Instagram poetry, while photographs of physical printed pages make it impossible to ignore the grain of the paper or the transparency of the pages. Instead of hiding behind one specific aesthetic or poetic brand, Unnahar plays with surfaces in a way that both anchors her poetry in everyday life and identifies her as a visual artist more than a poet.

Unnahar's multimedia attention is intriguing in the sense that it is how the artist seems to convey concerns that Loy shares. However, the chapter does not explore the most obvious example of Loy's experiments with multimedia. Loy's Bowery art includes many assemblages she dubs "refusees" – a nod to the pieces of litter she collected to compose those eclectic 3D scenes.⁸⁴ As multimedia aesthetics become a major component of the new media ecology, I find that textuality stands out even more as a medium intricately tied to female expression. Reading Loy as a touchstone for instapoetry allows for a detailed examination of textuality as the presence of otherness. To put Loy in conversation with something as foreign to her work as instapoetry means recognizing the timeless aspect of Loy's conception of feminism, that does not offer a real answer to gender issues, as each wave of feminism tries to in relation to specific historical moments, but efficiently evidences the structural challenges of Western society when it comes to gender norms and displays those challenges for all to see. The parallel between Loy's feminism and instapoetry gives an insight into a question that Stephen Voyce raises in his article "‘Make the World Your Salon’: Poetry and Community at the Arensberg Apartment": "to what extent do practices of collage, appropriation, multilingualism, and multi-

⁸⁴ See Yasna Bozhkova, "Incognito on Third Avenue: The Figure of the Vagrant in Mina Loy's Bowery Work." *Revue française d'études américaines*, vol. 4, no. 149, 2016, p. 27: Loy used to call her assemblages "‘Refusees,’ a pun conflating "refuse" and "refugees" with an ironic reference to the Paris Salon des Refusés (Burke 420)."

disciplinarity constitute formal operations that problematize authorship not by erasing the originator of texts but by ‘communalizing’ literary artifacts?’ (643)

This study opens on a comprehensive definition of female instapoetry in its most important features. This section is slightly peripheral to the overall aim of the chapter but essential contextual knowledge. From there, the discussion shifts to Loy and Unnihar’s works; my analysis circles around the theme of community in relation to identity as a foundational catalyst to Loy’s feminist modernism and Unnihar’s appropriation of it. First, the analysis wrestles with the ways and means of Instagram’s rhetoric of “likes” as opposed to Loy already established artistic camaraderie and its impact on the literary milieu of the twentieth century. Then, the two poets’ expansion of female space through the page uncovers tensions at the heart of female authorial expression and how it triggers identification with readers. The intimacy of the dialogical page gives way to the place of networks in constructing female identity. Finally, the chapter concentrates on definitions of feminism as a multicultural and multilinguistic phenomenon that invites a reflection on alienation. Overall, this chapter implicitly points at the transmedia nature of Loy’s definition of feminist modernism. Defined by Henry Jenkins as a story that “unfolds across multiple media platforms, with each new text making a distinctive and valuable contribution to the whole” (95-6), transmedia, here, refers to Loy’s engagement with formulating her own, sometimes contradictory, feminist modernist theory that spreads between letters, manifestos, essays and artistic endeavours.⁸⁵

⁸⁵ Paolo Bertetti, in “Toward a Typology of Transmedia Characters,” develops Jenkins’s definition: “Transtextual storytelling refers to a narrative created through accretion across multiple texts rather than within a single work, while transmedial storytelling refers to a narrative unfolding across more than one medium.” (29)

4.1. A Brief Introduction to Instapoetry

Basic definition

The term “instapoetry” is the portmanteau word formed by “Instagram” – a media platform that enables users to share pictures instantly – and poetry. Yet, instapoetry cannot be reduced to its medium. It is not simply poetry that is native of Instagram; instapoems are also created and shared on other social media applications, such as Twitter or Tumblr. Instead, it refers to a certain set of characteristics that are shared by digital poets in order to create a shareable and viral poem. Maria Manning, in “Crafting Authenticity: Reality, Storytelling, and Female Self-Representation through Instapoetry,” unsettles the idea that instapoetry only refers to a medium of transmission by insisting that the common aesthetic of those poems makes it a fully-fledged literary genre. While Manning is especially interested in the way instapoetry seems to revolve around the exploration of selfhood, she, nonetheless, describes its other main features:

Instapoems have tended to be defined as minimalist, free verse poems of varying lengths, many of which are accompanied by a small illustration that captures some aspect of the poem, or indeed, a visual of poet. The poems, like poetry more generally, share a wide range of themes, but the honest, in-the-moment confessional style of this particular iteration has come to typify it.”

(267)

The visual aspect of these poems is an obvious feature in this context since, “[a]t its core, Instagram is an image-sharing website” (Manning 265). Instagram poetry is shared as an image, even if it is an image that has text in it. The “description” section under each image is rarely – if ever – used by instapoets. As an Instagram post necessarily contains an image, the best way to have the poem seen is to embed it in

said image. Instapoetry, then, accomplishes itself in the relation between the short poetic lines and the element of visual art that accompanies the text.

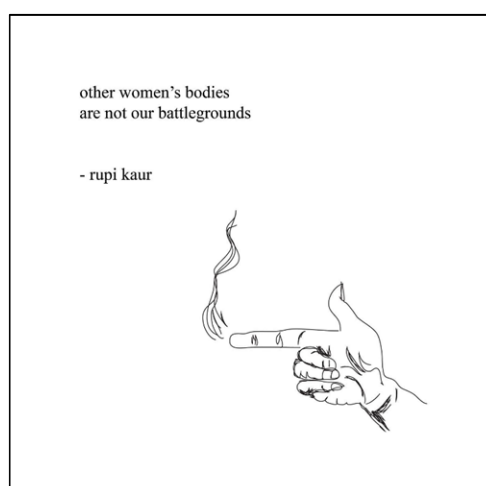


Figure 4.1. Rupi Kaur's Untitled Poem from *milk and honey*, re-shared 26 June 2022.

Downloaded from Instagram, <https://www.instagram.com/p/CfRssFOupDT/>.

Accessed 13 July 2023.

Figure 4.1. is an emblematic example of instapoetry: the drawing of a finger gun echoes the lexical field of warfare established in the last word of the fairly basic poem. The theme of the poem – female solidarity – buys into the overall aesthetic of good-heartedness representative of instapoetry, specifically the image of the young woman writer fighting toxic competitiveness and misogyny through positive verses.

Capitalistic branding

Yet, the genre is not as good-natured as it appears to be: behind the façade of love and respect, the very medium of instapoetry exhibits an attachment to capitalistic conceptions of art. A successful instapoem is not one that is praised for its originality and technical mastery but simply one that is shared and liked by as many people as possible. An instapoet's page is as much an artistic portfolio as it is the digital site promoting a brand. When discussing instapoetry in an article entitled "Until We

‘Gram: Scrolling through the Assimilated Aesthetics of Instapoetry,” JuEunhae Knox explains:

Each post must harmonize with the overall gallery style to create an appealing, coordinated exhibit for anyone visiting the page. Notably, if a user desires to change styles, they almost always delete their posts using a previous format, at least once they had enough posts of a new style so as not to leave their feed empty. Such demonstrations were in keeping with the overtly visible nature of Instagram, indicating that users purposely employed uniform styles to advertise their brand. (502)

While the previous chapter discussed Loy’s desire to push the limits of the page, to blur the boundaries of each poem, the Instagram platform successfully fuses textual and paratextual elements without it necessarily being an aesthetic statement since the Instagram interface allows each post to be fairly independent on their own even if they are always in relation with other posts. On Instagram, the different sides of authorship seem to be all mashed up together and the limits of the purely poetic bleed into the commercial aspect of writing poetry.⁸⁶ Advertisements take as much space as poetry, and for some superstar instapoets like Kaur, poetry just becomes a side of everyday life rather than the focus of the page. The notion of “*seuils*,” discussed by Gérard Genette in *Paratexts: Thresholds of Interpretation*, attempts to make sense of the textual space but only highlights its elusive nature by suggesting that authorship is formed by a multitude of activities. The threshold of a book, Genette suggests, is “a zone not only of transition but also of transaction: a privileged place of a pragmatics

⁸⁶ See JuEunhae in “Until We ‘Gram: Scrolling through the Assimilated Aesthetics of Instagram:” “Alternatively, as Instapoetry becomes a kind of ‘intimate public,’ capitalizing on users’ emotions so that they feel superficially connected to others on the global network, individual accounts of suffering endured by distinct marginalized groups, whether of people of color or of displaced asylum seekers, are constantly being flattened into a homogenized, universal experience.” (528)

and a strategy, of an influence on the public, an influence that – whether well or poorly understood and achieved – is at the service of a better reception for the text and a more pertinent reading of it (more pertinent, of course, in the eyes of the author and his allies)” (2). Here, however, the “paratext” – that is to say, the non-poetic posts framing the poems – are not in the service of a better understanding of the writer’s art. Instead, the poems themselves are in the service of the writer’s success (see Figure 4.2).

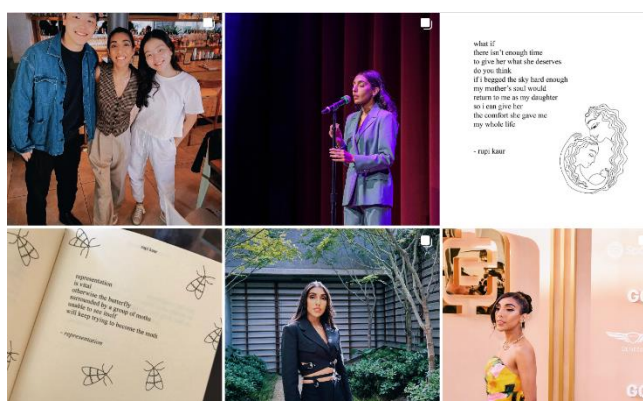


Figure 4.2. Ruhi Kaur’s Instagram dashboard from May 9th to May 23rd 2023.

Screen print from <https://www.instagram.com/rupikaur/?hl=fr>. Accessed 13 July 2023.

The segment from Kaur’s Instagram page shows only two poems nestled between four pictures of the poet’s life. The “paratextual” Instagram posts are not influencing a smoother reading of the poems rather than cementing the cult of the artist. Genette’s terminology is still meaningful though: textual thresholds are spaces of commercial and profit-making transactions in instapoetry.

The poem, then, is never really on its own on Instagram, and is constantly thrust back in its context. The “canvas” on which a poem is projected may be a poetic element that many a modernist poet drew attention to, but it is an essential and integral part of the reading experience when it comes to the poems found on

Instagram and other digital platforms. Knox points out the specificity of the medium: “[a] single post is significant in the way that it frames other posts, hopefully influencing the reader to follow the original poster, and simpler text is more assimilable” (486). If, for printed poems, the author has a degree of authority in the way the poems are framed, the peculiarity of Instagram is that poems are contextualized differently for each user. Depending on one’s particular interests and the digital path bringing one to a poetic encounter, the reception of the poem will be different. Each instapoem then becomes an event, created by the intimate and ungraspable relationship between the poetic square image and the other images surrounding it, that cannot be reproduced. This sense of uniqueness is obviously completely undermined by the simplistic nature of the poems that could be generated at will by any artificial intelligence.

The Instagram feed is part of the poetic experience, then, even in its non-poetic parts. The very act of scrolling up and down, opposed to the horizontal experience of the codex book, redefines the way poem and reader are connected. According to Wolfgang Ernst, “[f]or digital machines, there is no sense of time . . . [t]he very term ‘realtime’ is purely functional in the sense of just-in-time processing, deconstructing the human impression of a temporal window called ‘the present’ itself” (685-6). In earlier chapters, I mention the affected spontaneity of Loy’s poems, which are fragmented enough that the reader has the impression of interrupting the writer mid-creation. The shortness of instapoems, combined with the almost rhythmic drum of the user’s thumb scrolling down the screen, cements a feeling of simultaneity: the poem, which lasts only a moment and might never be found again, appears ephemeral, unless specifically saved for later. Furthermore, between the medium’s catered feed for each user and the ease with which content can be

reproduced, the term “‘fidget-spinner’ poetry” mentioned in Elizabeth Flock’s article “Why is this Poet Posting Meaningless Verses on Instagram,” is incredibly fitting, not only in its desire to convey an image of speed but also in the rotating movement of the fidget-spinner that shows that the same content is endlessly repeated.

