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## The Creature Questions its Reflection: Lyrical Feminist Explorations of Reference Desk Interactions

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THE CREATURE QUESTIONS ITS REFLECTION:  
LYRICAL FEMINIST EXPLORATIONS OF  
REFERENCE DESK INTERACTIONS

*Corinne Gilroy & Alexandrina Hanam*

The *lyric scholarship* of Canadian poet-scholars such as Jan Zwicky, Anne Carson, and Kathleen McConnell provides space for literary, analytic, and artistic critique of library reference practice and interactions. Lyric scholarship is a poetic and methodological tool that is used here to interrogate the dependence-driven customer service model imbedded in women-dominated service professions, while gesturing toward alternatives that cultivate inter-dependence, independence, and equity. Significant portions of this piece are structured to evoke Zwicky's *Wisdom & Metaphor*, in which the author's own verses live on the left, mirroring and responding to quotes from other writers and thinkers on the right. The performative, call-and-response potential of lyric scholarship is used here to create dialogue across the centre margin of the page (a reflection of the reference desk itself), challenging conventional practices of library reference and instruction.

## INTRODUCTION

### I.

He comes up to the desk and rings the bell.

( First warning: I forgot to hide the bell.)

I skip from my chair because it's been  
a quiet night of pointing to the toilets  
and wrong numbers.

He and his white ball cap (indoors! my mother'd die )  
just have a little question,  
a little tiny one about where to place a period  
in a little tiny APA citation.

( No matter how many you have,  
you probably need one more.  
Take it from me. )

That settled, keys clacked, he beams at his screen, his words, his lines,  
the last one,  
his last semester.

“Hey, is your name really *Library*?”

Grinning eyes on my chest—but not like that, right?

( No, I forgot my regular nametag.  
No, this is not the kind of question I'm here to answer.  
No, you don't get to do this. )

I laugh a little laugh  
a little tiny one that scoffs.  
a little tiny bull exhaling.  
The pages in the stacks hardly shiver.

( No matter how many times,  
it will always happen again.  
Take it from me. )

And still I don't say *No* because that's a two-letter neon sign  
a two-letter four-letter word blinking in red  
at the top of a hill I refuse to die on

( But sure, okay, a little chip of me underfoot  
To keep him here, at least  
Open, at least  
To the chance he'll have bell hooks fall on his head  
Or stub his toe on Irigaray's spine  
Even if it's his last one. )

II.

What on earth is this, right?

Lyric scholarship  
(or at least two bookish fans'  
attempt to scrape open a  
muddy tributary with our  
hands and plastic shovels)

*lyric is lithe*<sup>1</sup>  
says Jan Zwicky, poet-  
philosopher  
*It is poignant, and musical. It moves  
by association of images*<sup>2</sup>

*it evidences a slight tang of satire on  
the genre of academic writing,*<sup>3</sup>  
quoth poet-scholar  
Kathleen McConnell by day,  
Kathy Mac by night.

For Clare Goulet,  
lyric teacher-champion, it is about  
*keeping something alive and  
whole in its context.*<sup>4</sup>

And maybe it's about *resisting,*<sup>5</sup> too,  
warns Tina Northrup, her scholar's  
sword plunged into the soil

but as Anne Carson's lyric  
wisdom knows, it can be  
*confusing and embarrassing to have  
two mouths.*<sup>6</sup>

So here we are, deep in both  
the lyric and the library.

and the feminist reference desk  
(or at least two poet-library  
workers' attempt to build up a  
seawall with our small hands  
and smaller stones)

and so is the library, lithe  
as it learns to see  
itself in the mirror,  
traces this third space sparking  
at the edges

we have to laugh a little, don't we,  
at the heavy oak chest of what we've  
been and become  
what we think we are, by day  
what we want to be, by night

for the one sitting under that curious  
sign marked Reference, it is about  
keeping the question alive,  
the bright interrogation

and yes, it's about resisting, too,  
the pink collar that appears at a  
distance, tighter on approach

never quite teacher, clerk, mother,  
father, mentor  
so maybe this is just a little unclear,  
*uncanny*<sup>7</sup>

and here we are, deep in both  
the lyric and the library.

III.

We're a bit like frogs in pots, sometimes.  
Heat creeping quick, quicker  
toward boiled-dry space that belies  
our green skin and blisters.

