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She inches glass to break: feminist conversations between friends

A thesis submitted in partial fulfillment of the requirements for the degree of Masters of Fine Arts at Virginia Commonwealth University.

By

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Abstract

SHE INCHES GLASS TO BREAK: CONVERSATIONS BETWEEN FRIENDS

Liang Xia Luscombe, MFA

A thesis submitted in partial fulfillment of the requirements for the degree of Masters of Fine Arts at Virginia Commonwealth University.

Virginia Commonwealth University, 2018.

Major Director: Holly Morrison, Associate Professor, Painting and Printmaking

She inches glass to break: conversations between friends is a project that aims to manifest, through research and practice, my own feminist language within the videos I have produced in my final year of my Masters of Fine Arts. My feminist language is Australian and intersectional, invested in combating sexism, racism and in deepening language and representation around sexuality in relation to Asian women. This project discusses my video *She inches glass to break* (2018) in length, which created intersectional feminist dialogue in response to feminist filmmaker Ulrike Ottinger's film *Ticket of No Return* (1979) and *Breakfast at Tiffany's* (1961). Additionally, given this project's investment in language, this body of work is influenced both by aspects of psychoanalysis – in which speech is central to a “therapeutic action” – and by feminist linguistics in which linguistic analysis reveals some of the mechanisms through which language constrains, coerces and represents women, men and non-binary people in oppressive ways.

Introduction:

She inches glass to break: conversations between friends is situated as a practice-led MFA which is engaged in asking, what does my feminist language sound like in the videos I have produced? I will discuss the development and conceptual underpinnings of my video work in relation to this question. I will also examine existing writing, video, and film work that has been of influence to the project in an attempt highlight feminist strategies within these works and to then unpack how I speak alongside other feminist artists and theorists.

I will discuss the final two videos I produced during the final year of my MFA. The first is *She inches glass to break* (2018), a video that was in development for the entirety of the second year of my MFA and was presented in my thesis exhibition. This video takes on elements of a sitcom-style conversation between three women librarians as they plan for a library film screening. The dialogue revolves around their varying reactions to the use of yellow face in *Breakfast At Tiffany's* and their different analyses of the feminist film *Ticket of No Return*. While I will discuss *Ticket of No Return* in greater detail in Chapter Two, this film follows the character of the Drinker, a wealthy Caucasian woman who mysteriously arrives in Berlin in order to drink herself to death. All three librarians are played by myself (differentiated by distinct shades of lipstick matching each character's clothing) and embody different positions in relation to how racialized and gendered representations occur in these films. All three characters are also frustrated in different ways. The character Leah appears to be a bubbly Caucasian librarian who deals with her own quiet anger by longing for the self-annihilation which she links to the Drinker's act of drinking in *Ticket of No Return*. Daria is frustrated by her partner and home life, and has a sharp wit. She

identifies with the Drinker's feminist anger and sees her drinking as connected to these politics. She looks past the white feminism presented in *Ticket of No Return* in order to share in the Drinker's anger. The third character, Michelle, is the head librarian and is the most critical of *Ticket of No Return's* white feminism. She detests the way that the audience empathizes with a wealthy white woman who silently drinks herself to death. In between the two segments in which the characters discuss the two films is an advertising break by the company Parallel Gaze, advertising a pair of glasses to watch films. This part of the video was a collaboration with Jack Lundquist.



She inches glass to break (2018) 14:28, HD video, video still. Video introduction to the character Leah.



She inches glass to break (2018) 14:28, HD video, video still. Video introduction to the character Daria.



She inches glass to break (2018) 14:28, HD video, video still. Video introduction to the character Michelle.

The second video is *Imaginary Chinese Restaurant* (2017). In it, I have my own talk show and discuss with my guest, DJ Glitterati, our alienation in regards to sex. Over cocktails and conversation, we attempt to unpack how our own different experiences

of race and gender influence our experience of objectification and what compromises occur when engaging or refusing heterosexual sex. This video is a collaboration with Daliya Jokondo.



Liang Luscombe & Daliya Jokondo, *Imaginary Chinese Restaurant* (2017) 10:17, HD video, video still.

Some Definitions: Feminism

My perspective aligns with bell hooks’s definition of feminism: “feminism is a movement to end sexism, sexist exploitation, and oppression.”¹ The reason I am drawn to this definition is that it clarifies that all of us—men, women, and non-binary folks—have been socialized from birth to accept sexist thought and action. This is reflected in the dialogue of my videos in which internalized sexism is a subject of discussion.² To be feminist is not only to self-identify as one, but it is the very movement or action toward a feminist present; it is only through both addressing

¹ hooks, bell. *Feminism Is for Everybody: Passionate Politics*. Cambridge, MA: South End Press, 2000, p. viii.

² hooks p. viii.

internalized sexism and acting against patriarchal forces oppressing femme bodies out in the world that one acts out feminism. When I say acting against sexism that occurs in the world, I mean that my feminism is an ethics that I attempt to carry with me always—when I am at the studio, the classroom, workplace, and home. It is a daily activity to uphold a feminist ethics, one that I have found is much easier to enact with the support of peers. It cannot be limited to a single area of one’s life but is a lens through which to view patriarchal violence and its impact on women at different levels. My feminism is Australian third-wave feminism, this being intersectional, and looking to work against the grooves of hegemonic feminism and its constructions of whiteness. Since I began living in the United States, I have realized how much this country’s feminist thought, in particular the incredible intellectual work of black feminists, has influenced global feminism.³

To clarify, when I say Australian feminism, I am specifically describing my relationship to race, which has a different historical context in Australia than in the United States. This should firstly be placed in the context of my position as a settler, as settler society’s inability to address the institutionalized genocide, enslavement, and oppression of Indigenous Australians highlights the dehumanizing way racism operates within Australian culture. Australia has had a troubled and racist history with its migration of people from the Asia-Pacific region, expressed most damningly through the White Australia Policy which sought to bar people of non-European descent from migrating to Australia⁴ and now continues in a different manifestation

³ Such as the writing of bell hooks, Hortense Spiller, Audre Lorde, Angela Davis, Daliya Jokondo, Alexis Pauline Gumbs, Che Gossett, Hilton Als, Juliana Huxtable, Kimberlé Crenshaw, and Claudia Rankine.