Continual renewing

In this section, I discuss instapoetry as a rehashing tool that seeks to convey familiarity and comfort but also acts as a public, live archive avoiding any sense of textual closure. The very structure of Instagram as an endless thread of publication cultivates a fear of forgetting as much as a desire to see new posts. In that sense, old posts are constantly reemerging. An example of this sense of re-upping can be found in Rupi Kaur’s work and its repetitive tendencies. The poet re-shares old poems of hers regularly, forcing her audience to rediscover some of her work and, at times, putting them in a new light by linking them to immediate current events. For instance, she reused an older poem entitled “what is the greatest lesson a woman should learn” – a question answered in the very body of poem – to mark this year’s international women’s month. Kaur’s interest in poems she has already published does not stop there, however. The instapoet nods to her former pieces in newer ones, seemingly plagiarizing herself. In *milk and honey*, published in 2014, the poet metaphorically mentions sexual violence by writing the following poem:

he guts her
 with his fingers
 like he’s scraping
 the inside of a
 cantaloupe clean. (23)

This poem's illustration – a simple open cantaloupe placed on the page's bottom right corner after the text – does not prepare the reader for the violence of the words, thus creating a sense of surprise from the first line onward. The use of the verb “gut” on the first line forces the reader to confront a bloodied reality where the female object is apparently animalized and treated as a hunting trophy. However, in *the sun and her flowers*, the collection of poetry immediately following *milk and honey* and published three years later, the poet simply recuperates the cantaloupe lines, cancelling at the same time the intensity and strength of the simile. Indeed, in a long five page poem entitled “home,” the persona recalls sexual violence and how “unhomely” her body felt after it happened by developing the image of the cantaloupe in more brutal details:

i was a hundred and ten pounds of fresh meat
 you skinned and gutted with your fingers
 like you were scraping the inside of a cantaloupe clean. (69)

The image from *milk and honey* is intact, except that the “he” of the first poem becomes “you,” creating less distance between the speaker and the scene she describes. Moreover, by integrating the brief simile in such a long poem, after letting it shine on its own before, *home* reads as a confessional poem. The repetition of lines the reader already knows is not the proof of clumsiness or lack of skills. Rather, it creates a narrative between collections, where the speaker, revealing, at first, bits and pieces of her experience, is finally freed by her own words and able to disclose the details of her traumatic experience. Instapoetry, while easily digested by readers and viewers, acts as a first step in the progression of the creative process, or, at least, emphasizes the ongoing nature of poetic conception. The poem is the moment of sharing the highly staged personal creative process. As much as repeating verses seems to follow the “ease and speed” (Paquêt 302) of self-help mottos that Instapoetry

is compared with in “Selfie-Help: the Multimodal Appeal of Instagram Poetry,” it also hints at the writers’ will to better their work.

The poem entitled “home” is particularly interesting in that it is too long to ever be published on Instagram; it is available exclusively in the codex book. The repetition, then, is no longer one if we consider that Instagram posts are reviewed, developed and become incentives to expand on an idea. Thomas Bronwen, in *Literature and Social Media*, mentions instapoet Yrsa Daley-Ward who “spoke of her work as being compressed, like epiphanies, providing a pleasurable ‘intense shock’ and a space between the short poems which allows the reader to pause for breath” (88).⁸⁷ The apparent contradiction between “compressed” and “pause” in Daley-Ward’s description shows that these poems are still moments of respite within the whirling infinity of the social medium, a celebration of bodily rhythms. Just like the marcescent tree, which does not shed its withered leaves, even after new growth, the galleries of Instagram poets act both as snapshots of different moments in art production and as starting points of longer artistic journeys.

Reminiscent of Loy’s obsessive rewriting of the poems in her draft papers, instapoetic rehashing is less about finding the most suitable form and lines, and more about exploring the medium – or the various media – of poetry. In that sense, Noor Unnihar’s Instagram posts are treated in a similar fashion as Loy’s drafts; mixing

⁸⁷ Yrsa Daley-Ward is a British Instapoet with 202,000 followers (as of February 2023). Her poems more static poems are simply capitalized typed words on a white background, whereas some other poems are usually pasted atop pictures of nature and appear slowly on screen with the poet’s voice reading the words in the background. In a chapter entitled “Literary Movements in the Network Era,” Bronwen mentions that the poet was invited to “an edition of BBC Radio 4’s *The Verb*, hosted by Ian McMillan” (88) in which “McMillan drew many parallels between his use of Twitter, which he likened to a live performance, and Instapoetry, describing his fondness for a ‘caffeine hit of language’ and comparing the writing found on these platforms to the tradition of the commonplace book.” (88)

poetic lines and doodles in a somewhat linear manner, although drawings and texts are not separate parts of the page but rather merge together organically.

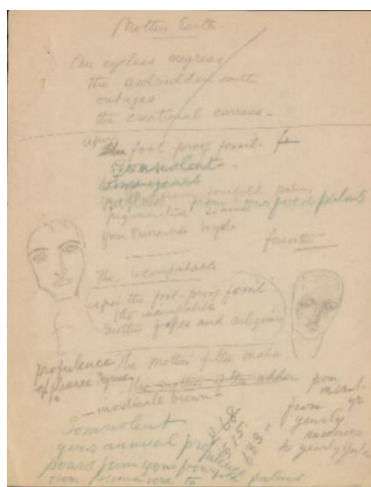


Figure 4.3. Mina Loy. “Mother Earth.” N.d. Beinecke Digital Library, YCAL MSS 6, Box 5, folder 106, Yale University, New Haven, Connecticut. *Yale University Library*, <https://collections.library.yale.edu/catalog/11699726>. Accessed 13 Feb.

2023. Screen print.

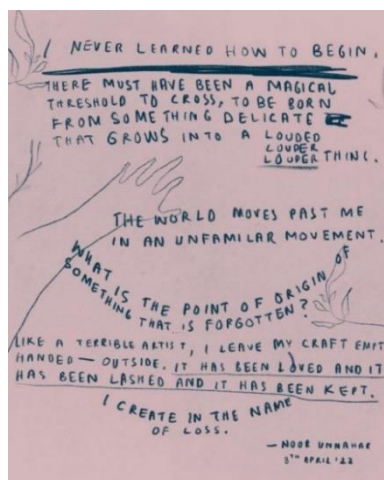


Figure 4.4. Noor Unnaha. “Threshold.” *Instagram*, 8 Apr. 2022.

Image downloaded from <https://www.instagram.com/p/CcGQMM4po2C/>.

Accessed 13 Feb. 2023.

Unnaha’s poem, just like Loy’s draft, exhibits drawings that, while touching the text, are mainly in the margins and in the blank interstices of the page. Both are

handwritten, with crossed-out words. It makes sense for Loy's page as it is, one guesses, an intimate document that the reader was not meant to see. However, "Threshold" is not only public but also performative: the movement of the lines in concave curves is not a side effect of the poet trying to get as much writing as possible on the page but an aesthetic choice responding directly to the lines "the world moves past me / in an unfamiliar movement." If the plants adorning the sides of the page are not particularly meaningful in the way they answer to "something delicate / that grows," the hand reaching out towards the inside of the page reinforces the idea of trying to catch up with life while blurring the very threshold of the poetic page as the hand seems to stretch past the words.

Codex v. digital

While articles on instapoetry tend to either praise the phenomenon as a way to place voices, up to then unheard, in the limelight, or simply criticize the clichéd, often plagiarized rhetoric of fast, lucrative poems, it is worth noticing that European train station kiosks in 2022 put Rupi Kaur's *home body* at the center of their window displays. The very fact that a collection of poetry is placed amongst hyper-entertaining, mainstream novels and other sudoku booklets questions how poetry distribution occurs and how modernist practices shed light on the ever-growing interest in digital poetry. The passage from social media to physical book due to the ever-growing attraction to Kaur's poetry points at two important facts: first, instapoetry entails a certain degree of adaptation as the digital medium rarely stands on its own. Instapoets, then, potentially have to make the effort to re-work their texts to make them fit either on paper or as a performance. Second, it shows that the printed book is still the established authoritative format. The adjustment from one medium to another, is what particularly interests us here.

To explore this idea, it is important to first discuss how digital media and paper apparently diverge when it comes to the reader's experience of the text. When Jerome McGann wrote "The Rationale of Hypertext" in 1996, he understood the future of digital literature as texts that readers will be able to interact with, either in their construction or in how they are experienced. For instance, N. Katherine Hayles mentions that "in many electronic texts, words and images do shift, for example, through randomizing algorithms or programs that tap into real-time data flows to create an infinite number of possible recombinations" (109). Instapoetry, however, does not give the reader the possibility to have a direct impact on the poem: the only way to respond to it is through the comment section. Even though the Instagram platform uses phrases such as "build community" and "express yourself" in their "About us" section, it is pretty clear that the application is built for visual media such as photographs and videos rather than texts. McGann's affirmation that "[h]ypermedia editions that incorporate audial and/or visual elements are preferable since literary works are themselves always more or less elaborate multimedia forms" (16) is all the more proven true by instapoetry and its movement from one medium to the next. Instagram poetry offers a new model to observe reality and blurs the limits of the real and the created. Manning explores this fuzzy boundary in her article by asking a set of questions that already points at the very core of the Instapoetic genre:

How can we begin to tell authentic stories on a website that so privileges constructed and perfected narratives? How can the predominantly female creators of instapoetry represent themselves via the medium? Similarly, a charge often leveled against instapoets is that their work values and lauds qualities of authenticity over concerns about artistic craft." (265)

Here, the author links authenticity with the question of identity; the instapoetic speaker has enough in common with the writer that what is said in the poems *feels* true while still being highly performative.

In Kaur's case, the passage from the Instagram grid to the paper of the codex book more or less replicates the same format, with the famous drawing settled under the poem. However, in a few instances, the visual elements are in direct dialogue with the text as visible in her untitled poem about alcoholism, where the whole poem is contained in the puddle of spilled liquid (see Figure 4.5). The reduction of the space of the poem to that of the drawn alcohol points at the parent's reduced worldview, encompassing only the addiction. The page, then, shrinks as the poem is embedded in the drawing, still on the page, but metaphorically part of a new medium. This work on the page itself is expanded in "focusing on the negative," a poem in which the page "shatters" like the "confidence" of the persona (see Figure 4.6). If, on the screen, the drawing is contained by the frame of the Instagram post, in the book, the imitation of broken glass starts at the bottom right corner of the page and spreads almost up to the words of the poem. (*sun* 67) In that sense, the scribble eats into the natural margins of the page and hides the number of the page, placed at the bottom center. The small "67" is swallowed in the ramifications of the drawn fissures and hardly legible.

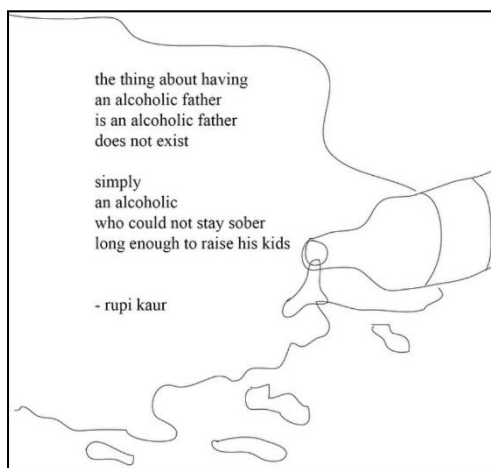


Figure 4.5. Rupi Kaur. “the thing about having / an alcoholic father . . .” *Instagram*, 9 Apr. 2015, <https://www.instagram.com/p/1Pcl2unAx4/>. Accessed Feb 20th 2023.

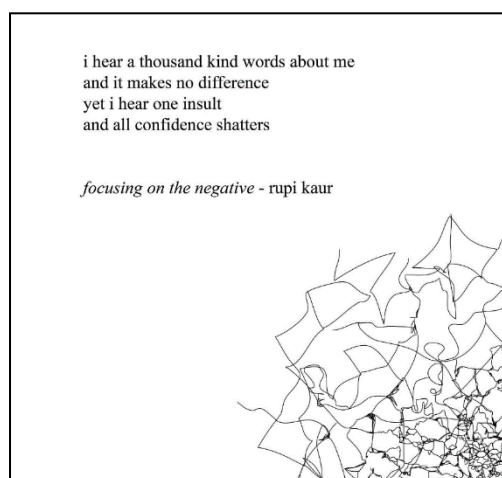


Figure 4.6. Rupi Kaur’s “focusing on the negative.” *Instagram*, 20 June 2022, <https://www.instagram.com/p/CfCkFA3pdHc/>. Accessed Feb 20th 2023.

By playing on the (unrealistic) illusion that the page is shattering, the poet is creating a strong parallel between the speaker’s inner feelings, exposed on the page, and the page itself as a physical object. This parallel works even better when the poem is on paper as the reader effectively holds the physical, tangible evidence of the speaker’s pain. Intimacy and identity seem even more connected to paper, in a way. The poem “home,” available only in the codex collection, as mentioned before, is not only adorned by an unfinished doodle, par for the course, but is also framed by a drawn trim (see Figure 4.7). The rectangle surrounding the poem looks like makeshift pages – a characteristic visible throughout the collection whenever there are long, confessional poems, almost as a way of setting them apart from the rest of the poems. There is something draft-like about this rectangle, as if framing the text was a way of signaling that those poems were meant for print only. The fact that those “fake pages” are drawn in a very rudimentary style, when they could have been added much more professionally, reinforces the impression of intimacy as the handwritten part

surrounds the text to give it a more diary-like feel, as if the reader has access to Kaur’s “secret” writing.

