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## Mina Loy and the Electric Body

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Mina Loy and the Electric Body

A Thesis Presented for the  
Master of Art  
Degree  
The University of Tennessee, Knoxville

Debra Elizabeth Cardell  
August 2013

Debra Cardell  
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Dedication

*For Mom, Dad, and Merl.*

*I could not have made it through the last two years without your support and encouragement.*

## Acknowledgements

*I would like to thank my committee for their patience and support.*

## Abstract

Mina Loy, modernist poet and artist, experimented with theories of feminism and class within her own artwork. This creates a complex point of interpretation for the reader because of overlap and contradiction. The concept of ekphrasis, when manipulated for Loy's context, opens possibilities of understanding Loy's many contradictions. Since the body and material world play a central role in Loy's art, ekphrasis is a lens through which we can begin to see the relationship between Loy's art and writing along with her feminism.

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## **Introduction: A Model for Modernist Ekphrasis: Mina Loy's Feminism and Aesthetics**

In the early twentieth century, when women felt pressure to keep quiet and uncritical, Mina Loy created art that boldly criticized marriage and motherhood. Though she was a visual artist first and foremost, Loy is most known for her enigmatic and feminist poetry. Loy focused primarily on women's experiences, bringing these out of the shadows in which they had been hidden, such as the act of giving birth or female sexual experience. Some of her first published poems are her central works in this vein such as "Parturition" (1914), a poem that describes the experience of giving birth, and "Love Songs" (1915), a poem from the viewpoint of a lover reflecting upon her failed love affair. These poems shock through graphic descriptions of human sexuality and the human body. In these early poems, Loy brings to life primal sexuality through visceral yet abstract descriptions of the body. Part of what makes her work subversive is this visceral quality. In her art, Loy intentionally contradicts herself repeatedly to act as a catalyst for the awakening of the reader, and she embraces the natural contradictions of working between different aesthetic genres. We can see this in Loy's definition of poetry as "prose bewitched, a music made of visual thoughts, the sound of an idea" (LLB 157). She positions herself as a visionary of "explorative being" ("International Psycho-Democracy" 276) who creates an artistic setting for penetrating life through ambiguity. Loy believed that "the aim of the artist is to miss the Absolute---the greatest creative gesture" ("Conversion" 1). Through this stance towards art, Loy creates a critical voice antagonistic towards established doctrines and institutions. Once the reader acknowledges the contradictory and multifaceted nature of Loy's textual and visual art, Loy's engagement with feminism and her portrayals of human experience become clearer revealing an aesthetic critical of societal structures of class, religion, gender, and race.

The concept of ekphrasis, in particular, helps us to access the contradictions and ambiguity in Loy's work. Ekphrasis is a central part of the theories and criticism I have formulated to describe Loy's art, particularly her poetry. I look past the more restrictive definitions of ekphrasis, which are also considered the more classical examples where ekphrasis is defined as the attempt to replicate a visual object through writing. When this definition is expanded and pushed, ekphrasis recognizes much more. I define this broader version of ekphrasis and the version central to this thesis as writing methods that attempt to connect the visual and linguistic worlds, and this attempt is particularly significant for Loy since she was both a visual artist and writer. I also define ekphrasis as aesthetics that connect cultural tradition through the reference of cultural signifiers. Loy uses ekphrasis to engage with cultural tradition, but in a very different way than ancient literature. For instance, in early literature, such as Homer's *The Odyssey*, ekphrastic moments occur by the description of key cultural figures and material related to them. In such early literature, these moments serve as a way to connect the poem to a cultural tradition, and it has been assumed that this goes away with modernity. Yet this is not the case. In reality, modern authors still engage with cultural tradition, yet do so from a critical standpoint.