Then the scalding pot drops to the floor,  
burnt creatures spilled on the stonework,  
poison.

(Did we spill it, or were we spilled?)

*Golden arches*<sup>8</sup> at the next exit,  
their impossible promise shimmering:

Shilling the consuming body, the food chain apex  
*mere commodities*<sup>9</sup> to be gluttoned, acquired, exchanged.

Where the highest value is placed on being  
efficient and productive: this is also  
how our interactions with students and researchers  
mutate into *transactions* with *customers*.

How we name is how we value.

Our nurturing, our cultivation and civic space  
That gentle coaxing toward self-efficacy.  
All of this gets  
Boiled down into dollar signs  
(glittering green snakes on skewers):  
all objects are potentially objects of exploitation.<sup>10</sup>

Here, we push back, step back, look.  
Our faces reflected in pans and spoons.

sharp edges  
rough margins  
*empty* space

—for what isn't named but still churns around in here,  
before coming to rest or to boil.

## THE CREATURE AT THE DESK

### I.

The doubling and interchangeability of the role and social status of the library worker engenders a creature in whom sex may be cancelled out by the sound of responding to an inquiry and the sound of responding to an inquiry may be cancelled out by sex.

*The doubling and interchangeability of mouth engenders a creature in whom sex is cancelled out by sound and sound is cancelled out by sex.<sup>11</sup>*

This seems a perfect answer to all the questions raised about whether this creature at the desk is necessary at all, whether her service and support are just as well performed by a machine, and whether she is herself a machine of some kind.

*This seems a perfect answer to all the questions raised and dangers posed by the confusing and embarrassing continuity of female nature.<sup>12</sup>*

And what of the dangers posed by the confusing and embarrassing continuity of the reference desk, the creep of *customer* ahead of *patron*? Can the modern patron harm her? Can she harm the modern patron?

It wasn't until yesterday afternoon around 4:30 that the library reference desk worker's subjectivity was explored sufficiently for her to gain a name for herself, and by then it was only to ask her if perhaps she would consider re-writing the rest of this paper over her lunch break; accept a salary commensurate with the softness of her skills; take on a flexible part-time schedule and an intern.

*it wasn't until the Renaissance that the statue's subjectivity was explored sufficiently for her to gain a name for herself<sup>13</sup>*

II.

Putting a door on the mouth of women's work has been an important project of patriarchal culture from antiquity to the present day. Its chief tactic is an ideological association of female sound with monstrosity, disorder and death.

*Putting a door on the female mouth has been an important project of patriarchal culture from antiquity to the present day. Its chief tactic is an ideological association of female sound with monstrosity, disorder and death.*<sup>14</sup>

Our apologies to Anne Carson for how little that quotation needs to be modified in order to reflect the helping professions and pink-collar work. We ask that the reader take a moment to appreciate the footnoted citation. And then another to consider again *monstrosity, disorder and death*.

Housekeeper plunges bare knuckles into a drain bloated grey with sloughed skin, hair and scum. / Mary Shelley confesses who we really are; takes the human body apart, stitches it back together. / Nurse grapples a platter of fluids the color of bricks; takes blood; folds down eyelids and pulls up bed sheets for the last time. / Sex worker grapples florid living sweating bodies, pays in empathy, gets only the margins in return.

The library is an escape into whiter collars, but there are tell-tale marks on our monstrous necks: soothe, redeem, sluice, polish, clear; carve out chunks of flesh for the public, for the love of it, for little.

III.

Is it conceivable that the exercise  
of hegemony, the slow creep of  
one body toward another, might  
leave the library's wilder spaces  
untouched?

*Is it conceivable that the exercise  
of hegemony might leave space  
untouched?*

[...]

*Could space be nothing more  
than the passive locus of social  
relations, the milieu in which their  
combination takes on a body...?<sup>15</sup>*

Even the margins have margins.  
The library within the institution.

The reference desk within the  
library. The question that answers  
a question.

Gesture past how things are,  
toward struggles kept out of sight.

Scratch the membrane of the  
status quo & a fractal polyp splits  
and blooms  
in the dark.

Though the space we take and  
make wild may only be the  
rough edge of a manicured field,  
it is ours.

There are loose threads on the  
veil of capitalism. Roots running  
past the property line. Shadows  
under the glare. This is the spot  
to sow something suggesting  
equity, ethics.