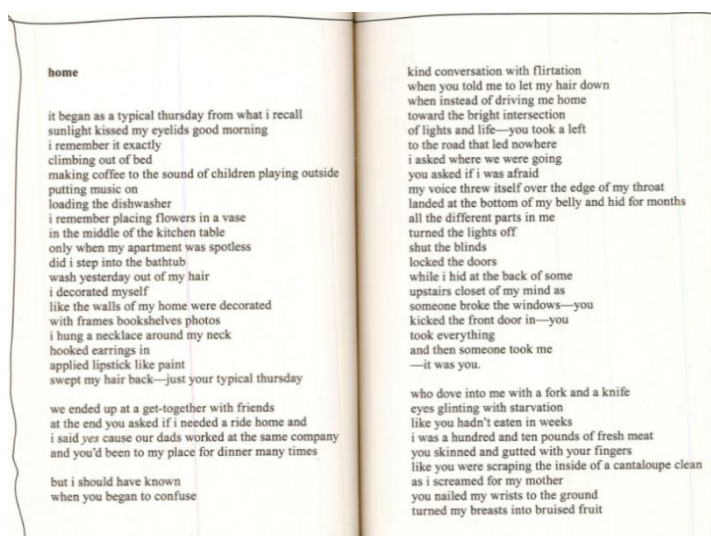


Figure 4.7. Rupi Kaur. “home.” *the sun and her flowers*. Andrews McMeel, 2017, pp. 68-9. Scanned page.

Like Kaur, Unnahaar dramatizes the medium by putting paper in the limelight, as visible with her address to the reader written on a “piece of paper” within the page:

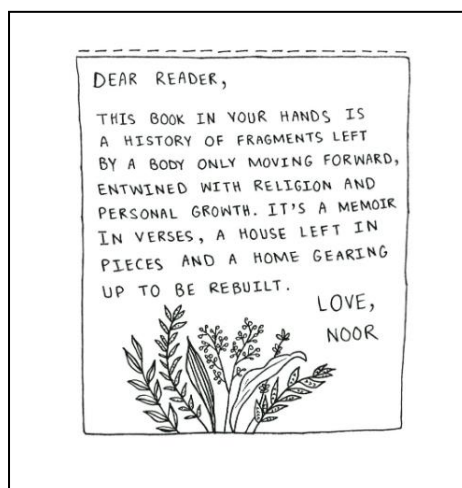


Figure 4.8. Noor Unnahaar. “Address to the reader.” *Yesterday I was the Moon*. Clarkson Potter/Publishers, 2018, p. 7. Scanned page.

The size and shape of the rectangle on the page looks like a sticky note. The singularity of the reader is showcased through the act of leaving a note just for them.

By holding the book, the reader is doing what Unnahar is saying on the “note,” which creates a direct link between reader and author. This *mise en abyme* of the codex book and paper indicates a discrepancy between media. As the paper collections of instapoets seem to bask in their own materiality, one can wonder why the shift to the codex begs for such a performance of the medium: what is it about Instagram that is only reproducible on paper through the fetishization of both the book and the intimate exposed to the public?

4.2. Growing intimate on the page

The interest in using instapoetry, rather than more experimental feminist types of contemporary poetry in relation with Loy lies in the similar interest in community-building. Loy’s work is infinitely more intimate than Instagram poetry yet it is this intimacy that social media tries to replicate. As Bronwen Thomas explores the new forms of participation encouraged by social media, through hashtags and comments, for instance, he notices that “social media provide a space for readers to share not only their reflections and responses with others, but the act of reading itself, whether that is by posting a photograph of the book they are reading, where they are reading it . . . or by joining in with a group read, using hashtags to connect with others reading the same text.” (41) Engagement with poetry to the point of participation, however, is not a unique feature of digital media and their comment sections. Ileana Baird, in the introduction to *Social Networks in the Long Eighteen Century: Clubs, Literary Salons, Textual Coteries*, shows that this kind of textual interplay has been sought-after for centuries: “[i]magine the eighteenth-century world as a *networked* community rather than a competing one reflects a recent interest in novel forms of social interaction facilitated by new social media” (4). Even going back to seventeenth-century metaphysical poetry and its dialogical form, women poets,

notably, would use pastoral sobriquets and idyllic depictions of platonic love to call upon each other and members of a same coterie could respond to each other's poems. Nancy Armstrong, in *Desire and Domestic Diction: A Political History of the Novel* also points at the advent of the woman author as offering a diversifying outlook on political matters by putting into dialogue sexuality and public affairs.

While Loy is often characterized as an absent or hidden figure of the poetic scene at the time, with anecdotes such as her having to prove her existence at Natalie Barney's salon (LoLB xii), she seems, perhaps more than most modernist poets, to be interpersonal by nature.⁸⁸ It is difficult to talk about Loy without talking about her cohort of artist friends. Conover himself opens his introduction to *The Lost Lunar Baedeker* with an anecdote of Mina Loy on a night out with Marcel Duchamp, not only highlighting the extravagant life of the poet, but also pointing at important context of the poet's writing process (xi). Loy's inner social circle is indeed composed of many important artists of the time who both influence and are influenced by her works. Similarly, in the upcoming collection of visual art and poetry, *Mina Loy: Strangeness is Inevitable*, the "Director's Foreword" aims at briefly situating Loy in her social context. While the foreword begins, once more, with a mention to Marcel Duchamp, it quickly moves on to other artists, noting that Loy's work "was admired by such contemporaries as Berenice Abbott, Djuna Barnes, Constantin Brancusi, Joseph Cornell, Arthur Cravan, Marcel Duchamp, Mabel Dodge, Peggy Guggenheim, Julien Levy, Richard Oelze, Gertrude Stein, Carl Van Vechten, and Beatrice Wood" (ix-x). Bonnie Kime Scott's schema of "A Tangled Mesh of Modernists" (10) barely

⁸⁸ Natalie Barney (1876-1972) was an American salon-host and writer. She is particularly renowned for trying to gather women poets in her salons.

touches upon the tip of the iceberg when it comes to Loy's artistic connections, but accurately represents modernism as an interlacing of small literary communities.

Loy's case is a particularly interesting one as she is not only associated with bigger names in the artistic sphere of the time, but she is too often defined through them today. The importance of Loy's inner circle in her art is not restricted to her friends becoming curators of or even incentives for her writing: intertextuality is at the core of Loy's poetry, with many poems based on other writers and artists, such as James Joyce, Gertrude Stein, Edgar Allan Poe or Wyndham Lewis. Her poems attempt to capture the language specific to each writer. In "Gertrude Stein," she writes:

Curie
of the laboratory
of vocabulary
she crushed
the tonnage
of consciousness
congealed to phrases
to extract
a radium of the word. (*LoLB* 94)

In the context of this poem, Louise M. Rosenblatt's contrast between efferent and aesthetic readings can give an insight into Mina Loy's conception of the reader's activity. In efferent reading, Rosenblatt explains that the emphasis is put on what will be "carried away" (24). What is meant by such a description is the idea that if Loy was an efferent reader, she would have constructed her poem on precise references of Stein's poems, almost like a summary. Conversely, the extract is concerned with the

style Stein uses in her poems, shedding light on “what happens *during* the actual reading event” (24). Kristina Marie Darling then suggests that Loy is actually trying to reproduce poetic devices used by Stein in her poem by working on repetitions and sound-patterning: the lexical field of compression, running throughout the poem is reminiscent of Stein’s reduced syntax or search for the essence of each object in *Tender Buttons*.⁸⁹ The poem also unfolds through the alliteration in [k] sounds with words such as “Curie,” “vocabulary,” “crushed,” “consciousness,” “congealed” or “extract.” It is also through sounds that Loy is able to equate science and language as it is shown with “vocabulary” and “laboratory.” The two words not only rhyme together but echo each other in length, with the same number of letters, syllables, and stresses. Loy’s respect for the poet is reinforced by comparing Stein to the esteemed figure of Marie Curie. Though the poem can be read as creating a form of hierarchy between the figure of the genius depicted and the fascinated speaker, Loy’s reproduction of Stein’s idiosyncrasies in her own handling of language makes the speaker both the subject and the object of her praise. Stein melds with the figure of the speaker-reader, which models poetry as a space that creates communities of like-minded individuals.

Loy’s poetic dialogues inform our reading of instapoetry – a craft that, first and foremost, aims at the persuasion of the other. Thus, instapoets try to create a similar – if less authentic – relation with the reader by manufacturing intimacy in the hope that it will bring them validation. First of all, Unnahr’s fascination with the materiality of the medium she uses to make art is developed in her paper collection. *Yesterday I was the Moon* uses the deckle-edge technique, creating a scalloped effect

⁸⁹ Kristina Darling, “Mina Loy’s Poetics of Rupture and Resistance: A Retrospective.” *Kenyon Review*, 5 Feb. 2019, <https://kenyonreview.org/2019/02/mina-loys-poetics-of-rupture-resistance-a-retrospective/>. Accessed 16 June 2022.

when the book is closed, to mimic the unevenness of a journal.⁹⁰ Unnahar even plays with “vintage” tropes throughout her collection by drawing cassette tapes (56), old cameras (74), or simply adding handwritten notes besides typed texts. The following page perhaps shows it best:



Figure 4.9. Noor Unnahar. “Unnamed poem.” *Yesterday I was the Moon*.

Clarkson Potter/Publishers, 2018, p. 128. Scanned page.

This doodle of an embroidery hoop containing an embroidered piece of cloth and a needle faces the poem “I go to war against words,” in the collection. Through this drawing, Unnahar develops the associations of femininity, which, at first sight, contrasts with the lexical field of warfare. By representing embroidery, the poet not only situates herself as a women writer but as a dislocated one at the same time: she borrows the topos of the religious and confined Western woman performing her household duties. In the introduction to *Pens and Needles: Women’s Textualities in Early Modern England*, Susan Frye points at the interrelation of writing and needlework at the time:

The texts that early modern women left behind I have classified as being produced by pens, needles, and combinations of the two. In a book about the

⁹⁰ This technique uses pages of slightly different width and feathered edges.

blurring of textual categories, it may come as no surprise that these categories are themselves unstable and overlapping, despite the fact that much of the scholarship of the past two centuries has insisted on their separation. (12)

While needlework does evoke the image of the well-behaved, chaste woman, Frye reminds us that the connotations of the craft are a little more rebellious: “[t]o a certain extent the needle represented women’s obedience to a rigid insistence on sexual difference, but it is an unstable signifier and, as an object, it is small but phallic, penetrating as well as penetrable, conveying activity, even violence, as well as creativity” (16). As she mingles stereotypically masculine and feminine imageries, Unnahr echoes Nancy Armstrong’s analysis of domesticity in the context of women writers, and inscribes herself in a tradition of women textuality and authorship that was also wholeheartedly embraced by women modernist poets. The focus on household tasks is reminiscent of Gertrude Stein’s *Tender Buttons* and its recreation of everyday objects and meals that both shatter and celebrate the ideal Victorian bourgeois order. Marguerite S. Murphy in her article, “‘Familiar Strangers’: The Household Words of Gertrude Stein’s ‘Tender Buttons,’” even states that Stein’s prime material to reconstruct language is the very ordinary speech of women (384). Yet, this is not what Unnahr is doing here; the insistence on “too many words” paradoxically uses needlework to complain about speech rather than to allow freedom of speech, in a striking reversal of historical practices. The woman speaker is both warrior and housewife, just like the women in Loy’s “Omen of Victory:”

Women in uniform
 relaxed for tea
 under a shady garden tree
 discover

a dove's feather
 fallen in the sugar.

The “[w]omen in uniform” of the beginning are the first witnesses of the end of the war and the peace treaty thanks to the image of the “dove.” However, the white feather of the bird also hints at the image of the “angel in the house:” as the war comes to an end, so does the active role of women in society. By representing embroidered words next to her poem about the writer’s activity, Unnahar clearly associates the act of writing with crafts and female bonding, which enables her to make her speaker part of a women community, and, in turn, to reclaim an identity that is understood and shared by others. Yet, the poet also goes beyond that in order to appeal to current feminist tastes by superimposing the image of the embroidering woman with a more aggressive take on femininity. Unnahar’s codex collection, however, does not intend to gather readership quite like the digital poems do; the paper poems are almost a second step into knowing the poet for the already convinced reader. In that sense, I want to go back to the Instagram platform itself.