Loy employs ekphrasis in both her visual and linguistic art, engaging with language primarily from a visual perspective. Indeed, it was impossible for Loy not to implement ekphrasis with her training in visual arts, the core of her aesthetic knowledge base. Valentine Cunningham insightfully describes the power of ekphrasis as that "all in all, then, what ekphrasis registers is the astonishing power of art to tell, convince, persuade, overwhelm, to mean strongly, to be with a transcendent force, to be a kind of truth: in other words, ekphrasis celebrates the wonder, the miracle, the shock of art, the aura of the art-object (to use Walter Benjamin's

words), its *thauma* (to use the Illiad's word)" (65). Loy reaches for truths about the restrictive nature of ideology through her art and manifestos and sees her role as an artist as someone who "shocks" with art. By understanding her engagement with the practice of ekphrasis and the foundational tenets of her aesthetic and feminist philosophy, we can gain a deeper understanding of Mina Loy and by extension the modernist aesthetic project, which manipulates the technique of ekphrasis to interrogate the major cultural shifts that affected perceptions of gender and race.

Part of Loy's ekphrastic practice can be seen by the way Loy's poetry conversed with the cultural moment of modernist experimentation and visual aesthetics. In these works we see a direct form of ekphrasis where a poet devotes the subject of a poem to a work of art. Loy's poetry is in dialogue with the visual world, and Loy also engaged with other artists' art in her poetry as seen in "Brancusi's Golden Bird" published in the *Waste Land* issue of the *Dial* (1914) and, later, "Ulysses" (1923), a poem in honor of Joyce's *Ulysses* (14). Two of the works at the high point of Loy's career, *Lunar Baedeker* and segments of her autobiographical epic *Anglo-Mongrels and the English Rose* (1923), were also published in this period. *Lunar Baedeker*, a collection of poems inspired by lunar travel, shows the possible range of Loy's poetry with many of the poems engaging with other artists' work directly, poems about or replicating other literary or visual arts by famous artists and writers including "Joyce's Ulysses," "Brancusi's Golden Bird," "Poe," and "'The Starry Sky' of Wyndham Lewis" (Potter & Hobson, 12-14).

The highest example of Loy's ekphrastic practice is seen in *Anglo-Mongrels*, a poem we will explore deeply later in this thesis. In this poem, Loy gives us insight into the childhood that shaped her career. Here, we see that Mina Loy's life began in hybridity. She grew up in a mixed marriage family. Her Jewish father, Sigmund Lowy, grew up in Hungary and moved to London

in his late teens. There he met Loy's English mother, Julia Bryan, a sheltered conservative Christian who shared the Victorian values prominent in the English middle class, which included anti-Semitism and stifling views on women. The way in which Loy's parents began their marriage and the way in which they dealt with racial tensions affected Loy personally and aesthetically (Conover lxiii-lxiv). Just as Loy's mother was sheltered in her childhood and teenage years, Loy was. And just as Loy's mother married early because of the ignorance that resulted from her sheltered childhood, Loy did as well. Loy became pregnant in 1903 after having an affair with fellow artist Stephen Haweis, which put her in a position where she was pressured to marry Haweis. Both women were guarded from the mystery of sex and paid major penalties with unexpected pregnancies that resulted in unhappy and unwanted marriages. The differences between mother and daughter were quite apparent, too. Loy, unlike her mother, had a profession to devote her attention to along with her children. Loy was also much more cognizant of issues that affected women such as marriage, children, and sex education (Burke 15-16).

By contrast, Loy's father, Sigmund, was a more positive influence on Loy, yet there was cultural strife between father and daughter. Sigmund pushed for Loy's education in the arts despite her mother's discouragement while also keeping himself culturally distant from his daughter. Julia, Loy's mother, raised her daughters as Christians, with the approval of Sigmund. As we will see in *Anglo-Mongrels*, the differing value systems of Loy's parents pulled Loy into different directions and created her ambivalence about her heritage and race in general. Sigmund's encouragement of Loy's artistic career made up for this strife with his daughter (Burke 15-17). Loy was the star pupil of impressionist painter Angelo Jank while studying in Munich in 1899. Two years later she studied under Augustus John in London. By the time Loy