⁴ The term “White Australia policy” comprises various historical policies that effectively barred people of non-European descent from immigrating to Australia. There was never any specific policy titled as

with the country's appalling refugee policies. As an Asian-Australian child growing up in the 1990s, I find the rise of politician Pauline Hanson typifies this trouble.

Hanson was elected as a member of Australian Parliament in 1996, largely upon a racist platform in which she said that Australia was in danger of being "swamped by Asians" and that these immigrants "have their own culture and religion, form ghettos, and do not assimilate." These comments highlight the ongoing tension between some of white Australian culture and migrant communities, as well as my own fragmented position as a second generation Asian-Australian.

In terms of my own contribution to Australian feminism, I identify with how the Australian feminist and academic Ien Ang in her essay "I'm a feminist but... 'Other' women and post-national feminism", problematizes the desire to represent a "Chinese" or "Asian" contribution to Australian feminism.⁵ She suggests that Australian feminist discourse has done little work to unpack the construction of a "multicultural Australia" and so often "migrant women" are lumped together, and are mostly being talked about, instead of being spoken to.⁶ She describes how Asianness is repeatedly constructed outside the symbolic space of Australianness (given the historical precedents I have described in the previous paragraph, this is unsurprising). It is the power of this symbolic order that works upon Ang. If she defines herself as Asian, she is placed within an established white Australian imaginary.⁷ The deeply

such, but the term was invented later to encapsulate a collection of policies that were designed to exclude people from Asia (particularly China) and the Pacific Islands (particularly Melanesia) from immigrating to Australia. These policies were progressively dismantled between 1949 and 1973.

⁵ Ang, Ien. "I'm a Feminist but... 'Other' women and post-national feminism." in *Transitions: new Australian feminisms*. St Leonards, N.S.W: Allen & Unwin, 1995, 57.

⁶ Ang, 69.

⁷ Ang, 69.

flawed possibility of fetishizing “Asianness” within my own feminist practice risks reinforcing the established formation of a white feminist lens upon “otherness.”⁸

White feminism focuses on the struggles of white women, dismissing the differing struggles of women of color and black women. It is the movement’s totalizing tendency that connects with white feminism’s failure to consider fully the racist beginnings of the feminist movement in the United States and arguably Australia, and how racism limited the movement’s potential. As bell hooks writes,

Every women’s movement in America from its earliest origin to the present day has been built on a racist foundation—a fact which in no way invalidates feminism as a political ideology. The racial apartheid social structure that characterized 19th- and early 20th-century American life was mirrored in the women’s rights movement. The first white women’s rights advocates were never seeking social equality for all women; they were seeking equality for white women.⁹

This is not to say my video works shy away from the discussion of Asian representations, however I also wish to deconstruct the figure of the white woman within film as a means to discuss how stereotypes of Asian women and women of color are constructed and maintained in relation to the dominance of whiteness. Concurrent to this difference is the way feminism needs to be negotiated and navigated with others—but how do we actually deal with difference? This is a question that continues to linger under the skin of my video *She inches glass to break* and is a subject I will return to. In terms of my own experience, to understand and create greater feminist language for myself is to wrestle with the experience of being a cis woman of color, that being both an empowering and painful experience. It is to

⁸ Ang, 57.

⁹ hooks, bell. *Ain’t I a Woman: Black women and feminism*. London: Pluto, 1982, 124.

find language to talk about the way this experience is embedded and linguistically expressed in the experience of body while also highlighting the validity of this in-body experience.

Some Definitions: Feminist Language

My feminist language is rooted in a deep horror of how women are represented in language and in culture at large. Claudia Rankine articulates this in her description of group conversation with Judith Butler:

Not long ago you are in a room where someone asks the philosopher Judith Butler what makes language hurtful. You can feel everyone lean in. Our very being exposes us to the address of another, she answers. We suffer from the condition of being addressable. Our emotional openness, she adds, is carried by our addressability. Language navigates this.¹⁰

This horror also resides in the sexist and racist utterances that come out of my own mouth, and a desire to understand that language, in the hope of rerouting it. The type of feminist language that I want to speak has been difficult to utter. So much so that the script for video *She inches glass to break* was rewritten ten times across the final year of my MFA. Each time I realized I needed to rewrite the dialogue, I asked myself, “why is it so difficult to say what I mean about white patriarchy and feminism? Why am I, as a women of color, hesitant to explicitly discuss the conflicted way I view the representation of white women in Hollywood?”

¹⁰ Rankine, Claudia. *Citizen: An American Lyric*. London: Penguin Books, 2015, 49.

In this way, my wish to understand how my own and others' sexist language connects with the study of feminist linguistics. The underlying tenet of feminist linguistics is that, "Language is used as a tool to constrain, coerce, and represent women and men in oppressive ways, produced linguistic analysis within socio-cultural contexts can reveal some of the mechanism of how this takes place."¹¹ Given that our conception of gender has developed to be understood through a process of socialization, contemporary feminist linguistics takes the position that gender is co-constructed *within* interactions.¹² This frames language as producing gender, constructing women as not only injured by masculine language but also as active users.¹³ This co-construction of feminist language occurs most explicitly in the video work *Imaginary Chinese Restaurant*, in which I host a talk show and interview feminist friend Daliya Jokondo about their alienation from sex and how this intersects with racialized representations of blackness. It is through this interview and our interactions that I then was able to begin to articulate my own relationship to representations of Asian women's sexuality. It is this intersectional feminist space that opened up in conversation that is most pertinent to this language. As Denise Decaires Narain writes, "However, whilst second-wave feminism is often associated with an emphasis on breaking the silence, postcolonial feminist interventions have often worked to expose the impossibility of such naïve understandings of voice."¹⁴ I also do not wish

¹¹ Mills, Sara and Mullany, Louise. *Language, Gender and Feminism: Theory, Methodology and Practice*. London: Routledge, 2011, 25.