The very application which hosts and influences the poems caters to that performative intimacy: while available on computer, is rather designed for smaller devices like smartphones. The small size of the screen and the intimacy surrounding smartphones, as almost extensions of the human body, already creates a sort of bubble around its user. Texts would be the favored means to discuss private matters, as opposed to letters or emails, which are more official or work-related nowadays. The Instagram algorithm creates a personalized and unique selection of content that make the application a familiar and comforting place. The example of Unnahar’s Instagram profile is even more interesting in this regard, as the poet chooses to use handwritten poetry over typed one most of the time:

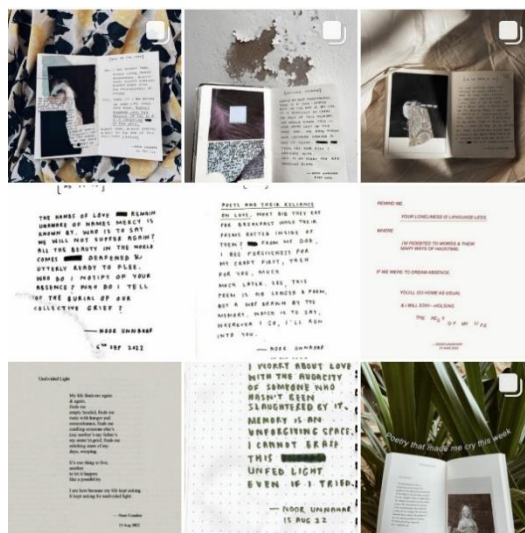


Figure 4.10. Noor Unnahaar's Instagram gallery, from Aug 11, 2022 to Dec 22, 2022.

Screencap from Instagram. https://www.instagram.com/noor_unnahaar/.

Accessed Feb 13, 2023.

The black rectangles signifying typos or mistakes, peppered in the posts, have a double role, here. On the one hand, they present a “flawed” version of the poet who, through the very exposition of an altered poem, stoops to the reader’s level. On the other hand, crossing out a word is an action that is tightly linked to paper and ink, which reinforces the poet’s interest in the material aspect of the page, already visible in the handwritten words and the close-ups on the texture of paper. Thus, the materiality of the Instagram post hints at the identity the poet wants to project. In this case, Unnahaar depicts herself as a poet of the people, despite her endless self-presentation and personal touches. Unnahaar’s crossed out words are an essential part of her poetry: she presents herself as approachable through those apparent mistakes that give a bodily quality to her work. Her poems are already, for the most part, handwritten and yet she feels the need to overemphasize the body as the site of creation by making scribbles a recognizable part of her works. In “The Birth-Mark: Unsettling the Wilderness in American Literary History,” Susan Howe declares “[i]t’s the stutter in American literature that interests me. I hear the stutter as a sounding of

uncertainty. What is silenced or not quite silenced” (181). While Howe theorizes the “stutter” as evidence of the repressed, the crossed out words in Unnahaar’s work seemed to be specifically put in the limelight to perform diary aesthetics and further create a bond with the reader. It entails both that the poet has almost a compulsion to write, even on a surface that makes it not very legible or complete, and that the reader is trusted enough by the poet, who can then avoid polishing her work.

Instapoems seem fairly aware of their own limitations. Kaur’s juxtaposition of poems with pictures of her at events she attended on her Instagram page exemplifies the difficulty to catch the reader’s attention through the speaker’s voice only. I claim that it is why multimedia is a needed feature of instapoetry: the poems need to be a little more than just poems to really resonate with the reader on an intimate level. One of Unnahaar’s recurring techniques is to inscribe her poems in the material. Within the digital world, she creates the impression that her poems are keepsakes of memories shared with the reader:

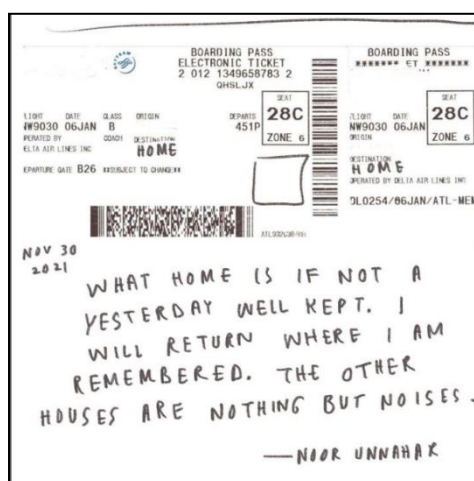


Figure 4.11. Noor Unnahaar. “Poetry on a Found Object.” *Instagram*, 30 Nov 2021, <https://www.instagram.com/p/CW5wKLetyz2/>. Accessed 14 July 2023.

In this Instagram post, the handwritten poem is arranged under a clearly modified plane ticket – there is no name – and yet the banality of the object crafts authenticity.

The poem reads as a spontaneous overflow of words prompted by the prop itself. The fact that the poet signs her name at the end of every single poem, interestingly, kind of goes against the conventions of the journal which is supposedly so private that it becomes almost anonymous in that it is only meant for the eyes of the person who writes it. The date at the top of the page and the signature at the bottom is evocative of letters. The effect is similar to that of a specific undated letter from Loy to Van Vechten:

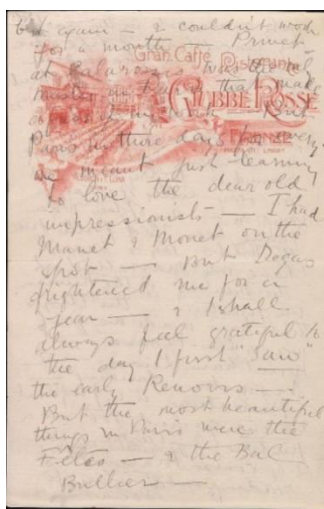


Figure 4.12. Mina Loy. “Undated letter.” Beinecke Digital Library, YCAL MSS 1050, Series I, box 76, Yale University, New Haven, Connecticut. *Yale University Library*, <https://collections.library.yale.edu/catalog/2043789>. Accessed 24 Feb. 2023.

The contrast between Loy’s discussion of painters Manet, Monet and Degas and the paper used, which seems to be a notepad or the back of a menu from a restaurant in Florence, roots the letter in the common aspect of everyday life. This apparent disregard for formality is what Unnahr is trying to emphasize with her poems. Perhaps the most noticeable attempt to do so is visible in a January 12th 2022 post where the poem is no longer written on paper but directly in ordinary life:



Figure 4.13. Noor Unnihar. “Luck is a cold-hearted con man ...” *Instagram*, Jan 12th 2022, <https://www.instagram.com/p/CYocGBfld5z/>. Accessed 24 Feb. 2023.

This example of poem *in situ* focuses on the “nowness” (Thomas 19) of the medium. The picture is taken, the viewer guesses, in the poet’s very own bathroom as it is not the only picture of the same sink on her Instagram grid. The viewer is put in the position of someone who interrupts a moment: the flowers in the basin are the elements that create a sense of narrative in this slice of life snapshot moment as they hint at a presence taking on the chore of cutting the end of the stems before putting said flowers back in a vase. There is something domestic about the picture, and the poem, inlaid in the earthenware, invites the reader/viewer to see the poetic aspect of the ordinary. More than that, the position of the poem at the edge of the sink lets the reader know that the poem will be gone as soon as the water is turned on, as if the words would slowly slide down the material and flow away. Just like with the logo for *Giubbe Rosse*, the “Gran Café Ristorante” of Loy’s letter, the image of the sink deflates the seriousness of the “cold hearted con man” Unnihar uses as a simile for luck. Paradoxically, it is through the performativity of the poem being written on a surface where no one would ever think to spontaneously write a poem that the scene

bears traces of familiarity and that the reader is able to share a connection with the poet.

Instapoetry pushes the aesthetics of incompleteness and rush so far that the posts mentioned are reminiscent of Loy's archives, which are meant to be private. The importance of manufacturing intimacy in a context that does not actually allow it, through a specific interest in materiality, is linked to a desire to establish oneself as an artist. In "Nosthetics: Instagram Poetry and the Convergence of Digital Media and Literature," Tanja Grubnic identifies nostalgia as a universal effect of instapoetry. Unnahr's placement of poetry within the materiality of everyday life seemingly defeats the purpose of the digital and can be considered a symptom of Grubnic's theorization of "nosthetics:"

On the first level, instapoetry demonstrates a formal, modernist 'mood' of nostalgia through the proclivity of representing the pre-digital methods of creating literary works, for poetry as time-consuming, non-digital material labour. On the second level, however, the distinctly melancholic qualities of the poetry do not indicate a nostalgia for another time, but another place: to take up space in the tangible world – to break free from the constraints of the screen where instapoetry resides, to be stored on the reader's coveted bookshelf rather than their mobile device. (146-7)

Distinguishing between time and space, Grubnic sees in instapoetry's old-fashioned aesthetics the desire to break free from the immateriality imposed by the very digital nature of the platform; a sort of rebellion against the core feature of the genre. The study of strategic intimacy in instapoetry shows that the digital form is the main appeal but also the main anxiety of the genre, which tries to relieve itself from its uncomfortable nature. Loy's experience of modernity is a similar search for space:

“International Psycho-Democracy,” written in 1918, invites “‘collectivity’ moved by the same intellectual logic” (*LaLB* 277) to “[m]ake the world [their] Salon” (*LaLB* 276). Loy’s essay seemingly constructs an understanding of artistic identity that finds itself translated to the letter in the capitalistic uniformity of the instapoetic horizon. Loy’s text illuminates modernist writing conditions as much as it reflects platform logic – in both cases, women thrive as writers in a designated social space.

4.3. Finding space for women

Loy’s experiments with poetry expand beyond the realm of paper: she takes a multimedia stance where instapoets, whose platform is multimedia in itself, constantly return to the stable image of paper and ink. In both cases, artists transform a specific medium into another in an attempt to appeal to a community – whether it be a close-knit circle or an anonymous crowd. For Bazin, small artistic communities in the twentieth century were opportunities to carve space for women writers: “unlike *Others*, which devoted 38 per cent of its content to women poets, including one whole issue to Mina Loy’s ‘Songs to Joannes’ and one all-woman issue, the space of the *Dial* was overwhelmingly dominated by male writers and artists” (169). Similarly, Loy is known for having participated in Barney’s *Académie des Femmes*, a feminist response to the *Académie Française*, which encouraged women’s literary production. For Voyce, salons, whether they are specifically catered for women or not,

[are] a cluster, a mêlée, of bodies and practices, writers and disseminators, technologies and texts. It is not simply that a social history of its participants and conventions affords an explanation of the conditions under which modernist poets create literature; rather, the social space of the salon is a constitutive element of a communally constructed artistic practice.” (643)

His insight on the relevance of salons hints at their direct impact on the literary scene of the time. Djuna Barnes's *Ladies Almanack* is a barely disguised narrativization of the *Académie*'s literary crowd, in which Loy is featured as Patience Scalpel. The space of literary production then spilled on the literary production itself and became much more than just a stage for artistic networks.

The intertextual nature of Loy's poems maps her position within modernity and further develops intimate artistic networks she was tangled in. Loy's famous ekphrastic poem "Brancusi's Golden Bird," for instance, is remarkable for its multimedia rendition of not one, but two artworks. Bozhkova indeed notes that "[t]he different imagery of the poem suggests that it also refers to the photograph of Quinn's version, reproduced in the Brancusi Number of *The Little Review* and later in the *Waste Land* issue of *The Dial* alongside Loy's poem" (*BW* 165). The angle of John Quinn's photograph flattens out the "incandescent curve" (*LoLB* 79) of the sculpture, and though said curve is mentioned in the poem itself, the layout, often discussed for its mirroring of the sculpture's shape, is strangely lanky:

The toy
become the aesthetic archetype

As if
some patient peasant God
had rubbed and rubbed
the Alpha and Omega
of Form
into a lump of metal

A naked orientation
 unwinged unplumed
 — the ultimate rhythm
 has lopped the extremities
 of crest and claw
 from
 the nucleus of light (*LoLB* 79)

Though Lazevnick sees the disruptive “As if,” sticking out of the poem, as “the joint at the base of Brancusi’s sculpture” (196), the placement of this marginal line, almost at the top of the poem is reminiscent of the light hitting the sculpture in Quinn’s photograph. Such an interpretation seems to be confirmed by the tenses Loy employs within the poem: Lazevnick mentions that “the initial lines ‘The toy / become the aesthetic archetype’ deliver the reader emphatically into the present. ‘Become,’ which does not agree in number with ‘The toy,’ could also be taken as a command, a voice seemingly above and outside the narrative that follows” (196). “Become,” however, could be a past participle and while it would make the syntax of the first lines a bit clumsy in English, it would not be the first time Loy translates the syntax of one language in another. The poem, then, would not be a real time description of the “Golden Bird” but a clear dialogue with the cultural impact Brancusi’s art had – embodied by the celebrated picture. Loy’s technique, here, goes beyond the simple detailed description that ekphrasis entails. The indentation of “As if” is noticeable because it operates a sort of comparison between the first two lines and the rest of the poem, making the first two lines the referent of the whole poem as much as the picture and the actual sculpture are.