*The answer must be no.<sup>16</sup>*

Until you claw it back.



## THE MIRROR AT THE DESK

### I.

Uninterrupted digging.  
Uninterrupted interruptions.

Shovel, pick, magnifying glass;  
field notes on their utility and danger.

*Deconstruction... maintains a  
constant questioning.<sup>18</sup>*

*The acceptance of the primacy  
of rational self-interest in  
human affairs constitutes an  
institutionalization of the priority of  
certain kinds of motives over others.*

*These motives are, in their essence,  
exploitative.<sup>19</sup>*

It's only through a fluke,  
a red stain on a glassy stone,  
that you realize the thing  
you have been cleaving,  
sampling, uprooting

is your own displaced self,  
and another breathing  
body besides.

This can't be just a laboratory.  
Hands need to be dirty, linked,  
washed, felt. Always  
*focusing on the subordinate.<sup>17</sup>*  
And undoing, releasing.

*Traluire* – to become translucent  
The mirror-glass stone lets go.  
(Was there ever one?)

II.

The library has come to reflect a contemporary movement in which professionals and staff are resisting what seem to them to be prescriptive and unethical programs for scholarly, civic, and leisurely pursuit.

*the term lyric has come to signify a contemporary movement in which poets and scholars are resisting what seem to them to be prescriptive and unethical programs for academic pursuit<sup>20</sup>*

The library has come to  
smash the screen  
smoke out the canon  
pull round nails from  
square corners  
flense this assessment,  
bleach its bones

The library has come to  
rip open the box and fold it neatly  
ignore the time and keep counting  
on interaction, energy,  
presence,  
the person here and here now  
with folded hands or  
white knuckles  
dark questions or circles  
here and here now

The library has come to  
this:

III.

The tenured radicals of the library  
are those librarians who, along with  
other library staff, have conducted  
a devastating assault on the  
patriarchal  
surveillance  
state  
and  
state  
censorship-  
by-  
proxy,  
deliberately and politically striving  
toward the egalitarian promise of  
the humanities via  
feminism,  
ethnic studies,  
and  
multiculturalism;  
and it is they who have begun to  
critically interrogate the contours of  
free speech in light of  
pluralism,  
respect,  
safety,  
and  
empathy  
—for the sake of traversing the  
pejorative of *political correctness*.

*The tenured radicals of Kimball's  
book and letter [about Anne  
Carson] are those scholars "who have  
conducted a devastating assault on  
the liberal arts curriculum across the  
country, deliberately degrading and  
politicizing the humanities in the  
name of feminism, ethnic studies and  
multiculturalism; and it is they who  
have begun to campaign against free  
speech and pluralism for the sake of  
enforcing a narrow vision of political  
correctness"*<sup>21</sup>

## THE REFLECTION IN THE MIRROR

### I.

*Then the third wave hove up from  
desire / for those same rights as  
women: recognition. / Equality  
doesn't mean homogeneity.<sup>22</sup>*

recognition  
as women, non-binary transfolk,  
men; professionals and patrons;  
scholars and hobbyists; Black,  
of Color, White; queer and  
het; refugee, immigrant, long-  
settled, indigenous; neurotypical  
and *a*; disabled and non; poor  
and wealthy; privileged and  
marginalized;

recognition  
as particular coordinates that have  
to be sought, as constellations,  
gravity wells and moving,  
turbulent space.

we want to be recognized, to  
recognize you—ships in a safe  
harbour, departing, arriving,  
drifting, moored;

as much of you as you want us to  
see, as many facets, colors, and  
angles as you are ready to reveal  
with your question, your query,  
your search, your curiosity;

quietly, if that's you, or at  
full volume against the noise,  
approaching or inviting approach;

I won't ask why you want to know,  
but I will invite you to ask this  
of yourself.

Compromise:  
promising together.

II.

*Brevity has been urged as the defining feature of lyric expression (Poe). But it is an economy of movement, not merely a stinginess with words, that is close to its heart: lyric is lithe.*<sup>23</sup>

*Brevity*: let's make it pejorative,  
hem it in, tax the lint in its  
empty pockets,  
(for just a moment; for science).

And *stinginess*. It was born  
petty; that helps. Small, precarious  
spaces with stale air. Floor plan for a  
saltine cracker wingspan.