¹² Mills and Mullany, 41.

¹³ Bucholtz, Mary, et al. *Reinventing Identities: The Gendered Self in Discourse*. Oxford University Press, 1999. ProQuest Ebook Central, <http://ebookcentral.proquest.com/lib/vcu/detail.action?docID=241595>. Created from vcu on 2018-04-13 19:19:50, 6.

¹⁴ Narain, Denise Decaires "What happened to the global sisterhood? Writing and Reading 'the' postcolonial woman", in *Third wave feminism: a critical exploration*. 2004, New York: Palgrave Macmillan, 244.

to perpetuate such naïve understandings of how feminist language operates. Instead I want to ask, who is speaking? Who is silent? On whose terms is this conversation being had? How does postcolonial theory assist us in building a more ambivalent relationship to feminist discourse that more realistically views conversation and feminism's limits?

Chapter One: What Kind of Speech?

The feminist language utilized in my videos is academic: I wonder what the benefits and limitations of this mode of operation are, in which critique and deconstruction are primary tools? Both film critique and deconstruction of racialized and gendered language occurs in *She inches glass to break*, whether through naming how the “model minority” stereotype operates or by attempting to understand the way we view characters in the films *Breakfast at Tiffany's*, *Guardians of the Galaxy 2* (2014), and *Ticket of No Return*. Does academic deconstructive language in fact go against my desire to value in-body experience and knowledge? In *She inches glass to break*, these different modes of experience and knowledge do play out in the video. For example, the video opens with the character Leah recounting the way that the female characters in Clarice Lispector's stories have “an intense, animalistic energy feeling, but they are sitting still in beautiful dresses,” and that she also feels this wild, repressed energy that sits within her stomach. This dialogue is paired with the video screen being broken up into four close-ups of Leah's body in which she expresses agitation through rubbing, lip biting, and pulling at her skin as the sound of fire occurs in the background. Through this combination of elements I hope to convey to the viewer the in-body agitation that connects to femme agitation under patriarchy that Leah feels in

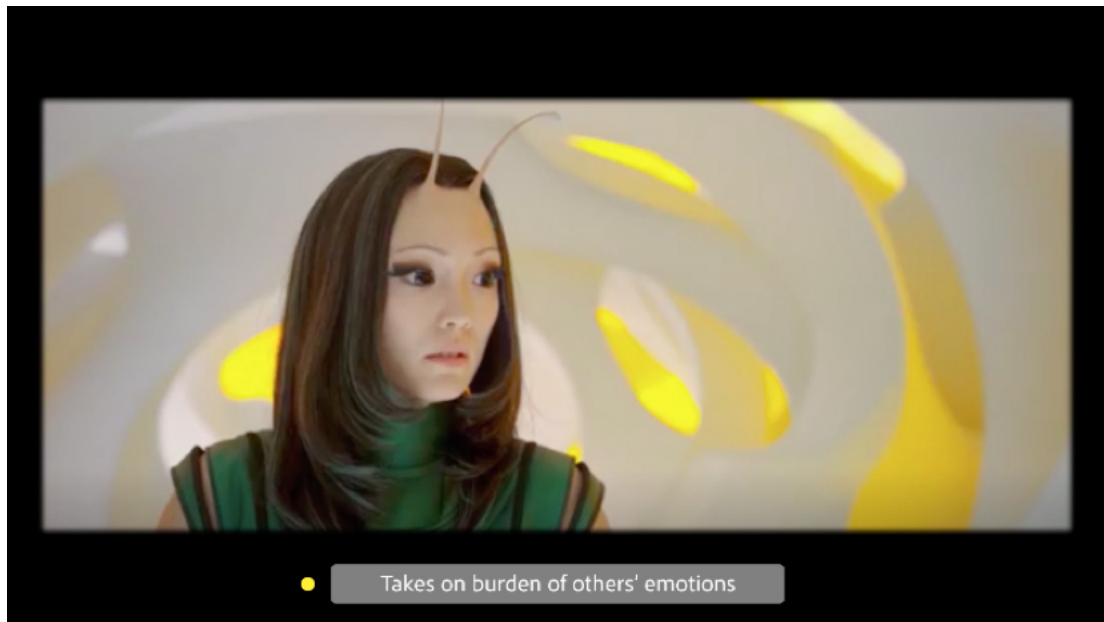
contrast with her bubbly outward self-presentation.



She inches glass to break (2018) 14:28, HD video, video still.

Later in the video, this is contrasted by the “advertisement segment”, *Parallel Gaze*, in which a pair of glasses is advertised as an intersectional feminist tool with which to deconstruct racist and sexist moments within film. The glasses specifically function by producing subtitles that are academic filmic critique of the films that the eyeglass wearer is watching. During the advertisement we see the glasses being utilized by a viewer who watches a scene involving the empath Mantis in *Guardians of the Galaxy 2*. Mantis is played by Pom Klementieff and the glasses identify the misogynistic and orientalizing manner in which the film constructs both her character and her relationship to her master Ego, whereby she, as his servant, uses her powers to ease his loneliness and put him to sleep. The glasses identify that stereotypes are being employed in the film when Mantis speaks of Ego, “Takes on the burden of others’ emotions” and that the “Submissive Asian women cliché” is being employed in her depiction. There is a question embedded in the advertisement itself, “does critique

function as the best feminist tool?” For instance, if the *Parallel Gaze* glasses were used, would the wearer internalize a critical feminist eye so they could see through the sexism and racism within filmic depictions?



