

Space, Art, and Activism: The Innovative Poetics of Anne Waldman & Rachel Blau DuPlessis

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Abstract: This article explores commonalities between the poetry of Anne Waldman and that of Rachel Blau DuPlessis. Superficially, the poetics of Waldman and DuPlessis appear quite disparate from each other with the exception that they are both female American poets working during the same historical period. While Waldman is associated with the second generation of the New York School, the Beatniks, and the Outrider experimental poetry movement, DuPlessis is more prominently lauded for her work as a feminist critic and essayist. Though the pairing of Waldman and DuPlessis seems incongruous, close readings of both poets reveal several common threads, most prominently their innovative utilization of space, the connection of their poetics to other art forms, and the rooting of their work in activist causes.

In the preface of their landmark collection *The Norton Anthology of Literature by Women*, feminist critics Sandra M. Gilbert and Susan Gubar define their anthological work as an attempt to gather “literary works in which women writers have expressed their sometimes problematic, sometimes triumphant relationship to culture and society...[in order to]...recover a long and neglected literary history” (xxvii). Due to a historically patriarchal emphasis upon male literary figures and models throughout standard literary canons, Gilbert and Gubar’s anthology addresses the problem not only of the fringe-like existence of female authors but also of the resulting lack of critical recognition for the literary legacy passed between different generations of women as well as their own temporal counterparts. When placed within the context of Gilbert and Gubar’s argument, the stakes of connecting the poetics of Anne Waldman and Rachel Blau DuPlessis are nothing less than the status of the female literary tradition as neither poet’s work fits neatly into the standard categorization schema of the male-dominated literary canon. Initially, Waldman and DuPlessis appear quite disparate from one another with the exception that Waldman and DuPlessis are both female American poets working during the same historical period. While Waldman is associated with several literary schools, including the second generation of the New York School, the Beatniks, and the Outrider experimental poetry movement (Poetry-Foundation 1), DuPlessis remains unassociated with any specific literary movement and is more

prominently lauded for her work as a feminist critic and essayist, with the exception of her life poem project. Although the pairing of Waldman and DuPlessis seems incongruous, close readings of both poets reveal several common threads, most prominently their innovative utilization of space, the connection of their poetics to other art forms, and the root of much of their work in activist causes. When viewed through the lens of feminist literary criticism, the initial seeming disparity but ultimate connection between Waldman and DuPlessis suggests not simply an exemption to the standard classification scheme of male literary canon but further evidences Gilbert and Gubar’s belief that “though conventional literary periodization does not suit women’s literary history, women’s history does have significant phases of its own” (Gilbert and Gubar xxvii). Within this context of female literary legacies, the poetic commonalities between Waldman and DuPlessis become indicative of a shared historical movement potentially corresponding to second-wave feminism in which both poets express their newfound power as women in late twentieth century American society. By creating a uniquely female poetic space, collaborating with other art forms rather than assuming a solitary, fringe-like literary existence, and ultimately grounding their work in feminist activism, Waldman and DuPlessis both create a poetics that innovatively reflects a historically novel framework of female independence and power.

One of Waldman's most deliberate and self-referential manipulations of space is unsurprisingly demonstrated within her poem "Makeup on Empty Space." Her formal utilization of space begins with the literal application of various makeups (e.g. rouge blushing, pasting eyelashes, piling creams) upon the repeated titular phrase "on empty space" for the first seven lines. The eighth line, "painting the phenomenal world" (Waldman 1), then provides the first shift within the poem in which Waldman implies the solipsistic concept of unavoidable subjective perception by repeatedly creating a literal world outside the self and then erasing any sense of verisimilitude by introducing figurative imagery, leaving the narrator as the sole constant within the ever-shifting poem. In the first eight lines, Waldman thus delivers a superficial imaginary and empty space by describing literal makeup practices and then thematically subverts her own imagery with a rupturing of the perceivable world by introducing the figurative notion of painting the phenomenal. For the next three lines, Waldman again superficially decorates and interacts with this empty space using literal objects until another shift occurs: "I pour words over empty space, enthrall the empty space" (12). By pouring words over the empty space, the narrator again disrupts the literal with the figurative as well as connotes a meta self-awareness in the narrator by pointing towards Waldman's deliberate manipulation of the poem's space through specific shifts in diction. The next shift from literal to figurative is even more rapid when the act of spinning necklaces in line 14 is followed directly by "Fancy this, imagine this: painting the phenomenal world" (15). Functioning as imperatives, the phrases "Fancy this" and "imagine this" imply a second-person subject since commands require a subject that is being commanded with the speaker assuming the role of the commander. Waldman thus further explores her capacity to manipulate space by formally drawing the reader into the situation through the use of imperatives and then thematically delivering a moment in which to consider the irony of makeup's unnaturalness by not allowing any literal applications of makeup to persist for more than a few lines without being interrupted by the figurative. Such self-referential commentary about its manipulation of space continues sporadically throughout the poem, such as when the narrator directly states, "I want