The multimedia dialogue Loy weaves in the poem paints a picture of her inner circle as much as it points at her place within that circle and within avant-garde movements. In *Becoming Modern*, Burke discusses Loy's friendship with Brancusi through anecdotes of their shared dinners and cinema outings (328 and 380, qtd in Lazevnick 195) but Lazevnick accentuates the imbalance of their successes, as Loy never quite reached Brancusi's celebrity (195). Through "Brancusi's Golden Bird," then, Loy develops her position, already mentioned in the analysis of "Gertrude Stein," as fascinated audience benefitting from her gracious appreciation of other artists. Moreover, the layering of different versions of the same artwork shows a knowledge of the artistic milieu of the time that was undoubtedly shared by her fellow avant-garde artists. The poem caters to the friends Loy knew were going to be the main audience for her work while establishing herself as one of them, to the point that her relationships become an identity marker. By recreating her bonds with figures of the modern avant-garde, Loy's poems cement her centrality within the movement but also use textuality as a means to expand the space of women in modernity: through her poem, she mingles with the visual art scene of the time.

This reliance on intertextuality is not as visible in instapoetry, or rather, the conventions of the genre are so specific that an intertextual study could probably expand boundlessly. The genre itself forces together communities of instapoets that owe their fame to each other without fully conversing with each other. Loy's intertextual poem, I argued, helps her redefine the contours of the space allotted to women poets. Similarly, Unnihar's poems can be understood as pockets in a space in which the poet metatextually expands her identity as writer. I am focusing on Unnihar's paper collection and Loy's visual textuality to understand how writing, more than any other craft, is exploited as a conduit for the human body. To begin with

instapoetry, I claim that Unnhar's conflation of body and text aims at cementing the speaker's position of authority – the text creates the body and vice versa. Far from Kaur's eroticization of the female body, Unnahar's speaker presents an intellectualized agender body. Elżbieta Chrzanowska-Kluczevska notes the porousness of boundaries between the intellectual and the physical space: “[i]t is of utmost importance to realise that although logical space is a product of human intellect, it rarely becomes enclosed in the privacy of one specific mind. Logical space finds its expression and embodiment in language” (137). Here, Unnahar presents the page as the embodiment of her inner thoughts:

I go to war against words
 to fight ‘til one of us
 has shed enough blood
 to accept defeat; there’s no
 easy way to write. (129)

The first line of the excerpt is a clash between the brutal reality of warfare and its decimated bodies and the fact that the opponents inscribing violent acts in the speaker's body are manifestations of the speaker's intellect. The weaponization of words is a common trope – we can think of the adage “the pen is mightier than the sword” – except, here, words are attacking, not shielding, the speaker. In this first poem, words are both the means through which the speaker exposes their corporeality and described as flesh themselves. The final metatextual sentence, “there’s no / easy way to write,” establishes the very poem as the proof of the speaker's scarred body. The stereotypically masculine metaphor of the battlefield keeps being revisited throughout the collection and becomes increasingly difficult to understand as the role

of “words” continually shifts. From opponents, they become the traces of the poet’s intimate sorrow:

sometimes my words
 become a pile of broken glass
 they do not come out
 without hurting; dripping blood. (57)

The verb “come out” and the insistence on blood, again, in these lines, move from the imagery of warfare to that of parturition. The question of kinship between the artist and the work of art is sealed once again with the motif of the blood and the metaphorical spillage of bodily fluids. The poet later writes that she “spill[s] [her] tears and / blood and sweat on a canvas” (95). The medium, however, effectively becomes the body rather than a simple echo of corporeal creation when the poet disrupts even more the current metaphor and assimilates words to either balm or poison:

isn’t it absolutely
 terrifyingly, shockingly
 amazing
 how words
 those tiny little sounds
 in this chemical-filled air
 those shapeless weird marks
 on stark white paper
 can make or break
 living breathing people. (65)

The last two lines give to “words” the power of birthing people through the verb “make,” not only in the sense of influencing them but also – as opposed to “break” – creating, bringing to the world. The gap between the grand “living breathing people”

and the reductive terms “tiny little sounds,” “shapeless weird marks,” displays an imbalance the medium and the impact of the medium. In *The Textual Condition*, McGann mentions that “the object of the poetical text is to thicken the medium as much as possible— literally, to put the resources of the medium on full display.” (14) In this poem, Unnahar praises the medium by reversing the creator/creation dynamic and placing the words as authors. Yet, the birthing imagery, already implied throughout references to blood in other poems, seemingly recycles the trope of the literal and metaphorical “pregnant poet” which, here, does not make a good job at offering a gendered commentary on writing but rather presents a narrative to back up the poet’s authority. Words do not only spill organically from the speaker’s body, they hurt her on the way out and can impact the physical well-being of the readers. The poet is positioned as both martyr and god-like figure.

Where Loy reproduced on the page the cluster of communities she participated in, effectively expanding the physical space of salons onto the space of the page, women instapoets utilize the page as a prosthetic of the female body through which they gather communities of women. I want to pause a few moments on the relevance of forming gendered literary groups. Bazin’s exploration of Marianne Moore’s editorial impact on the *Dial* shows that Moore not only increased the number of women published, but also published them together (168). However, that is, according to Bazin, where the female congregation stops:

It might look as if by gathering together women artists, writers and critics she is reinforcing the category of ‘woman’ and thereby undermining her own preference for diversity rather than aesthetic unity, yet the clustering of women artists has the opposite effect. Through this arrangement, diversity is showcased. There is no category that can be labelled ‘woman’; there is no

aesthetic or formal unity that links women as creators and makers of modernism. Moore displays women artists through proximity to illustrate difference rather than sameness. (168)

Reading women instapoets together only reinforces their similarities but reading them in dialogue with Loy's poetry reveals the capaciousness of her feminist modernism: just like Bazin describes for Moore, the space Loy's poems leave for otherness actually makes her own originality stand out. To close the discussion on communities as space for women, I want to compare how Unnahar and Loy both blur the distinction between speaker and addressee in the poems as yet another expansion of the poetic space. However, this final analysis aims at demonstrating that this metatextual effort fosters identification in Unnahar's poem and alterity in Loy's.

Unnahar's "Fate" separates poets from non-poets. The speaker shifts positions: at the beginning, she is associated with the latter category before fully identifying with the art of writing. The poet's goal is fairly simple: finding validation by creating a mirror image between creator and audience:

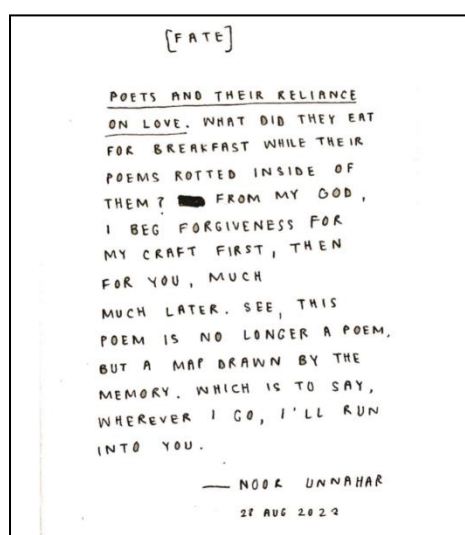


Figure 4.14. Noor Unnahar. "Fate." *Instagram*, 28 Aug 2022,

<https://www.instagram.com/p/ChzmF4PN0YZ/>. Accessed Feb 23rd 2023. Screen

print.

At the beginning, the poet seems to merge with the exasperated or doubtful reader by placing herself as a non-poet: the repetitive use of “their,” “they,” and “them” in the first four lines singularizes her from a community of poets doing the same thing. The negative verb “rotted” places the poem both within the body and within the lexical field of decay, highlighting the despising tone that infuses the opening lines. Soon, however, this “they” turns into an “I” as the speaker mentions “[her] craft.” The possessive adjective places the poet apart, once more, but instead of being separated from the crowd of poets she now rises above them as owner of the art. This instability of the poet’s status is a tension that never gets resolved in Unnahaar’s body of poetry. In a January 19th 2022 Instagram post, she writes: “Come to me with your wretched memory. Remind me that the weight of my life has been astounding. I forget easily.”⁹¹ The apostrophe operating in the opening imperative “come to me” directly calls upon the reader due to the lack of prior referent. Again, the author focuses on the question of memory and the reader is placed as a confidante in being the one who can “remind” the speaker of her past trauma. The adjective “wretched” points at the fact that the reader is the one spoken to since it would be a way of acknowledging the lack of personal history between the two figures. The memory is “wretched” in the sense of something degraded because the reader can only base their knowledge of a “past” through their familiarity with the entire body of poems. The speaker, then, is a manifestation of the poet herself, bidding the reader to not only consume but recollect, in a movement contradicting the constant renewal pertaining to Instagram. The act of remembering is problematized, here, since what the speaker apparently cannot retain

⁹¹ Noor Unnahaar’s Untitled Poem, <https://www.instagram.com/p/CY69eAMtWTM/>. Accessed Feb 23rd 2023.

is the “astounding” hardship she went through. The poem’s “you,” as the guardian of the speaker’s memories becomes the physical presence of those recollections, the embodiment of the speaker’s mind. Unnahar constantly remaps the space of identity, which promotes a view of friendship that is quasi platonic: “as Cicero’s *De Amicitia* has it, ‘*versus amicus est tamquam alter idem*’: the real friend is, as it were, another self” (Brady 305).

A similar movement happens in Loy’s “To You,” published in 1916, as the speaker merges her body with that of the reader of her own poetic text by blurring the line between speaker and addressee:

Plopping finger

In Stephen’s Ink

Made you hybrid-negro

A couple of manuscriptural erasures

And here we have your deaf-mute

Beseech him

He will never with-hold so

Completely

As the tattle of tongue-play

Or your incognito. (*LaLB* 89)

The title of the poem marks its beginning even more intensely than it usually does as the first line is directly related to the title. The “you” of the title is the one “plopping [their] finger” in ink. What is the relationship between “you” and “he,” in this passage? Alex Goody provides a detailed account of what is, according to her, the progressive transformation of the speaker into the addressee:

The line-breaks which disrupt the semantic groupings of “To You” produce an uncertain grammatical subject, and the prepositions which structure the poem highlight the relational activity of the piece. Thus, not only can we recognise the act of writing as an actual production (rather than representation or deferral of meaning), but we are also witness to a textual production of a relational subject. Although “You” is/are addressed and invoked, this postulated third person (the text, the writing, the subject) of the poem is the writer herself.⁹²

Indeed, “you” is presented as an authorial figure since metatextual objects modify “you”’s body, such as “Ink” or “manuscriptural erasures.” The latter is particularly meaningful when it comes to Mina Loy as this is exactly the problem that is encountered today with the poetic work of Loy. Many of her manuscripts are lost or illegible. The projection of the persona as the addressee of the text gives a peculiar effect of closeness since the addressee becomes a surrogate for the authorial figure, both subject and object of the poem. Goody interprets this passage from speaker to addressee as a way for the poet to point at the instability of her status in modernism as a female artist making it in a fairly masculine literary movement.⁹³ Yet, Loy’s poem focuses on literary creation rather than the speaker’s identity: the triangulation of authorial figures revolving around poetic production makes the poem’s construction the real central figure of the poem as the line perpetually conveys new questionings; whose finger? Who is you? Who is he? The slippery quality of the poem emphasizes the very structure of the poem and the nature of poetry as a handicraft. Finally, Goody notes that “by usurping authorship from the male [the speaker] becomes a racially

⁹² See “Gender, Authority and the Speaking Subject, or: Who is Mina Loy?” from *Mina Loy: A Symposium*, University of London, 11 March 2000. https://www.asu.edu/pipercenter/how2journal/archive/online_archive/v1_5_2001/current/in-conference/mina-loy/goody.html. Accessed 18 July 2023.

⁹³ See Alex Goody, “Gender, Authority and the Speaking Subject.”

mixed Other, the blackness of the (unauthorised) written word (as black ink) metonymically referring to the blackness of race.”⁹⁴ This fusion of gender and race is at the center of Loy’s modernist concerns with otherness, a concern that digital poetry, as an unrooted medium, recovers in its will to build community.

4.4. Multiculturality and Displacement

In this final section, I link the idea of a “transnational modernist artistic community” to Loy’s feminist strategies and see how it connects with instapoetic practices. In “Cross-Cultural Baedeker: Mina Loy’s Cosmopolitan Modernism,” Bozhkova notes Loy’s tendency to ascribe geographic and linguistic fragmentation to artistic avant-gardes:

Loy’s work underscores the importance of both location and dislocation. With their emphasis on cross-cultural travel and observation, her writings serve as a chronicle not only of cultural differences but also of the turbulent artistic phenomena of the early 20th-century international avant-garde. Her work is ironically positioned as a Baedeker to both, and in her poems, essays and manifestoes gradually unravel the idea of a transnational modernist artistic community.⁹⁵

Loy’s poems present a view of modernism that is highly transnational and somewhat ungraspable thanks to her networked verses. As discussed in chapter three, Chasar investigates how the modernist taste for textual materiality cannot only be restricted to aesthetic innovations but is also developed as a response to the way authors may have been distanced from the authority of editorial practices (176). Conversely, the social

⁹⁴ See Alex Goody, “Gender, Authority and the Speaking Subject.”