Apply to *pink collar*, tight and  
chafing. Exact and static.  
Adjust in the mirror.  
Pull, fruitlessly.

Dependable, yet hysterical.  
That's us.  
Reliable, crucial, underpaid,  
expendable.  
(You should want to do it for  
the love of it, right? Salaries only  
sully things.)

*But it is an economy of  
movement*, a sharp, effective,  
glinting blade, when something like  
the library  
will bend but not snap,  
expand but not burst,  
reflect but not glare.  
The library is *lithe*  
when we want it to be.  
Space for the sweating collar to fray  
into threads and inquiries.

III.

Those in power at the reference desk, that is to say, librarians, also have responsibility to what Spivak calls “unlearning one’s privilege” or to become, as we may put it, able to listen to “that other constituency,” those who approach Our Reference Desk, and speak in ways that we will be taken seriously by one another and recognize that the very position we occupy can be historically powerful when we want those with whom we engage to actually be able to answer back.

*Those in power also have responsibility to what Spivak calls “unlearning one’s privilege” or to become “able to listen to that other constituency” and “speak in such a way that one will be taken seriously by that other constituency ... [and] recognize that the position of the speaking subject within theory can be an historically powerful position when it wants the other to actually be able to answer back”<sup>24</sup>*

The mouth of the library is the ear  
with which we listen and  
*answer back;*  
*reflect;*  
with which we listen to  
those who answer back.

*The mouth of lyric is an ear.<sup>25</sup>*

The library reference desk is rooted  
in an integrity of response and  
co-response; each dimension of  
service and inquiry attending to  
the others.

*Lyric is rooted in an integrity of  
response and co-response; each  
dimension attending to the others.*

The library is both mouth and ear,  
a speaking and a listening,  
an act of both observing  
and being observed.

## CONCLUSION

*But the lyric approach, as opposed to dissecting, taking apart for the purpose of examination, is about keeping something alive and whole in its context.*<sup>26</sup>

*It aims not just to convey an idea, but to embody it.*<sup>27</sup>

*Lyric is an attempt to comprehend the whole in a single gesture.*<sup>28</sup>

He comes up to the desk and says hello.

I skip from my chair because it's been  
a quiet night of directions to the toilets  
and wrong numbers.

He and his white ball cap

( *My lucky hat. My team is playing tonight.* )

just have a little question,  
a little tiny one about where to place a period  
in a little tiny APA citation.

( No matter how many you have,  
you probably need one more.

And then next year maybe you won't. )

That settled, keyboard clacked, he beams at his screen, his words, his lines,  
the last one,

his last semester. ( *A small moment for small joys, just then.* )

*Hey, can I ask your name?* ( *Grinning, he shares his.* )

(Well, it's not *Library*, in case you were curious.)

We laugh at the brass nameplate on my collar: *Library*.

little tiny laughs that alight.

little tired too-late exhalations.

The pages in the stacks yawn along.

( No matter how many times,  
it will always happen again:  
the late nights, the last minute.

Work with it; not against it. )

*Open* is a warm neon sign at the top of a hill I'll be on for two more hours yet.

Spreading bits of glass doors I've seen & broken through  
for traction

( To keep him open if not here  
Even if this is his last climb. )

ADDENDUM: A RESPONSE TO #UBCAccountable  
AND #CANLITAccountable

Last November, they threw rocks  
at the neon sign on top of the hill.  
Warm light went all cold flickery  
and we haven't come down since.

*(It has been a long hill, heart. / But  
now the view is good.<sup>34</sup>)*

It wasn't students with stones in  
hand, not young seekers testing  
their strength. But their teachers,  
mentors: Canadian Literati  
in defence of *process*<sup>29</sup> but also  
their power.

*(ignorance, old evil, is enforced /  
and willed, and loved... / used to  
manufacture madness, / ...it is the  
aphrodisiac / of power<sup>35</sup>)*

Winds changed and the *cloud  
of suspicion*<sup>30</sup>, the neon gas, the  
dust they kicked up to denounce,  
changed course. Some coughed,  
sputtered, hunkered down in the  
space they claimed. Others fled,  
object, remorseful.

*(what will you do, / now that you /  
sense the path unraveling / beneath  
you<sup>36</sup>)*

But Zwicky, our *lithe*<sup>31</sup> lyric poet-  
scholar, put her voice in a valise,  
left her name on the stones, left  
the scene? We can't say, and that  
says what it says.