She inches glass to break (2018) 14:28, HD video, video still.

My feminist language is influenced by psychoanalytic theory. As Elizabeth Grosz describes, feminism and psychoanalysis continue to have a highly fraught relationship in which both Sigmund Freud’s insights owe much to his first patients, described as female hysterics, while Jacques Lacan’s earliest research in psychoanalysis relied on the discourse of the “mad women”—female hysterics, paranoiacs, and psychotics.¹⁵ Given the underlying Western phallogocentric structure of psychoanalysis, why am I drawn to this frame within the language of my work? *She inches glass to break*’s underlying structure is informed by Lacanian psychoanalysis’s focus on how the subject relates to language. Lacan displaces the Cartesian *res cogitans*—the thinking

¹⁵ Grosz, Elizabeth. *Jacques Lacan: A Feminist Introduction*. New York: Routledge, 1990. ProQuest Ebook Central, <http://ebookcentral.proquest.com/lib/vcu/detail.action?docID=178389>, 6.

being—and instead posits the speaking subject, a subject defined by and in language.¹⁶ As Grosz writes of Lacan's construction of the subject:

This subject is not simply a speaking being, a being who happens by chance to speak, but a being constituted as such by being spoken through by language itself. It cannot be conceived as the source or master of discourse, but is the locus or site of the articulation (enunciation) of representations, inscriptions, meanings, and significances.¹⁷

There are a number of implications if the subject is not the master of their own spoken language. Firstly, he argues that the subject is not a natural individual but is repeatedly invaded by the unconscious. For Lacan, the submerged unconscious cannot be articulated in its own voice, thus it relies upon the language of the consciousness in which to articulate itself through indirect means: interruption, eruption, or silencing.¹⁸ This negotiation for the subject in relation to both unconscious and conscious language for all characters in the video is often negotiated through the lens of race and gender. For instance, in one of the earliest scenes to introduce the viewer to the character Leah, she tells the audience that she cannot remember how her mother's wedding band slipped onto her finger. Presumably unmarried, she then goes on to quizzically explain that she does not want to get married, but that her body wants to feel what it is like, just to pretend. She must then negotiate this unconscious action and attempts to rationalize these desires through language. Each of the characters do this in different ways and much of the conversation between the characters highlights

¹⁶ Grosz, 148.

¹⁷ Grosz, 148.

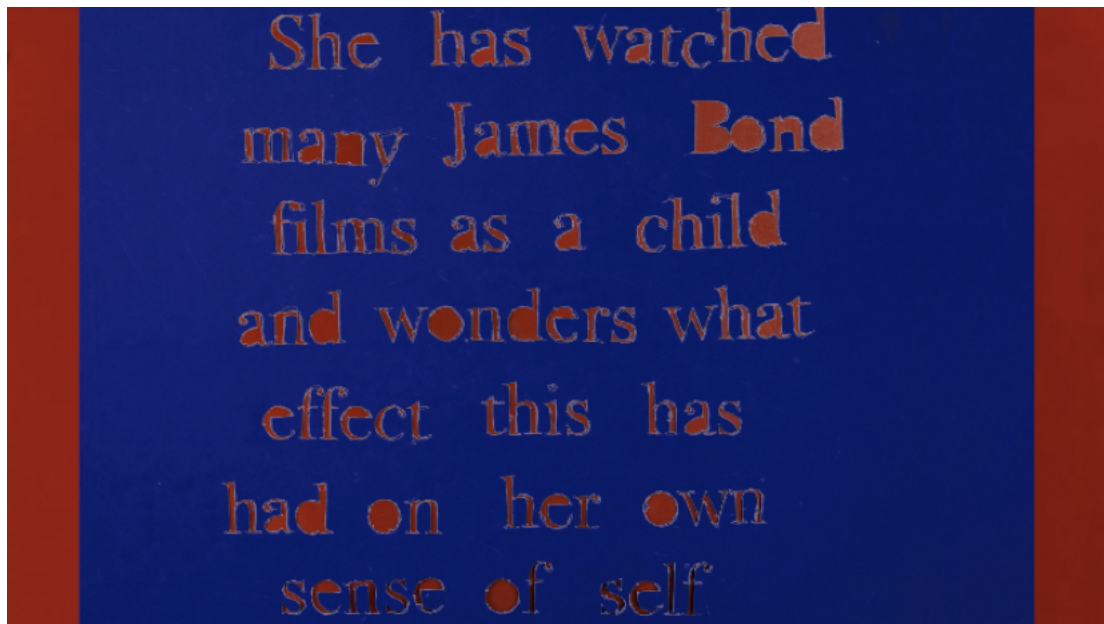
¹⁸ Grosz, 114.

the different negotiations with the unconscious.

Within Lacanian psychoanalysis the subject is the site, but not the master of articulation (this a key for feminist writing by French feminist philosophers Luce Irigaray and Julia Kristeva), this is a fruitful outlook to discuss more complex positions between the characters I've constructed. Given that I play all three characters, the video can be read as an inner monologue of one person whose unconscious has been personified and trifurcated. *She inches glass to break* reflects upon how the subject is *also* invaded by overlapping racialized and gendered stereotypes that the audience can internalize within the unconscious or misrecognize off-screen in others. For instance, in one text component of the character Michelle's thoughts, the text reads as the following:

Michelle: She has watched many James Bond films as a child and wonders what effect this has had on her own sense of self.

The text functions as a way for the character to gesture toward the internalized sexism created by watching James Bond films, in which women are portrayed as expendable objects of desire, without pinpointing what effect this has had on her subconscious.



She inches glass to break (2018) 14:28, HD video, film still.