to take this old wall apart I am rich in my mind thinking / of this, I am thinking of putting makeup on empty space" (59-60). Within these two lines, the narrator begins with a literal wall and then figuratively retreats into her mind so that line 60 can liken putting on makeup to the act of interweaving the literal and the figurative so that they cancel one another out. This pattern of repeating phrases and subsequent shifts continues for the entire duration of the poem until the final moment of "singing & moaning in empty space" (146), thus inverting and encapsulating the poem in a perceived shroud of empty space by ending with a figurative shift so that the last of the literal details are disrupted and erased so that all that is left at the end of the poem is the empty space, i.e. the woman.

In a segment of her life poem project entitled "Draft 5: Gap," DuPlessis innovatively manipulates space in a manner that is thematically reminiscent of Waldman's while remaining formally distinct. As predicted by the title, DuPlessis' poem contains several instances in which blocks of texts are blacked out, beginning with the supposed first word of the poem. This mimicry of redacted information simultaneously creates its own hidden space and formally invites the reader to attempt to invade said space in a manner similar to the use of imperatives towards the beginning of Waldman's "Makeup on Empty Space." Rather than the empty solipsism demonstrated through figurative erasure in Waldman's poetry, DuPlessis instead delivers an extra-linguistic device that blocks the capacity of the reader to observe the language; she does so instead of simply stripping the language of its validity by interweaving the literal and the figurative as Waldman does. DuPlessis additionally parallels Waldman through her occasional instances of direct references to the manipulation of space within the poem. For example, the use of the color white in the line "eyes whitened behind glass" ("Anne" 13) comments upon the phrase's position within the poem as it directly follows several lines of blacked out text while the mention of eyes references the visual trickery of the poem; in addition, the preposition "behind" points towards the hidden language in the poem just before the "indelible black squares" in line 15 directly references DuPlessis' formal disruption of space through redaction. By using continuous

indentation and line spaces to draw the reader's attention to the formal aspects of the poem and then sporadically blacking certain portions of text all while referencing its own spacial manipulation, DuPlessis essentially creates a shifting poetic pattern that thematically withholds information from the reader, just like Waldman's poem, while innovatively disrupting the space of her poem in a much more active manner.

Although their rupturing and manipulation of space functions as an exclusive gesture by not allowing a privileged male perspective to enter their female poetic space, the second commonality Waldman and DuPlessis share is inclusive: their incorporation of other art forms or types of media to accentuate and shape their own poetics. For Waldman, the preferred accentuating art form is the performance of the poetry itself. Armed with her own powerful and resilient voice and often background bands of varying instruments, Waldman's performances go beyond pure poetry readings in that the performance adds additional layers to the poem that were not and could not be present in print. An excellent example of such a moment is Waldman's performance of her poem "To the Censorious Ones" at Naropa University in 1990. In her performance, Waldman began by emphasizing the "I" in the line "I'm coming up out of the tomb, Men of War" (1). By elongating the word "I" and voicing it in a manner that gradually transitions from a very low, gravelly pitch to a medium pitch, Waldman utilized her voice to mimic the rising from the tomb that the narrator of the poem forewarns. This use of onomatopoeia continued in the line "Can you feel the ground rumble under your feet?" (4) as Waldman shifted her voice so the sound of the "rum" portion of the word "rumble" rumbled as if it were made of the earth the poem's narrator discusses. Waldman continued the repetition of rising pitch and intensity until the final moment in which the narrator exclaims, "I'm opening the box / Boo!" (23-24). By suddenly dropping all loudness and intensity from her voice for an elongated pause between the words "box" and her exclamatory "Boo!," Waldman ended her performance of the poem with an audible moment of peace; by allowing a moment of silent composure before her scare attempt, Waldman negated the potentiality of being viewed as an exponentially angry woman

and instead demonstrated acute control of her passion and allowed her listeners to wait as she silently demonstrated her authority over that space. Through her performance, Waldman thus added a third dimension to her uniquely powerful and gendered space.