*(What will you do, / you, heart, who  
know the gods don't flee<sup>37</sup>)*

Lyric is *poets and scholars...  
resisting... prescriptive and  
unethical programs for academic  
pursuit*,<sup>32</sup> and that's not what this  
is, what it says.

*(the one sin is refusal, and refusal to  
keep seeking / when refused<sup>38</sup>)*

*The mouth of lyric is an ear*<sup>33</sup>: and  
maybe an eye, and we want to,  
need to know if the students—  
the women—whose courageous  
backs bear the weight of this fight  
have yours?

*(You must look.<sup>39</sup>)*



Notes

- 1 Jan Zwicky, *Lyric Philosophy*. 2<sup>nd</sup> ed. (Kentville: Gaspereau, 2012), L73.
- 2 Ibid.
- 3 Kathleen McConnell, *Pain, Porn, Complicity* (Hamilton, ON: Wolsak and Wynn Pub., 2012), 15-16.
- 4 Clare Goulet, qtd.in Anita Lahey, "Academic Papers get Poetic," *University Affairs*, last modified December 5, 2011.
- 5 Tina Northrup, "Lyric Scholarship in Controversy: Jan Zwicky and Anne Carson," *Studies in Canadian Literature / Études en littérature canadienne* 37, no. 1 (2012).
- 6 Anne Carson, "Gender of Sound," in *Glass, Irony & God*. (New York: New Directions Books, 1995), 119-137.
- 7 McConnell, *Pain, Porn, Complicity*, 106-107.
- 8 Brian Quinn, "The McDonaldization of Academic Libraries?" *College & Research Libraries* 61, no. 3 (2000): 248-61.
- 9 John E. Holberg, "Relational Reference: A Challenge to the Reference Fortress," in *An Introduction to Reference Services in Academic Libraries*, ed. Sarah Connor, (New York: Haworth Information Press, 2006), 45.
- 10 Zwicky, *Lyric Philosophy*, L52.
- 11 Carson, "Gender of Sound," 136.
- 12 Ibid.
- 13 McConnell, *Pain, Porn, Complicity*, 20.
- 14 Carson, "Gender of Sound," 121.
- 15 Henri Lefebvre, *The Production of Space*, trans. Donald Nicholson-Smith (Oxford: Blackwell, 1991), 11.
- 16 Ibid.
- 17 Hope A. Olson and Melodie J. Fox, "Gayatri Chakravorty Spivak: Deconstructionist, Marxist, Feminist, Postcolonialist,," in *Critical Theory for Library and Information Science: Exploring the Social from Across the Disciplines*, ed. Gloria J. Leckie, Lisa M. Given, and John E. Buschman (Santa Barbara, Calif.: Libraries Unlimited, 2010), 297.
- 18 Ibid.
- 19 Zwicky, *Lyric Philosophy*, L51.
- 20 Northrup, "Lyric Scholarship in Controversy."
- 21 Northrup, "Lyric Scholarship in Controversy."
- 22 McConnell, *Pain, Porn, Complicity*, 79.
- 23 Zwicky, *Lyric Philosophy*, L73.
- 24 Gayatri Chakravorty Spivak, "Bonding in Difference: Interview with Alfred Arteaga," in *The Spivak Reader: Selected Works of Gayatri Chakravorty Spivak*, ed. Donna Landry and Gerald McLean (New York: Routledge, 1996), 27.
- 25 Zwicky, *Lyric Philosophy*, L181.
- 26 Clare Goulet, qtd.in Anita Lahey, "Academic Papers get Poetic."

27 Lahey, “Academic papers get poetic.”

28 Zwicky, *Lyric Philosophy*, L73.

29 An Open Letter To UBC: Steven Galloway’s Right To Due Process. 14 Nov 2016.

30 Ibid.

31 Zwicky, *Lyric Philosophy*, L73.

32 Northrup, “Lyric Scholarship in Controversy.”

33 Zwicky, *Lyric Philosophy*, L181.

34 Jan Zwicky. “Courage.” *The Long Walk*. (Regina, Sask: University of Regina Press, 2016)  
Pg 6-7, lines 20-21.

35 Ibid., lines 3-5.

36 Ibid., lines 10-12.

37 Ibid., lines 16-17.

38 Ibid., lines 23-24.

39 Ibid., line 26.

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