⁹⁵ See **Yasna** Bozhkova, “Cross-Cultural Baedeker: Mina Loy’s Cosmopolitan Modernism.” *E-rea*, vol. 16, no. 2, 2019. <https://journals.openedition.org/erea/7368>. Accessed 18 July 2023.

media platform Instagram offers a public scene to anyone creating poetry, thus giving power back to authors.⁹⁶ In this context, the social network is often seen as the perfect scene to make oppressed voices heard. Indeed, some of the most famous instapoets, such as R. H. Sin, Lang Leav, or Nikita Gill, are racialized writers who find in Instagram a stepping stone to publication and transcending discriminative publishers. Ethnic background and questions of immigration are an essential component of Kaur's poetry:

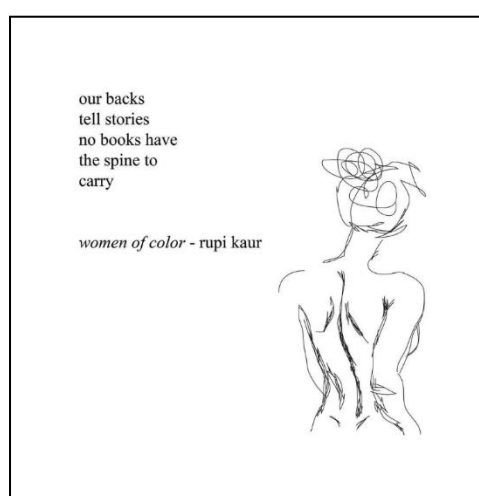


Figure 4.15. Rupi Kaur. “women of color.” *Instagram*, 6 March 2023,

<https://www.instagram.com/p/CpbrWr7Mjjc/?hl=fr>. Accessed 13 July 2023. Screen print.

In this poem the speaker places herself among the group of “women of color,” whose bodies are compared to the anatomy of a book. By doing so, the speaker reinforces her identity as an artist and, through that, as a person of authority. The poem, just like

⁹⁶ See Maria Manning in “Crafting Authenticity: Reality, Storytelling, and Female Self-Representation through Instapoetry:” “As such, I instead suggest that this location, like other avenues for digital storytelling and depictions, opens up the available space in the canon and allows for the depiction and representation of a greater variety of voices to be embodied subjects rather than the objects they may once have been restricted to in much of literature. Indeed, women’s use of Instagram to disseminate poetry can be seen to disrupt the patriarchal regulation of expression in two ways: firstly, and simply, by placing their interior lives into a public sphere via Instagram, and secondly, due to the use of a digital dissemination method, which places their work into the typically white male-dominated sphere of the internet.” (270)

the drawing, is fairly elusive and the poet's focus on race is only visible through the very title of the poem. Both attached to and distancing itself from racial concerns, the poem models race as community-building. The mention of "our backs" creates a bond between some readers, who identify to the poem based on the colour of their skin, and the focus on positivity, not touching upon anxieties with discrimination presents a performative view of racial identity. Through race, Kaur makes herself more visible – a globalizing figure embedding herself in different linguistic and historical backgrounds.

The poet's ethnical background is, at times, staged. When discussing Kaur's TED talk, Chasar focuses on the poet's white dress and overall demeanour as a way of emphasizing the performance of poetry: "[e]yes for the most part closed, Kaur vatically half-intones and half-channels her poem . . . Rotating her hands and arms, she evokes dance moves associated with the Indian subcontinent and thus a folk-ethnic identity" (187). Similar to her early TED talk appearance, Kaur began performing her poems on stage after the publication of her second and third collections. When discussing the performativity of poetry, Johanna Drucker, in "Visual Performance of the Poetic Text," indicates that what she calls "performance" is not necessarily the act of reading a poem aloud in front of an audience, but also to the presence of the text: "[p]erformance in this sense includes all of the elements that make the work an instantiation of a text, make it specific, unique, and dramatic because of the visual character through which the work comes into being" (131). Following on that idea, Drucker insists that in the kind of poetry that enacts the material, the poem becomes detached from the gender and presence of the author. Yet, the opposite seems accurate when discussing Kaur; every aspect of the poetic dissemination is linked back to the author. The complete lack of punctuation and

uppercase letters, already expressed in the very title of the collections, is a nod to Punjabi, while the contents of the poems aim at reclaiming the female body. Kaur often mentions her immigrant parents' hardships as seen in the following poem:

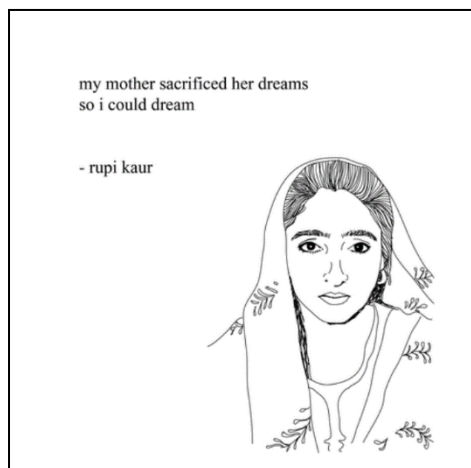


Figure 4.16. Rupi Kaur. “my mother sacrificed her dreams / so i could dream.”

Instagram, 13 Feb. 2023, <https://www.instagram.com/p/ColLaRXL4Qg/?hl=fr>.

Accessed 29 May 2023. Screen print.

While Kaur confidently puts features of non-white feminism in performance, here, through the sartorial choices in the drawing of her mother, the poem itself is so succinct that the reference to the trope of the immigrant mother “sacrificing” herself gives way to a more general reading of the poem in which a large part of the poet’s online audience could relate to the display of respect toward a motherly figure.

Kaur’s complex entanglement of white and non-white feminisms is reminiscent of Loy’s work on ethnic hybridity. The long poem “Anglo-Mongrels and the Rose” is often discussed as racial empowerment since Loy uses “mongrel” at a time when, according to DuPlessis, the term had “bad press” (*GRRC* 161). Loy’s representation of the mother figure in the long poem is much more complex: the English Rose represents “Albion / in female form” (123) who is restricting her child’s creativity. Despite the current movement in modernist studies towards a more global

vision of modernism – perhaps best exemplified by the revitalization of the field brought by Susan Stanford Friedman’s *Planetary Modernisms* – a white, monologic, masculine view of the movement is too often still at stake. Laura Winkiel, in *Modernism, Race, and Manifestos*, exhibits that tension by affirming that there is an “occlusion of racial difference in definitions of modernity” (23) even though “modernists grapple with race in order to imagine revolutionary change” (2). For Loy, ethnicity is a form of creativity, at least according to her famous essay “Modern Poetry.” At the beginning of her paper, Loy equates poetry to music: it is “prose bewitched, a music made of visual thoughts, the sound of an idea” (*LoLB* 157). The essay raises two main points stemming from this comparison: one, poetry is highly personal in that each poet composes original rhythms echoing their own singularity (*LoLB* 158). Second, modern poetry necessarily comes from America as it is a multilingual place:

It was inevitable that the renaissance of poetry should proceed out of America, where latterly a thousand languages have been born, and each one, for purposes of communication at least, English—English enriched and variegated with the grammatical structure and voice-inflection of many races, in novel alloy with the fundamental time-is-money idiom of the United States, discovered by the newspaper cartoonists.

This composite language is a very living language, it grows as you speak. For the true American appears to be ashamed to say anything in the way it has been said before. Every moment he ingeniously coins new words for old ideas, to keep good humor warm. And on the baser avenues of Manhattan every voice swings to the triple rhythm of its race, its citizenship and its personality. (*LoLB* 158-159)

Multilingualism and multiculturalism appear to be the tools of modernism, the hope for a reinvigorated and truly unprecedented language, which would fulfill Ezra Pound's now formulaic view of modernism as the cult of the new. In instapoetry, the fragmented identity of the racialized speaker is at the junction between building community and claiming singularity. Kaur "calls both the online medium and style of her poetry 'design poetry:' poetry based on the spoken word that voices communally what is often silent" (Kruger).⁹⁷ Interestingly, the term she coins presupposes poetry based on the visual, yet the definition puts sound and musicality in the limelight. The term "design poetry," then, is fairly apt in the context of Loy's own relationship with race, which I develop in relation to both her poems and her prototypes.

In "Anglo-Mongrels and the Rose," it is in the section about the "English Rose" that Loy makes it particularly difficult for the reader to abide by traditional rhythmical patterns, implying that the language is affected and stiff. Although she writes in English, her treatment of written letters and words in this specific poem is more reminiscent of the importance of the alphabet in Hebraic culture. Accounts of the sacred nature of the Hebraic alphabet refer to the power of letters, notably *Sefer Yetzirah*, also dubbed "The Book of Creation."⁹⁸ Discussing the text in an article entitled "Early Forms of Jewish Mysticism," Rachel Elijor affirms that the anonymous author of the book intended to emphasize "the creative quality of letters and numbers, which, in spite of their limited quantity (twenty-two letters and ten numbers), are

⁹⁷ See Sasha Kruger, "The Techopo(e)litics of Rupi Kaur: (de)Colonial Aesthetics and Spatial Narrations in the DigiFemme Age." *Ada: A Journal of Gender, New Media, and Technology*, no. 11, 2017. <https://scholarsbank.uoregon.edu/xmlui/handle/1794/26772>. Accessed 17 July 2023.

⁹⁸ *Sefer Yetzirah* is a book on Jewish mysticism written by an unknown author some time between the third and sixth century. In the introduction to "*Sefer Yesirah*" and *its Contexts: Other Jewish Voices*, Tzahi Weiss writes that "*Sefer Yesirah* appeared in the Jewish world at the beginning of the tenth century. In this period, it was already interpreted as a canonical treatise by leading rabbinic figures living on three continents, and it had many different versions." (1) Linguistics is also at the heart in the book.

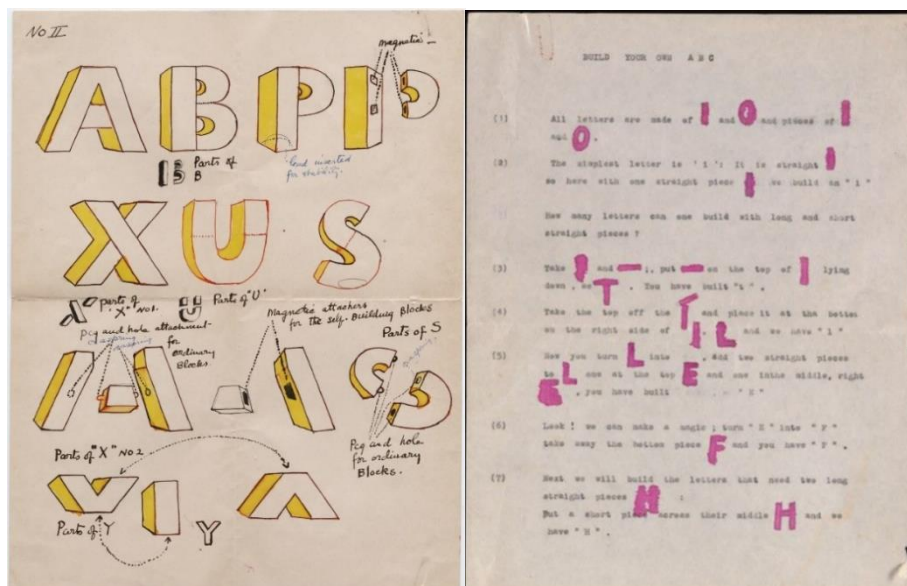
capable of generating an almost infinite number of words and sums” (785). This plasticity of the alphabet is very much in tune with the multiplicity of pronunciations and interpretations of most of Loy’s lines, starting with “the apparent impeccability / of the English.” Similarly, Felicia Waldman expresses the playfulness of the letters:

The most important aspect of the Jewish sacred text is the manner in which it is written. Since the Hebrew alphabet contains consonants only, the written word appears as an obscure corpus, with a hidden significance. What gives life to it is the voice sound. Reading is an adventure. If it weren’t for the oral tradition, which has preserved it, it would turn each time into a hangman game, in which the right sonority should be guessed. Therefore it may be said that the reading of the text has been legitimized by the centuries of vocalization and the sense of the verse has been clarified (?) by the long oral tradition, which has evolved in perfect parallel with the written one. (77)

The importance of the alphabet observed in Jewish tradition when it comes to sacred texts seem to have an impact on how Loy apprehends language and how she wishes to see her reader interact in the poetic page. Margaret Konkol, in “Prototyping Mina Loy’s Alphabet,” reminds us of the toy Loy designed in 1940: an alphabet that could be constructed, deconstructed, recreated, by slotting together specific shapes. Konkol contends that this alphabet

represents Loy’s articulation of a theory of language as kinetic, geometric, recombinant, and open to mutation. The letters resemble, in their simple sans serif, angular geometric form, Bauhaus-inspired democratic ideals about simplicity and function. In addition, the segmental portions of each alphabetic letter articulate a liberatory futurist typographic fantasy of pure graphemes –

free of history. These recombinant three-dimensional letters instantiate Loy's unpublished modernist poem, an articulation of language as a physical substance which infers its own morphology. (295)



Figures 4.17. and 4.18. Mina Loy. "Build Your Own ABC." 1941. Beinecke Digital Library, YCAL MSS 6, Box 7, Folder 184, Yale University, New Haven, Connecticut. *Yale University Library*, <https://collections.library.yale.edu/catalog/11863187>. Accessed 2 Dec. 2022. Screen print.