While Waldman's incorporation of other art forms into her poetics is primarily auditory, DuPlessis' work relates mainly through visual art, especially the way in which her formally fragmented and varying poems mimic collage. In an interview piece for Jacket Magazine entitled "Desiring visual texts: A collage and embroidery dialogue," DuPlessis explicitly states that her past "is pertinent to my poetry, but it is also important to collage. Collage now might be a way of reconnecting with that past and reclaiming it" (Damon and DuPlessis). The thematic reconnecting and reclaiming alluded to in DuPlessis' comments become formally represented in the collage-like structures present within much of her poetic work, such as in the first section of her poem "O" from Draft X: Letters:

Overwhelming.

Stuck
two owls hooting
thru and thru
the domèd cupola of night.

They try to tell you
The feel of dying.

I lose my breath.

The poem appears to be constructed in a manner similar to a collage, for the italicized and non-italicized words and phrases act as differently shaped pieces due to their slant or lack thereof and they are then set upon or near one another in the form of somewhat neat and purposeful layers with space in between just as pieces of a collage would lie. This reading of DuPlessis' poetry is further supported by her statement that "collage became a vital and central poetics for my current poetry, but more on the level of structure than in the realm of individual image juxtapositions" (Damon and DuPlessis). According to her own elaboration upon collage's influence on her poetics, DuPlessis' work may be interpreted as collage-like not in its creation of one specific image but of the semantic conjunctions made possible by placing different blocks of texts together in varying spacial and formal arrangements. In the first collage by DuPlessis included in the arti-

cle, "Wishes on the Wish Tree," several small and different pieces of cloth appear to be haphazardly attached with varying degrees of space between one another to a large piece of cloth. Likewise, DuPlessis' poems are more visually accessible if imagined as fragmented thoughts and bits of the narrator's identity and past that the poet specifically organizes in a way that forces the reader to find some connection within the space between all of the pieces in order to reclaim some sense of a cohesive whole. The seemingly great superficial disparity and spacing between the fragments of cloth in DuPlessis' collage forces the viewer to visually construct a space in which these physical pieces fit cohesively just as the fragments of sentences and phrases within DuPlessis' poems force the reader to mentally construct connections within the gaps the poet leaves. The potential correlations between DuPlessis' work and the structure of collages are relevant not only to further interpretations of her poetry but also to the manner in which DuPlessis and Waldman utilize different art forms to structurally support and expand their poetics and the space in which their poems persist. Within the context of feminist criticism, Waldman and DuPlessis' poetic incorporation of other art forms also reflects a rejection of the solitary female artist described by Gilbert and Gubar; rather than remaining on the fringe of artistic society while male writers dominate the art scene, Waldman and DuPlessis actively engage in art communities and thus create their own shared literary tradition.

As part of a female literary tradition tied to the novel self-empowerment of women in late twentieth century feminism, the final prominent correlation between Waldman and DuPlessis is their mutual affinity towards utilizing their poetics to serve an activist purpose. In her 2005 essay "Anne Waldman: Standing Corporeally in One's Time," DuPlessis argues that "Anne Waldman's work in poetry exists at the intersection of activist passion, gender critique and wariness, and long poem ambitions". The activist passion to which DuPlessis refers is visible within a wide variety of poems, such as "To the Censorious Ones," beginning with the speaker's demarcation of "Men of War" (1) as her enemy. Waldman's moment of feminist power then becomes even further cemented as she utilizes her linguistic power to transformatively broaden her targets