French feminist philosopher Luce Irigaray's work builds on the link that Lacan made between linguistic and psychical processes. If language has the means to interpret psychical life, then Irigaray's feminism attempts to rewrite subjectivity under the primacy of the phallic signifier, in short, challenge patriarchal language.¹⁹ Irigaray does not look to create a new women's language but instead as Grosz writes, "her project, rather, is to utilize already existing systems of meaning or signification, to exceed or overflow the oppositional structures and hierarchizing procedures of phallogocentric texts."²⁰ Irigaray argues that the phallogocentric nature of language presents itself as universal and neutral, when in fact it is produced and maintained according to patriarchal interests. She describes this to be evident in language through singular meanings, hierarchical organisation and the division into subject-predicate form. These characteristics of language represent the self-distancing aspect of masculinity that refuses material that rubs against rationality, in which statements

¹⁹ Grosz, 176.

²⁰ Grosz, 176.

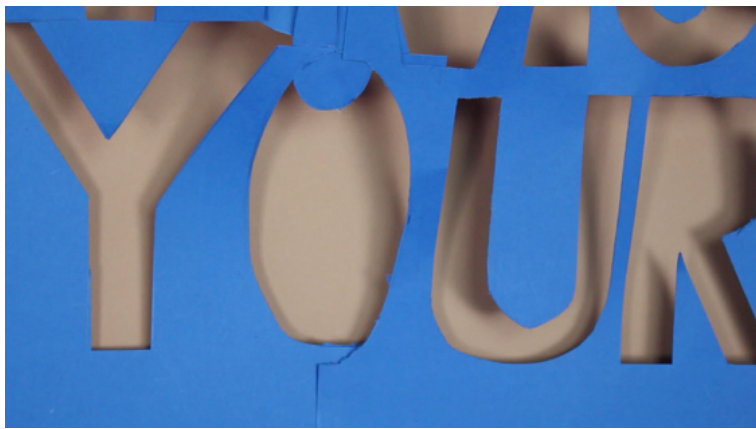
cannot be reversed.²¹

Psychoanalysis is indeed “the talking cure.” Given that it only employs listening and deciphering, its questions are aimed at the location of enunciation—who speaks as the subject?²² As Grosz writes, “Psychoanalysis has no aim, object, procedures, or techniques other than those given by language.”²³ *She inches glass to break* plays with concepts of listening and deciphering both within the spoken dialogue and aspects of the set of the video. Within the brightly colored, flat film sets—in which each environment is created out of craft paper and covered in printed or cut-away text—are text elements that all pertain to the inability to hear your own or another’s voice, such as “CAT GOT YOUR TONGUE” or “CAN YOU PLEASE REPEAT.” It is within this backdrop of text pertaining to the inability to hear the subject’s enunciation that the conversation between the three friends takes place. The text becomes an active voice in the conversation when particular characters cannot/will not disclose their opinion to another character. For example, when Michelle talks about the experience of viewing Mickey Rooney donning yellow face in *Breakfast at Tiffany’s* with her sixth-grade class as a child, she says, “I didn’t know what to say. You know when you are a kid, hell even when you’re an adult.” In response to this dialogue, the camera cuts to the set and pans across the words “CAT GOT YOUR TONGUE” as if speaking back to Michelle, highlighting the difficulty for a group to discuss racist imagery within film when it is presented to us.

²¹ Grosz, 179.

²² Grosz, 114.

²³ Grosz, 114.



She inches glass to break (2018) 14:28, HD video, video stills.

The act of deciphering the speaker's enunciation is also utilized in the section of this same video in which Daria explains the term model minority directly to the audience in a manner in which she takes on the persona of a rather condescending educator. Subtitles appear below her, translating not the speaker's exact words but instead directly addressing the viewer. The subtitles act as a kind of antagonistic intermediary between the speaker (Daria) and the audience, and make a number of judgments about both the manner in which Daria speaks and the content. The subtitles in the first part of this segment appear to be Daria's inner thoughts, telling the audience that her pencil is pointing at them. However when Daria sarcastically lists the attributes of the model minority stereotype as "smart, hardworking, docile, submissive, uncomplaining," the subtitles flip as if the audience is now the voice of the subtitles saying, "Is this it? She is very nicey, nice, nice, nice, nice, nice, nice, nice." The subtitles describe the audience's racialized perceptions of Daria as a model minority herself, describing her being "nice" even when she is attempting to use sarcastic language directed at audience. In this way, the language in the subtitles move between being not only a tool to decipher both the inner thoughts of both audience and performer, but also signifies the way in which articulation can be perceived in very racialized manner.



She inches glass to break (2018) 14:28, HD video, video still.

Chapter Two: Does talk work?

The content of my recent videos is triggered by conversational flashpoints; moments in which conversation with peers gets stuck and leads me to wish to understand why this occurs. The beginnings of *She inches glass to break* sprung from such a moment during a seminar class. My peers and I viewed the feminist film *Ticket of No Return*

in which a woman goes to Berlin and silently drinks herself to death. Filmmaker Ulrike Ottinger connected the emotional tone of self-annihilation with a feminist ideology, placing the lead character's drinking as a socially taboo form of dropping out and a refusal to conform, to patriarchal structures of "proper" femininity. I thought these strategies were extremely provocative and energizing. The character of the Drinker is constructed as a social outcast; her decision to drink herself to death in Berlin (Berlin seen in the late 1970s as a center of hedonism and intrigue) is amplified for the audience by her pronounced abstinence from speech and the lack of naturalistic sounds within the Drinker's perception.²⁴ However, I was completely dismayed by the response of many of my classmates, some of whom were very dismissive of the female protagonist or else silent. Given that I so identified with what I perceived as the silent feminist rage represented in the film, the final year of my MFA research was propelled by a need to question why this film's subject matter produced dismissal alongside the way that silence permeates the narrative of *Ticket of No Return* itself. Rather than utilizing solely traditional film critique, the dialogue employed in my videos weaves together both filmic critique and personal stories that I have noted from conversations with women friends. In this way I hope to map the social atop the films that are discussed in the video.