Loy operates a reversal of the Hebraic alphabet: instead of having only consonants, the letters of her do-it-yourself alphabet are only composed of vowels: "All letters are made of I and O and pieces of I and O." In "Anglo-Mongrels and the Rose," Loy forces her reader to pay attention to the letters of the alphabet and their roots in oral tradition. Thus, in "The Social Status of Exodus," Loy plays with the spellings of words, to the point that it blurs the intended meaning of the lines. The poem reads:

For men of a happy-go-lucky vulgarity
 relegated
 this jew-jaw of general invective

to a hole and corner secretive
popularity. (*LaLB* 173)

In this extract, when the reader sees “jew-jaw,” they instinctively relates it to “gewgaw” as it is the closest known noun in terms of spelling. If “jew-jaw” does not completely make sense in the context of the sentence, and especially since the reader is not familiar with the use of these two terms combined as one, it is still interesting that the poet decided to tie them together. After all, Exodus is a Jewish man often characterized by his bodily features throughout the poem, so mingling “jew” and “jaw” together is not out of tone. It is quite the opposite, since “jew-jaw” may be more appropriate in the context of the poem; the word ties together all the themes that have been mentioned in connection to the character of Exodus. The playfulness of Loy’s language concentrates meaning, points at itself and encourages the reader to explore the endless links that can be formed through a simple play on word. Here, it is more of a visual pun than an aural one, for “jew” is quite different from the beginning of “gewgaw” in phonemic terms, yet, this visual aspect of the pun is also intricately tied to sounds, as “jew-jaw” is quite close to the French word “joujou”, reminiscent of the useless, playful nature of a gewgaw, and of the very play with words Loy is engaged in. The visual aspect of this pun makes the action of creating a compound noun almost a typographical play. In that sense, it seems that Mina Loy’s poetry is a particularly good example of Roman Jakobson’s formulation that “poetry is organized violence committed on ordinary speech” (qtd in Erlich 219).

Susan Gilmore mentions that the toy alphabet exemplifies “feminist poetics” in that it “can be not simply reiterated but reinvented. Seemingly frivolous, Loy’s designs dramatize the quest for self-determination that *Anglo-Mongrels and the Rose* similarly enacts” (303). Loy’s application of Jewish mystical to non-sacred texts,

here, acts as a feminist reworking of Jewish literary tradition. Maren Tova Linett explains that “the Jews of feminist modernism cross more boundaries than those of national identity. They also fail to fit properly into categories of race, class, gender, and even religion . . . they signal multiple boundary-confusions” (5). Loy’s playful desecration of the sacred alphabet dismantles Jewish identity at the level of language but also reads as a celebration of its plasticity since it encourages reconstruction and diversity. According to DuPlessis, Loy focuses on an aesthetic mongrelization as she “claim[s] that subject place as fruitful and creative” and “the [place] in which interesting art could be made” (*GRRC* 159). This very same definition of the dislocated feminine subject is used in instapoetry. Sasha Kruger links, and rightly so, the concept of “unhoming” in instapoetry with the overall need to create community in order to survive as an artist on that application. Kruger, in her analysis of diaspora in Rupi Kaur’s poems mentions that the virtual world is the space of “sisterhood.”⁹⁹ Interestingly, it is the female subject that is the subject of diasporic uprooting. Unnihar’s poetic persona is also a good example of this linguistic and spatial dislocation, visible in the very titles of her poems: “azeez aurton – dear women” addresses the reader as not a single entity but a group. By saying “dear women” in two languages, the poet connects the reader to a wide, transnational community while at the same time excluding men as possible recipients of her poetry:

you’re not only a *she*
 or a *her*
 make your name sound
 like something

⁹⁹ Kruger, “The Techopo(e)litics of Rupi Kaur,” p. 2.

completely terrifyingly, beautifully

out of this world. (90)

While the title definitely emphasizes a sense of kinship between women as a whole, the poem reverses that push towards the mass to promote individuality and identity through refuting the personal pronouns “she” and “her.” The poem implicitly implies that men are the ones reducing the readers to a single pronoun. The community of “she”s and “her”s constructed by men, then, is one that the persona refuses as it lumps women together on basis of gender, whereas the title hints at a multicultural and empowering sisterhood by giving an example of how to treat sisters. Indeed, the title is built like the beginning of a letter that encourages intimacy, respect and inclusivity. Unnahar, in this poem particularly, but also in her work as a whole, builds community where identity matters but only in opposition to a nameless generalization of women. Yet, under the pretext of reinserting oneself in a tight-knit community, instapoetry can be seen as an aesthetic refusal of “constructions of female sexuality” and “the regulatory norms of white western beauty ideals” (Kruger 2). When Unnahar affirms

i cannot stop sounding

like the language i grew up with

and i cannot stop speaking

this foreign language

for it helps me

survive. (37)

she makes a definitive choice to express herself in a language she does not fully master to let alterity in. The sentence-fragments and syntactical hiccups are not that present in her collection but enough to show a cultural displacement, which is reinforced by the usage of non-English words. The collection opens on the declaration

“Here is the start” (12) and closes on “*khatam shud* / it ends here” (160). It is interesting that the book starts in English, with an epigraph from Elizabeth Barrett Browning’s “The Cry of the Children” but ends with a reaffirmation of the poet’s localized identity and somehow sheds light on the same issue with Loy’s English-speaking mongrel, despite all her claims that the American language is multi-cultural.

The recuperation of Loy’s poetry today then makes sense considering the growing interest in new genres of digital poetry: what Loy identifies as sites of modernism resonates with instapoetic deliberate uses of language and multimedia to convince and friend the reader. Studying the interconnected Mina Loy in relation to female instapoets’ strategies to establish themselves on the platform highlights differences but offers insights on how Loy’s feminism takes shape in the poems and how it still impacts the readers today. As discussed in the introduction, the expansion of modernist studies reframed modernism as a movement that can be read across space and time in various ways: North suggests a melancholic cycle of modernist aesthetics whereas Nicholls is fascinated by modernist instantaneity. Those debates are all the more interesting in the wake of instapoetry where similar paradoxes seem to cohabit in the very fabric of the genre. Bozhkova’s analysis of Loy’s modernism relies on her participation to many artistic communities; the poet’s immediate artistic reaction to her contemporary context takes many changing forms, “creating a multiple temporality that often blurs the past, the present, and the future” (*BW* 276). This clever interpretation of Loy’s modernist insights bridge disputes concerning the temporal nature of modernism. By using Loy’s feminist practices to convey how her poetry is particularly sought after today, I expand this definition to illustrate that Loy conceives modernism as a form of otherness. What I mean, here, is that Loy’s modernism is strikingly part of what we would call “canonical modernism” and yet

always pointing at the designation's *quid pro quo*, which is reminiscent of the current problems within modernist studies, where scholars are trying to go beyond restrictive definitions of the term without fully managing to get rid of the initial framework of modernist studies. By identifying as a feminist modernist, Loy shows the interrelation between the two terms and their ability to produce a synthesis of the anxieties tied to modernity on a personal and interpersonal level, and the cultural impact of modernity to this day.

Conclusion

This study of Loy's work sought to examine the poet's own take on feminine or feminist poetics in order to get a better grasp of how and why she was recaptured by the academy as a seminal feminist figure that attracts more and more scholars. Although I draw attention to Loy's lack of investment in the burgeoning of the feminist movement and its progress through history, I have argued that her oeuvre deploys modernist aesthetics that are engaging with perspectives on the place of women. If chapter 1 proved that Loy's "Feminist Manifesto" is less in conversation with British first wave feminism than with the construction of a new figure of the artist, the rest of the dissertation calls attention to Loy's interest in feminine poetics and in challenging the status of both men and women. By doing so, Loy cements her place as a woman modernist while demonstrating that womanhood encompasses an array of different topics. Loy's capacious feminist modernism touches upon the whole spectrum of experiences that constructs modernity and synthesizes the problems that arise from modernist female authorship. This capaciousness entails that the poet leaves space in her writing to accommodate the voice of others, whether it is a committed choice or not. The dialogic nature of her writings translates well today as modernist studies struggle to redefine the relationship between modernism, its temporality and its scale. Recently, studies on Loy have shown that her work is a prime example of modernism resisting periodization: she participated in various avant-garde groups, never in the same country, thus creating a relation with modern art that is neither linear nor unchanging. Rather, the poet has been presented as a

theorist of modernism due to her fluctuating positions of avant-garde factions and the retrospective modifications of her own papers.

My dissertation understands this perpetual movement in and out of artistic bubbles as the very definition of Loy's modernism. Although dubbed "critical" by Scuriatti, Loy's modernism is perhaps not so much defined by its analytical distance than by a persistent state of becoming. Here, I borrow a definition of modernism from French theorist Henri Meschonnic, who elusively defines *la modernité* as a nascent state, a quest for meaning.¹⁰⁰ Such a view of the literary movement echoes Stanford Friedman's own planetary definition in its lack of bounds to specific spatio-temporal markers. Loy is a useful figure today in that sense because she accommodates a broader delineation of modernist studies while still fitting in a fairly canonical view of the movement – a comfortable in-between. The term "critical" suggests that Loy was always looking back on modernism and, to some extent, she was. However, the feminist streak at the heart of Loy's modernist endeavours invites us to see her ambivalent takes on the avant-gardes as her participation in the unfinished nature of modernism. Alexandra Juhasz notices the "perpetual 're' for things feminist" (3) which she links to the fact that "feminists exist and are forgotten, make their work and see it disappear, are rediscovered, erased, and re-represented again" (2). That is certainly reminiscent of the way Loy's works became available and important in the scholarly realm, but it is also central to how Loy's modernism has been perceived for the last few years with her coming back to her past writings to modify and add on

¹⁰⁰ See Meschonnic, *Modernité Modernité*, Paris, Gallimard, 1988.

"La modernité est une quête de sens." (47) // "Modernity is a quest for meaning." My translation.
 "La modernité est un état naissant, indéfiniment naissant, du sujet, de son histoire, de son sens." (9) //
 "Modernity is a nascent state, indefinitely nascent, of the subject, its history, its meaning." My translation.

them. Her relation with modernism then appears to be intricately linked to what is now perceived as feminist methodologies.

As the 1980s mark the beginning of a sudden scholarly fondness for Loy in the Anglo-American setting, it is interesting to notice that her works are much less explored in other countries she has visited, starting with France. Yet, her time in Paris was not brief: she first enrolled in Art school in 1903 but came back in 1921 and 1923, leaving back for the United-States only in 1931. She stayed there as the left bank of the Seine became the site of an artistic rebirth. In a sense, thanks to Loy's travels, she was always a witness of major cultural changes. Yet, in France, Loy's studies had a slower and much later start than in English speaking countries: Laure De Nervaux-Gavoty's article on urban landscapes in Loy's poetry has been a fairly isolated example of the French taste for Loy before Bozhkova started to get involved with the poet's work in 2013. The 2020s, however, seem to set the field of Loy studies going in France with more conferences and dissertations being issued from La Sorbonne University. French academic work on Loy is located in English departments. Therefore, it abides to an Anglo-American understanding of modernism and modernity and is in direct dialogue with the world-wide academic sphere of Loy's studies. Her poems not having much visibility in France in the first place is certainly the reason for such a sparse scholarly interest in the poet. Loy is then a good example of the organization of modernist studies in France: at the undergraduate and graduate levels, syllabi still privilege male authors and a rather canonical view of high modernism with Pound and Eliot as figureheads of the movement. Less known and prolific authors like Loy, specifically women ones, are rather studied through the lens of gender studies because there is so little time and space to explore them in a broad

course on modernism. The university landscape seems to naturally push a feminist narrative on those smaller poets.

As for the general public's access to Loy's poem, Olivier Apert is her official translator in France and has published two books that received strong recognition from the audience: a collection of poetry entitled *Il n'est ni vie ni mort* (2017) and a collection of essays, *Manifeste féministe & écrits modernistes* (2014). Yet, his interest in Loy started in the early 2000s, when he published *Le Baedeker Lunaire: Poèmes I* (2000) and *Insel ou portrait de l'artiste en tête de mort* (2001). Those first two books did not, however, benefit from the same publicity as the last two. The latter appeared at the same time as a novel-like biography of the author, written by Mathieu Terence in 2017. Despite its details, Terence's book is full of typos and assumptions that do not find validation in archival materials.¹⁰¹ Nevertheless, Apert and Terence's books are significant starting points when it comes to the slow apparition of Mina Loy in France. Both men – and it is worth-noticing that, once again, the voices framing Loy's work are male – have discovered the poet through their interest in Arthur Cravan and Loy's unpublished prose text, "Colossus." Cravan's life, and more specifically his disappearance in 1918, reads as a one-of-a-kind story; Parmar describes it as a "posthumous myth."¹⁰² It is that very same passion for the legendary that animates French publications on Loy's life and work. Like Conover, Apert's preface to Loy's writings is wrapped around her supposed iconic life. The translated "Feminist Manifesto" opens on the same anecdote of the *New York Evening Sun* electing Loy as the canonical "modern woman" (7) that Conover uses in *The Lost*

¹⁰¹ Here, I mainly refer to the assumption that Loy and Djuna Barnes were in a committed lesbian relationship (193) and the mistranscription of "Anglo-Mongrels and the Rose" in "The Angelo-Mangrels and the Rose" (192).