from "Men of War, Censorious Ones" (7) to "big boys" (8) in the following line so that her poem transitions from a piece specifically regarding Helms to a more generalized oppressive male political presence. As the alternative title implies, Waldman's poem can then function primarily as an "Open Address to Senator Jesse Helms," angrily protesting his promotion of censorship and his extremely conservative views in general by pitting a female speaker against her patriarchal oppressors. DuPlessis additionally argues for the feminist activism of Waldman when she quotes Waldman's poem "Iovis" in *Kill or Cure*: "He rules through possession, rape, and through the skillful means of the shape-shifter as well. From the psychological point of view (as a 'daughter'), I need to call him out, reveal him, challenge him, steal his secret". By quoting Waldman's description of and aggressive engagement with Jove and Zeus as procreative male deities, DuPlessis suggests that Waldman's poetics function generally as a form of activism by arguing for social change within the current political sphere as well as particularly functioning in a feminist sense by enabling a distinctly female speaker to grab control from a primarily male power source. The gendered aspect of Waldman's work here, i.e. the manner in which Waldman's poetics engage with gender politics, is grounded in the causes of feminist activism by continually attempting to, as DuPlessis argues, create a distinctly female power and energy within her poetry. By allowing the poem to serve as a space in which a female speaker can escape societal limitations and exclude any potential domination by a distinctly male point of view, Waldman's poetics mimic the newfound female power currently being realized in late twentieth century feminism. By creating a female position of power within her poetics, Waldman's art demonstrates its inherently political nature by advocating for the necessity of social reform regarding the patriarchal oppressors present within the current political hierarchy. Known primarily as a critic and essayist entrenched in feminist theory (Poetry Foundation 2), DuPlessis' poetics is also heavily rooted within feminist activism. In her 1990 essay "OTHER-HOW," DuPlessis argues that the main aspect of poetry that must be completely ruptured is the centrality of the lyric voice as wholly privileged and originating from a male source:

As a woman writing, my language space, my cultural space is active with a concatenation of constructs — prior poems, prior poetics — a lot of which implicates women. But not often as speaker. As ideal. As sought. As a mediator towards others' speech. As object. As means. As a thing partially cannibalized. Neutralized. (581)

Through her series of equations, DuPlessis problematizes the masculine lyric voice, i.e. the way lyric poetry traditionally privileges a strictly male point of view, by referencing the prevalence within poetic tradition of using women primarily as referential objects rather than as speakers with agency. The poetic rupturing that DuPlessis states is necessary to achieve such female freedom can be observed in an *ars poetica* segment of the long poem "Writing":

Making her and watching her

.All like little novels? *make herself*
Novels are nothing like this.

*The synchronicity of seeing that when
this –*

By destabilizing the very form of the poem through a confusing, non-traditional spacial arrangement of phrases with varying gaps in between, DuPlessis destabilizes the narrator's sense of self by introducing the concept of "making her" and creating a lens through which to observe "her" in the first line and then immediately introducing a non-italicized portion of text with a subject seemingly unrelated to the first line. By restating the notion of creating a general female presence in the phrase "make herself" and then interrupting the italicized section again, DuPlessis avoids the possibility of gendering the lyric voice of the poem by formally disrupting any sense of a cohesive point of view, especially one that privileges a male perspective, while simultaneously utilizing the line "Novels are nothing like this" to self-referentially remind the reader of the poem's own deliberate attempt to break with literary tradition. Taking into account Du-

Plessis' concern for women existing in poetry simply as referential objects viewed through a male poetic lens, the shift from "making her and watching her" (1) to the statement "make herself" (3) turns the third-person "her" of the first line into an inwardly pointing, self-referential "herself" so that the woman being described is no longer an inactive presence being observed and created by a secondary source but is instead a female with the agency to construct her own identity; if there is any gendering within DuPlessis' poetry, it is one that rejects the tradition of a privileged male lyric voice and instead leaves room for either a female speaker with agency to exist or for no cohesive perspective at all.

As previously stated, the commonalities between the poetics of Anne Waldman and those of Rachel Blau DuPlessis remain significant most prominently in relation to their implications for the study of movements or trends in women's poetry. Within the section of her essay "OTHERHOW" entitled "Rupturing the History of Poetry," DuPlessis questions the validity of using the standard of a male-centric literary canon, especially concerning poetry, by asserting that "the very idea of a history of poetry is a fictional sequence formed by choices, exclusions, interests, silences, — a whole and contingent politics of discourse" (586-587). In her call to rupture the history of poetry, DuPlessis mirrors Gilbert and Gubar's concern that a female literary tradition not only exists but that it has also been silenced and marginalized to the point that any of the significant common movements or trends within it remain inscrutable when using schemata that privilege male authors and their own literary heritage. Though their poetics remain irrevocably disparate and unique, Waldman and DuPlessis find their connective core in the manner through which they fashion themselves, as female poets must, by rupturing the male-dominated schemes of past poetics. When viewed through the lens of feminist literary criticism, Waldman and DuPlessis both innovatively manipulate space within their poetry, collaborate with other art forms, and ground their work within activist causes in a manner that corresponds to the novel space and agency for women specifically fought for and afforded by late-twentieth century feminism.

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