²⁴ Hansen, Miriam. "Visual Pleasure, Fetishism and the Problem of Feminine/Feminist Discourse: Ulrike Ottinger's *Ticket of No Return*" in *New German Critique*, Issue 31, January, 1984, 101.



She inches glass to break (2018) 14:28, HD video, video still.

Ottinger's *Ticket of No Return* traces a doomed woman, the Drinker, who comes to Berlin to deliberately drink herself to death. Throughout the film she is completely silent. Whilst predominately alone going from casinos to bars over the course of a few days, the Drinker befriends a local homeless woman, the Bag Lady—who is also an alcoholic, and they attempt to connect through the haze of their drunkenness. Furthermore, there is an ambiguous tension between alcoholism and feminism throughout the film; for instance, it is unclear as to whether Ulrike Ottinger is arguing that alcoholism represents anxiety that when identified can be utilized as a feminist action. It is also unclear if she is purely pointing to alcoholism as being caused by self-hatred (the Drinker attempts to obscure her reflection through throwing the contents of her wine glass upon the mirror and that even fights with her own shadow). This is amplified by the way that the characters Social Question, Common Sense and

Accurate Statistics, who play the three Fates, continually make statistical evaluations that label the drinker as sick.²⁵ Ottinger describes her working methodology:

To present reality with complete truth is as complicated and confusing as reality itself. I just don't believe that one can invent a figure on the basis of an ideology and then let it act according to that ideology. I find that unrealistic. Even that figure has fantasies and dreams. I refuse to make these unambiguous films that say that because such-and-such the following is true. That would then be a political statement. By doing that you hold back a part of reality and at the same time a part of the truth. To put it quite briefly, this simplification becomes a lie.²⁶

It is the complexity of the Drinker's relationship to imposed morality, both in relation to gender and self-annihilation that sustained my conceptual interest in the film for such a long period. Due to my sustained engagement with the film, it became apparent that the questions surrounding how race and gender impact upon how we view public drunkenness and silence in *Ticket of No Return*, were still left wanting and could be responded to in my own work. As the character Michelle identifies in *She inches glass to break*, given that the drinker is a wealthy woman, her public drunkenness is not seen as criminal or threatening, not the case for working-class women of color. Upon *Ticket of No Return's* release, Ottinger did receive criticism in relation to the decadent and aestheticized manner that the film dealt with the Drinker's alcoholism instead of in a more naturalistic tone.²⁷ Whilst aspects of the film leans in close to an aestheticism of both lead characters' alcoholism, the highly stylized costuming and

²⁵ Rickels, Laurence A, *Ulrike Ottinger: the autobiography of art cinema*. Minneapolis: University of Minnesota, 2008, 56.

²⁶ Rickels, 54.

²⁷ Hansen, Miriam, 99.

fantastical scenes (in one such flight of fantasy the Drinker walks a tight rope in front of an audience including a dwarf and a dressed up pig) arguably is utilized by Ottinger to highlight the surreal perception that the Drinker has of her surroundings. The non-naturalistic background sound that permeates the film emphasizes both her social isolation and her intoxicated state. This is also placed in sharp contrast with the Drinker's pronounced silence throughout the film, in which her engagement with those around her is kept at a minimum.



Ulrike Ottinger, *Ticket of No Return* (1979), film still.

Sharon Hayes's video *Ricerche: three* (2013) has been a key work for my research project in relation to utilizing conversation as a feminist medium. The work takes the form of an interview by Hayes with a group of 35 students from Mount Holyoke College, an all-women college that has made a commitment to recruiting both international students and trans men. The students answer questions about sex, gender, and politics in the United States today. It is loosely based on Pier Paolo

Pasolini's 1964 film *Comizi d'amore* (Love Meetings), a documentary that surveys changing social norms around sex in post-Marshall Plan Italy through interviews with groups.²⁸ Hayes asks wide-ranging and sometimes confrontational questions, such as: "Do you feel like you have the same sex as your mother?" and "Do you feel you can be as free as you want in your daring adventure?" and "Do you feel connected to the feminist movement?"



Sharon Hayes, *Ricerche: three* (2013) single channel HD video, 38:00, video still.

I believe there is a feminist methodology embedded within the structure of this artwork itself; at the core of these interviews is the interplay between the individual and the collective in relation to gender politics. Hayes deliberately films the interview with all participants present so that the women can respond to and debate each other's responses. Many of the shots in the video are of the entire group of students, emphasizing the shifting group dynamics within the conversation, while other close-

²⁸ Gogarty, Larne Abse "Commitment and Desire in Sharon Hayes's *Ricerche: three* (2013)" in *Tate Papers*, no. 25, Spring, 2016, <http://www.tate.org.uk/research/publications/tate-papers/25/commitment-and-desire-in-sharon-hayes-ricerche-three>.

ups frame the speaker. Contradictory positions about the role of feminism emerge. When asked whether sex is important to them, some answer that due to their religion they abstain, which garners a response from another woman that she, “doesn’t really speak to virgins.” This same woman explains that of course she “believes in equality” but that she would not go on a feminist march. The way that group dynamics function in this video produces a highly layered conversation that reflects feminist consciousness-raising groups.

Ricerche: three (2013) also allows for conflict within the discussion itself and highlights the complex weave of the personal feminist politics that Hayes is able to map out in this work. This was also an important aspect of how I conceived the conversation among the three characters in *She inches glass to break*. While Michelle, Leah, and Daria easily find consensus in relation to the use of yellow face in *Breakfast at Tiffany’s*, conflict arises as they discuss *Ticket of No Return*. Unlike *Ricerche: three*, conflict occurs both in conversation among the characters but also with the viewer of this work itself, through Michelle and Daria’s snarky direct-to-camera monologues.

