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

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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\(^1\)
says Jan Zwicky, poet-
philosopher
It is poignant, and musical. It moves
by association of images\(^2\)

it evidences a slight tang of satire on
the genre of academic writing,\(^3\)
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.\(^4\)

And maybe it’s about resisting,\(^5\) 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.\(^6\)

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\(^7\)

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 at the next exit,
their impossible promise shimmering:

Shilling the consuming body, the food chain apex
mere commodities to be glutted, 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.

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.

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.

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.

The doubling and interchangeability of mouth engenders a creature in whom sex is cancelled out by sound and sound is cancelled out by sex.11

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

It wasn’t until the Renaissance that the statue’s subjectivity was explored sufficiently for her to gain a name for herself.13
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.14

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 untouchable?

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.

Until you claw it back.

Is it conceivable that the exercise of hegemony might leave space untouchable? [...]

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

The answer must be no.16
The Mirror At the Desk

I.

Uninterrupted digging.
Uninterrupted interruptions.

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

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.17
And undoing, releasing.

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

Deconstruction... maintains a constant questioning.18

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.19
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 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:

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"
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.”21
The Reflection in the Mirror

I.

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.

Then the third wave hove up from desire / for those same rights as women: recognition. / Equality doesn’t mean homogeneity.22
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.23

*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.

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

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

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.”

The mouth of lyric is an ear.

Lyric is rooted in an integrity of response and co-response; each dimension attending to the others.
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. It aims not just to convey an idea, but to embody it. Lyric is an attempt to comprehend the whole in a single gesture.

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, 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 wasn’t students with stones in hand, not young seekers testing their strength. But their teachers, mentors: Canadian Literati in defence of proces but also their power.

Winds changed and the cloud of suspicion, the neon gas, the dust they kicked up to denounce, changed course. Some coughed, sputtered, hunkered down in the space they claimed. Others fled, abject, remorseful.

But Zwicky, our lithe 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.

Lyric is poets and scholars… resisting… prescriptive and unethical programs for academic pursuit, and that’s not what this is, what it says.

The mouth of lyric is an ear: 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?

(It has been a long hill, heart. / But now the view is good.)

(ignorance, old evil, is enforced / and willed, and loved… / used to manufacture madness, / …it is the aphrodisiac / of power)

(what will you do, / now that you / sense the path unraveling / beneath you?)

(What will you do, / you, heart, who know the gods don’t flee)

(the one sin is refusal, and refusal to keep seeking / when refused)

(You must look.)
Notes

1 Jan Zwicky, *Lyric Philosophy*. 2nd ed. (Kentville: Gaspereau, 2012), L73.
2 Ibid.
12 Ibid.
14 Carson, “Gender of Sound,” 121.
16 Ibid.
18 Ibid.
20 Northrup, “Lyric Scholarship in Controversy.”
21 Northrup, “Lyric Scholarship in Controversy.”
22 McConnell, *Pain, Porn, Complicity*, 79.
26 Clare Goulet, qtd. in Anita Lahey, “Academic Papers get Poetic.”

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27 Lahey, “Academic papers get poetic.”
28 Zwicky, Lyric Philosophy, L73.
30 Ibid.
31 Zwicky, Lyric Philosophy, L73.
32 Northrup, “Lyric Scholarship in Controversy.”
33 Zwicky, Lyric Philosophy, L181.
35 Ibid., lines 3-5.
36 Ibid., lines 10-12.
37 Ibid., lines 16-17.
38 Ibid., lines 23-24.
39 Ibid., line 26.
Bibliography