¹⁰² See Parmar, "Mina Loy's 'Colossus' and the Myth of Arthur Cravan," *Jacket* 34, 2007. <http://jacketmagazine.com/34/parmar-loy.shtml>. Accessed July 31st 2023.

Lunar Baedeker (xvi). For Terence, Loy's legend is embodied: the author focuses the narrative on details of her physical appearance and sartorial gravitas. In the book, Loy's life ends with that very attention to fashion as Terence writes "[t]hat day, she was wearing heels that she gilded herself" (23).¹⁰³ Thus, Loy is constructed as a whimsical heroine in France, a fact that Liliane Giraudon deplors in her postface to the manifesto, where she implies that there is more to the poet than her glorified life.¹⁰⁴ To focus on the title of the collections, obviously her "Feminist Manifesto" is what seems central to the translator, but it is also her futurist allegiance as he names his translated collection of poetry after the poem "There is no Life or Death." Its futurist inspiration is evident in the entrenched syntax unfolding bold statements. Here again, Loy's association with futurism serves the legendary portrayal of the poet the translator seems to construct.

Interestingly, main women figures of the long twentieth century have been translated earlier in French: many editions of Emily Dickinson, Gertrude Stein, H.D., Marianne Moore, or even Elizabeth Bishop have been available long before Apert started working on Loy. Translations of Djuna Barnes's works are also fairly recent but much more accessible than that of Loy's. Moreover, Barnes has also been very consistently included in anthologies of poetry. What is it about Loy's writings that appeals to the current literary moment in France? David Bertrand submits the

¹⁰³ See Terence, *Mina Loy, éperdument*, Paris: Grasset, 2017: "Elle meurt très calme, à quatre-vingt-quatre ans, d'accord avec le moment. Ce jour-là, elle porte des escarpins qu'elle a dorés elle-même" (23).

¹⁰⁴ "Ni Agathe aux seins tranchés, ni Marguerite sortant du ventre du dragon, sans doute va-t-il falloir débarrasser Mina Loy de sa légende, de tout l'aspect glamour qui dore son existence, sa magnifique beauté . . . son légendaire amour pour Cravan . . . sa traversée 'cinématographique' d'un siècle somme toute assez sanglant..." (66). // "Neither breastless Agatha, nor Margaret escaping the dragon's insides, Loy should be divested of her legend, of the glamorous aspect that gilds her existence; her stunning beauty . . . her legendary love for Cravan . . . her cinematic crossing of a rather harsh century" (my translation).

hypothesis that a fourth wave of feminism started taking shape from 2010s onward with the quick growth of social media, and the democratization of online militancy notably through the resurgence of accusations against Harvey Weinstein. The #MeToo movement, despite being online, has also affected the publishing landscape of codex books. Without implying that there is clear line of descent between those events and the publication of Loy's works in French, the way the movement was constructed in France perhaps sheds light on how Loy's language might have intrigued French readers at that specific moment. #MeToo was translated in French by "rat out your pig," a phrase that avoids any compromise in its sharpness, and thus mirrors Loy's very tone in the "Feminist Manifesto." That being said, Apert's translation of the manifesto sounds less subversive than Loy's original. In the first sentence, for instance, Loy deems the feminist movement "Inadequate" (*LoLB* 153), which Apert translates as "Imperfect" (13).¹⁰⁵ Where Loy does not give any redeeming qualities to feminism, Apert's approach is a bit more nuanced since the movement is seen as impaired or unfinished but not entirely sub-par.

The last chapter of my dissertation focuses on communities and on the impression of "friending" that stems from instapoetic discourses. This context of female bonding through social media seems just as influential in the late recuperation of Loy as a feminist figure in France: the public intimacy of platform poetry is a sought-after quality that the poet embodies. Diglee's *Je Serai le Feu* develops that aesthetic of friending on paper since the book's preface presents a personal anthology of women poets, which aims at reminding the reader of forgotten artists.¹⁰⁶ Intimacy

¹⁰⁵ See Apert, *Manifeste féministe & écrits modernistes*, Caen: Nous, 2017. "Le mouvement féministe tel qu'il est constitué à présent est Imparfait" (13).

¹⁰⁶ Diglee, or Maureen Wingrove, is a French feminist illustrator and writer. She is interested in the expression of intimacy, women's bodies and women's sexuality. Diglee created numerous graphic novels, all concerned with feminine experiences. In *Je Serai le Feu*, started in 2017, she shares the

is emphasized by the beautiful physical appearance of the book that focuses on the “erotics of art” (Sontag 14). The poets are gathered in loose categories, such as “predators,” “eccentric ones,” or “verbal alchemists.” Those subdivisions refer as much to the poems as to the poets themselves. Apert’s translation of Loy is part of the “rebellious ones.” Yet, the four poems chosen to represent the work of the author are not among her most typographically inventive: there are two poems from “Songs to Joannes” (XXI and XXIV), “Moreover, the Moon — — —,” and “I Almost Saw God in the Metro.” Those poems are on the shorter side of Loy’s writing spectrum and either discuss sexuality and reproduction or the moon. This choice speaks to a very specific type of reader: usually young women who pursued literary studies and share a common set of marked interests in progressive politics, social justice, the liberation of the body and mysticism, among others. The restructuration of publishing houses in France, in the last decade, enables Loy’s poems to be published and marketed to this specific type of readers. The very titles of Loy’s collections, variations on the *Lunar Baedeker* echo the current fascination for the moon. However, I claim that Loy’s treatment of the moon is thoroughly different from its traditional association with female sexuality. Instead of reusing dated images as they are, Loy energizes them. Rachel Blau DuPlessis mentions, for instance, that

[i]n the poem “Lunar Baedeker” (written before 1921), the moon – patron of women, poetry, the night, and sexuality – is examined, anatomized, and found to be a modernist cabaret stage upon which many genders in several

work of the women poets she discovered as an adult, blaming school for only teaching her poems written by men. This collection, that she insists is not an anthology of women poetry but rather a summary of how she rediscovered forgotten women authors. (9) Her “anthology,” has been published by *la ville brûle* editions, which is an independent publisher focusing on scientific essays or human and social sciences that has recently opened its publications to other fields. Despite this change, the editorial line remains the same and *la ville brûle* still favours books that are informative and focused on the positive impact of diversity.

combinations play out many sensual dramas that realign the foundational materials beauty–love–sex–poetry–Woman. (*GRRC* 41).

Far from the almost ecofeminist stance that is too often associated with the moon nowadays, Loy, in “Lunar Baedeker” avoids the trope of the liberated female body in nature by describing the moon as follows:

the eye-white sky-light
 white-light district
 of lunar lusts. (*LoLB* 81)

The reference to “light” and the movement from “sky” to “district” place the moon, almost assimilated to a streetlamp, within the context of the urban world. The mention of “lunar lusts” is more in touch with the idea of women’s sexuality but this vague reference to stilted *topos* is later judged “obsolete” (82). The poem, overall, does not fit in the poetry trend that writes the empowering effect of reconnecting with the body. Read superficially, however, Loy’s oeuvre seemingly follows the same themes, mentioned earlier, as contemporary non-activist feminist poetry.

At the same time as Loy’s poetry becomes more susceptible to enticing a younger audience in France, Giraudon enunciates the relevance of the poems today. She describes Loy’s writings as being “‘of the moment’ since the simple act of writing seems so close to that of translating according to the angle of incidence of one’s own life. Woven at the time she experiences, they shape episodes, instants of life often inseparable from a timetable, a way of being” (66).¹⁰⁷ Giraudon’s

¹⁰⁷ See *Manifeste féministe & autres écrits*, “Textes qui comme la plupart de ses écrits (vers ou proses) pourraient être catalogués ‘de circonstance’ tant le simple acte d’écrire semble ici proche de celui de traduire selon l’angle d’incidence de sa propre existence. Cousus à l’époque qu’elle traverse, ils forment des épisodes, des instants de vie souvent inséparables d’un emploi de temps, d’un mode d’être” (my in-text translation).

comparison of Loy's writing as "translating" the present moment operates, without perhaps meaning to, a critique of Apert's own translations. The translator's stance on the poems sometimes evades the flow of the original poems and ends up smoothing out the disrupting femininity that the poet constructs.

Apert's translation of Loy's poems is particularly disappointing in its handling of typography. If the translation in French necessarily affects the poems, what is particularly surprising is the absence of multiple dashes in the title of "Moreover, the Moon" as well as in Poem XXI. In "On Linguistic Aspects of Translation," Roman Jakobson reminds us that "translation from one language into another substitutes messages in one language not for separated code-units but for entire messages in some other language. Such a translation is reported speech; the translator recodes and transmits a message received in another source" (233). The absence of dashes in the poems seems to indicate that the editor and translator did not consider the poet's use of dashes was a necessary part of the poem that deserved to be mentioned in reported speech, thus failing to create "two equivalent messages in two different codes" (233). The dashes are transformed into a blank line, separating the poem in two stanzas, unlike the way Alfred Kreymborg edited it.¹⁰⁸ Similarly, the absence of dashes in the translation of "Moreover, the Moon — — —" is surprising. Januzzi mentions: "I have noticed that while she occasionally punctuated titles in holograph (for example, 'Virgins Plus Curtains— Minus Dots. '), she never to my knowledge punctuated a title in a typed manuscript" (109). Yet according to the version of the poem available at the Beinecke, Loy did specifically punctuate "Moreover, the Moon — — —" in typed

¹⁰⁸ A version of "Songs to Joannes," published during Loy's life is available in the magazine *Others* vol. 3, no. 6, April 1917, pp. 3-20, digitally readable on the Modernist Journals Project's website. <https://modjourn.org/issue/bdr523494>. Accessed 27 July 2023.

manuscript. In that sense, I believe that forgetting the dashes in that title goes against both the author's "final intentions" and the grain of the text.

Beyond typography, Apert's handling of Loy's "unfinished" aesthetic is unsatisfactory. Here I take the example of Poem VII from "Songs to Joannes:"

My pair of feet
 Smack the flag-stones
 That are something left over from your walking
 The wind stuffs the scum of the white street
 Into my lungs and my nostrils
 Exhilarated birds
 Prolonging flight into the night
 Never reaching— — — — —. (*LoLB* 55-6)

In Apert's translation, the first three lines are completely missing. The poem reads:

De l'écume de la rue blanche
 Le vent empaille mes poumons et mes narines
 Oiseaux ragaillardis
 Qui prolongent le vol au sein de la nuit
 Et n'arrivent jamais — — —. (40)

It is unclear why the translator deemed it acceptable to ignore the first three lines, focusing on speaker and addressee, and cut the line of em dashes short. I argue that leaving out the lines that establish a relation between "you" and "I," the translator is attempting to reduce some of the love plot that is yet necessary to the poem. The last line of the poem, finally, is not as abrupt as Loy's. Instead of "[n]ever reaching," Apert's version reads as if the "[e]xhilarated birds" never come, which upsets Loy's fractured syntax. Apert's translation is not a feminist tool despite its will to be. The

poet is pushed toward a version of feminism that dodges traditional romantic poetry and love plot. There is, then, a double-movement in this translation, which makes the poems easier to read for a French audience but tries to force any traditional trope out of the text. Despite Giraudon's reading of the poems as personal translation of a present, Apert's work fosters a form of otherness that lacks the intimacy so visible in the original poems.

The French enthusiasm for Loy, years after her death and rediscovery in the English-speaking world shows that the poet's feminism keeps attracting different readers and scholars situated in various global locations. As the field of feminist studies changes and evolves, Loy's work remains topical because the poet's gender concerns seep into every part of both her writing process and her understanding of the world. In her will to establish herself as a woman modernist, the poet embedded in her writing discussions of the tensions and anxieties provoked by modernity. While being specific to the period, they still resonate in the current development of modernist and literary studies. Though the field of Mina Loy studies seems to be rapidly expanding with more and more access to her work, it remains fairly new in that there are still many documents to discover, as the exhibition, *Mina Loy: Strangeness is Inevitable*, shows. The chaotic archival filing of her works suggests that it is not impossible to discover more not-yet-unearthed manuscripts of the poet as more attention is given to her many artistic connections, notably with less known women writers.

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Abbreviations:

YCAL: Yale Collection of American Literature, Beinecke Rare Book and Manuscript Library. MSS 6: Mina Loy Papers.

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