The characters have differing responses to how they relate to the lead character, the Drinker, a wealthy white woman. While Leah identifies with the Drinker’s desire for silent self-annihilation, viewing the film brings forth for her recollections of dissociation when she was harassed on her bike and her own self-annihilation during her college party days, fueled by alcohol. In contrast, the character Michelle intensely dislikes the film. Given the Drinker’s social and racial standing, Michelle is suspicious of *Ticket of No Return’s* claim that the Drinker’s self-imposed silence is

feminist. She believes that both the film's audience and the other characters within the film would hear the Drinker if she had spoken. Lastly, Daria, a Thai woman, overlooks the fact that the film describes the experience of a white woman so that she can connect with the Drinker's rage.

Although not evidenced by the appearance of the three characters (all three women are played by me), I had written the characters' different viewpoints in relation to *Ticket of No Return* as a means to draw out their different racial identities. Leah is a Caucasian woman, while Daria is Thai and Michelle is of Chinese descent. There are clues to this in video: Leah admits she does not notice the Drinker's whiteness; Daria wonders if her presumably Caucasian boyfriend notices that "having a Thai girlfriend doing the dishes had a bit of a mail order bride vibe," and Michelle admits that she has completely blocked out the use of yellow face in *Breakfast at Tiffany's* due to her tendency to "play the good model minority." I also point to these differences in what is not discussed amongst the three women. Both Michelle and Daria's direct-to-camera monologues to the audience pertain to issues of race representation in *Ticket of No Return* that they do not say within the conversation itself. For example, Daria discusses at the end of the video that she could only imagine the Drinker as a white woman because representation of Asian women is so limited in Western cinema that such a role would not be given to an Asian actress.

Why is it that the two women of color in *She inches glass to break* do not raise these issues of representation in the conversation? Returning to Ien Ang, she suggests that

feminism must stop assuming that it is a “natural” political designation for all women.²⁹ She writes:

Rather than adopting a politics of inclusion (which is always ultimately based on notions of commonality and community), [feminism] will have to develop a self-conscious politics of partiality, and imagine as a *limited* political home, which does not absorb difference within a pre-given and pre-defined space but leaves room for ambivalence and ambiguity.³⁰

Ang urges *ambivalence* as a starting point of conversation between mainstream feminism and “other” women because it does not look to resolve differences in a hope to find a shared experience. This approach also acknowledges the asymmetrical and incommensurable nature of race, which are defined by hierarchies of domination. She suggests that to take difference seriously we must examine how this gap is constructed and maintained:

I want to suggest, then, that these moments of ultimate failure of communication should not be encountered with regret, but rather should be accepted as a starting point for a modest feminism, one that is predicated on the fundamental *limits* to the very idea of sisterhood (and thus the category of “women”) and on the necessary *partiality* of the project of feminism.³¹

It is this critical stance of ambivalence that does not perpetuate a naïve preempting of community between women. In *She inches glass to break*, I wanted to create a rich dialogue through the very fact that this particular feminist film does not speak to all characters in the same way. While I think that ambivalence is an important starting point, it is not an end point for feminist conversation. The address-to-camera moments

²⁹ Ang, 58.

³⁰ Ang, 58.

³¹ Ang, 60.

in my video also serve other functions beyond ambivalence. They provoke and implicate the audience in the performance, the use of language, and the discussion of the intersections of race and gender representation.

Black feminist academic Alexis Pauline Gumbs's poetry collection, *Spill: Scenes from Black Feminist Fugitivity*, presents a collection of scenes depicting fugitive black women and girls seeking freedom from gendered violence and racism. While the content of this poetry is undoubtedly feminist in nature, I wish to focus on the methodology that Gumbs has spoken about in regard to this body of poetry, and discuss its relevance to my own research in terms of what it means to speak *with* others. Her book takes its name from fellow black academic Hortense Spillers, whilst sections of the book are dedicated to Harriet Tubman and Phillis Wheatley; Gumbs pays homage to these women, and *Spill* memorializes these figures in such a way as to suggest their enduring legacies for those who come after them.³² Given the continued violent threat upon black women's lives in the United States, the importance of black feminist legacies cannot be underestimated.

In an interview with Hortense Spillers, Gumbs describes how she has returned to write about Spillers's writing time and time again in her intellectual life. However, this collection comes from a process of writing *with* Spillers's work and with black feminist writing more generally as a different approach than writing a scholarly monograph about another academic's writing, a work that she could be an "expert"

³² Bey, Marquis. "A Spillage of the Fugitive Variety" in *Social Text Online*, March 17, 2017, <https://socialtextjournal.org/a-spillage-of-the-fugitive-variety/>

on.³³ She describes this process as one that repositions her intimacy with and commitment to other black feminists' work within her own writing practice.³⁴ This is made even more explicit by the way in which every single citation in *Spill* is made in reference to Hortense Spillers' writing, and the bibliography is comprised only of women of color. Gumbs describes this as a performative protest in relation to valuing the labor of black women specifically for a peer-reviewed book published by a university press (Duke University Press).³⁵ For example, Gumbs writes,

was that her baby's skin? what water did. what waste, what fire
did. what thrown-away machine. could not be. this could not be the
smooth the kissed the cherished the Vaseline'd skin she would scald
her life off for. was this the sweetest face she has sacrificed sleep
and sense for? was this the child she brought here? and why? she
did not cry. she did not touch. it was too much. the texture of her
loss.³⁶

At the end of this passage she cites the phrase "altered human tissue" from Hortense Spillers's essay, "Mama's Baby, Papa's Maybe," situating her poetry in relation to Spillers's writing about the violent psychic markings upon the African-American family and flesh left by slavery. Gumb's passage above, which mentions the child and the texture of pain upon the body, is brought into sharp focus through this citation and its relation to Spillers's more academic writings on the subject of black female pain.

³³ John Hopkins Center at Duke University, *Left of Black with Hortense Spillers and Alexis Pauline Gumbs* (online video, October 25, 2017). <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=Ui-EZQ1BTfE>.

³⁴ John Hopkins Center at Duke University, *Left of Black with Hortense Spillers and Alexis Pauline Gumbs*.

³⁵ John Hopkins Center at Duke University, *Left of Black with Hortense Spillers and Alexis Pauline Gumbs*.

³⁶ Gumbs, Alexis Pauline, *Spill: Scenes of Black Feminist Fugitivity*, Durham: Duke University Press, 2016, 19.

I specifically cite these strategies in her work as a means to highlight how they have informed my own ideas of what it means to speak about another artist's artworks. In the development of my own video I returned to the film *Ticket of No Return* over again, as I strongly identified with a focused engagement with another feminist's work. In fact, each character in *She inches glass to break* represents my different relationship to the film over the twelve months I had been working with it. The character of Leah represents my enthusiasm for the film when I first saw it; she is somewhat blind to issues of intersectionality in the film. The character of Daria has a level of anger that I felt in relation to first thinking through the dominance of the Caucasian female film star. Lastly Michelle is the character who has the greatest ambivalence in relation to the Drinker's position as a white woman who uses silence as a feminist strategy, reflecting my current position in relation the film. It is through this sustained engagement with this film and feminist film genealogies that I was able to create different viewpoints that rub up against each other in the video *She inches glass to break*, in an attempt to find my own feminist voice.

Gumbs has also spoken about herself as a community-accountable scholar; an example of this is her use of knowledge developed from discussions around the kitchen table as a vital tool to develop her writing.³⁷ She situates her community as not solely the academy, but highlights and values the knowledge production that occurs in the domestic and feminine space of other women at the kitchen table. She also links her writing practice within her own personal feminist practice, saying, "What are the things going on in our lives that we are calling intimacy that are enslaving us? I'm trying to figure out how to unlearn that personally, which is

³⁷ Bey.

political.”³⁸ These comments highlight the ways in which she implicates her own politics within a process of feminist change for herself and her writing. An aspect of my feminist practice is discussing feminist issues with peers in a feminist reading group organized with friends in the first year of my MFA or socially. This has become such an important part of my conceptual methodology that I began recording conversations I had with two female friends. These recordings were then incorporated verbatim into the script of *She inches glass to break*, most predominantly in the character Leah’s dialogue. Both Leah’s descriptions of Clarice Lispector’s stories and her tendency to dissociate when sexually harassed while riding her bike have a level of richness in their detail as they utilize another women’s personal in-body experience from which to build the video’s imagery.

Conclusion

At the heart of the kind of the feminist research produced in videos *She inches glass to break* and *Imaginary Chinese Restaurant*, are questions surrounding what the cultural impact is of layering both vernacular and academic language within my own artistic production. How can critique and deconstructive language of race and gender be infused with stories of how it feels to dance at a party for hours or painful moments of being sexually harassed on the street? This mode of video making looks to picture critique through conversations that are often not validated in patriarchal language, but in fact make up the basis for how many of us learn the most important lessons taught in communal life. In an earlier version of *She inches glass to break*, I had in fact cast the character of Daria as a Caucasian male. However in the development process I replaced him firstly with another actress, and then myself, as I realized that it was

³⁸ John Hopkins Center at Duke University, *Left of Black with Hortense Spillers and Alexis Pauline Gumbs*

important for the video to show a conversation between women of color, a conversation that could be seen as film criticism and *gossip*. As Hannah Black writes,

In a world where sexual violence is an everyday danger with few or no consequences, networks of gossips do their best to let each other know who cannot be trusted, where you should be careful, who has been lucky and who has not.³⁹

In this way, Black highlights the importance of gossip as a vernacular and gendered network of knowledge. Knowledge production that occurs in the domestic space in the presence of other women impact on how we understand why some of us cannot or choose not to speak in academic contexts. In *She inches glass to break*, vernacular language also occurs in the DIY aesthetic and materiality of the sets in which are constructed from brightly colored paper. The provisional quality and rather rough finish of these sets suggesting that world that these characters occupy is one that is self-created and domestic, instead of pointing to institutional space.

The best kind of intersectional feminist thought bridges both vernacular and academic language in a manner that charges the critique being made. For example, in bell hook's essay "Eating the Other: Desire and Resistance," she cites a conversation by a group of "very blond, very white, jock type boys"⁴⁰ were having in front of her whilst on the Yale University campus:

Seemingly unaware of my presence, these young men talked about

³⁹ Black, Hannah, "Witch-hunt" in *TANK Magazine*, Spring 2017, <https://tankmagazine.com/issue-70/features/hannah-black/>

⁴⁰ hooks, bell. *Black looks: race and representation*. Boston: South End Press, 1992, 23.

their plans to fuck as many girls from other racial ethnic groups as they could "catch" before graduation. They "ran" it down. Black girls were high on the list, Native American girls hard to find, Asian girls (all lumped into the same category), deemed easier to entice, were considered "prime targets." Talking about this overheard conversation with my students, I found that it was commonly accepted that one "shopped" for sexual partners in the same way one "shopped" for courses at Yale, and that race and ethnicity was a serious category on which selections were based.⁴¹

Hooks utilizes the overheard conversation about racialized desire to “set the scene” for her searing feminist critique of Western Imperialist sexual desire to “try out” people of color as sexual partners. It is this intersection of vernacular and academic language that I think has exceptional power, as it expands what we imagine research constitutes. The interweaving of academic with colloquial has the potential to be layered in complex ways as it takes feminist artistic practice outside of the ivory tower and into a site of antagonistic negotiation with forms of speech that we encounter day-to-day.

⁴¹ Hooks, 23.

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