was twenty-three, she was an elected member of the Salon d' Automne. Loy was heavily involved with her visual art career and did not begin publishing poetry until 1914 with the publication of "Aphorisms on Futurism" in *Camera Works*. Loy, one of the few female Futurists, had a close relationship with the most notable intellectuals involved with Futurism, and the most influential relationship was with Filippo Marinetti. Though her time with Futurism was short, her interaction with its tenets and especially Marinetti were great catalysts for Loy's writing career. After a difficult marriage with artist Stephen Haweis, Loy was reinvigorated by the Futurist call for action, non-conformity, and intellectual shock. By 1917, Loy was divorced from Haweis and living in New York. There she would meet the man she considered the love of her life, the draft-dodging poet and boxer Arthur Craven. Craven and Loy married soon after meeting, yet it would be a short marriage with Craven disappearing soon after their vows. This abandonment leads to the beginning of Loy's reclusion, though it would be many decades before Loy would disappear fully from the arts scene (Conover lviii-lxxvi).

Even in the twentieth century, it is easy to assume that women are often excluded from the canon because of gender bias in the literary world, but the case is more complex with Loy's literary reputation. Both Loy's visual and literary art careers were marked by scattered endeavors. Throughout the twenties she became immersed in a lampshade business with the goal of creating cash flow and a career in design; however, money was always an issue. Loy had an entrepreneurial spirit but not the money or luck to have a successful business (Conover lxxii-lxxiv). That being said, Loy's lampshade business could have been successful simply by the merit of Loy's work if she had had more investors, and even with these difficulties, the business was gaining a growing reputation in lampshade design at its high point. Endeavors such as this business or later work as an art agent ultimately pulled Loy away from her writing career. Loy

was a visual artist first and foremost and simply devoted more time in marketing and producing her visual art, not her literary art. The fact that Loy continued to keep her presence in the literary world as much as she did in her later years is impressive by itself when one considers the huge divide Loy juggled between the literary and visual art worlds.

Loy's challenges personally and intellectually greatly influenced her feminism and aesthetics. To understand Loy's feminism, one must understand that Loy is a feminist essentialist. She thinks that women's bodies are essentially different from men's bodies, but unlike morally conservative essentialists, she thinks these differences have the potential to empower women rather than to subjugate them to restrictive rules and roles. Loy in fact calls for the "absolute demolition" of outdated conservative value systems (153). Her form of essentialism valorizes women and emphasizes the inherent unity between their bodies, thoughts, and actions. To Loy, women are oppressed by the traditional institution of marriage and, by extension, the culture of purity and virginity surrounding marriage in the Victorian and post-Victorian era leaves women the only option of being a "parasite, prostitute, or negation" (LLB, Conover 154). In response to the marriage institution, Loy advocates that women should not overly identify with the identity of mother or mistress but should instead embrace their sexuality without shame. Women should also acknowledge that they are different from men, and Loy argues that women only restrict themselves by trying to be the equal to men. We cannot, that is, have it all, for while we may have professions, it is often with the sacrifice of motherhood. Though Loy does emphasize the potential that motherhood has to raise women to new plateaus of consciousness, these plateaus can only be reached if society's dictums do not consume the woman first.

Consciousness for Loy is creative and directly connected to the body *and* art. She views true artists as those who avoid societal indoctrinations and are able to think beyond those expectations and, therefore, they can guide the public away from these expectations to a certain degree by communicating new ideas through the arts. According to Loy, bodily and material transformations act as a channel for changing consciousness by causing shifts in our perceptions of reality, and since women have the ability to reproduce, they have special abilities to unite thought with action and creation just the same as artists have. Both artists and women, then, have a responsibility to be free from societal conditioning because of their ability to create. Loy's genius lies in how she manipulates visual images and words to blur lines of visual and literary art while also illuminating societal pressures put on people, especially women. As such, Loy's visual and literary art is both a performance and a polemic. Loy embraces contradiction and therefore easily blurs the lines between aesthetics and political critiques of society, and by extension illuminates the contradictions of society and identity. The contradictions in her art and polemics align with her feminist agenda to destroy old values by undermining them, and thereby encouraging her viewers and readers to do the same, and Loy undermines ideologies in important ways through ekphrasis: She makes emotions and human experience into objects, simultaneously removing us from our reality so that we can see the ideologies we live with daily. Through wit, abstract vocabulary, and complex syntax, Loy brings us closer to understanding the commodification of flesh and emotions in the early twentieth century.

In her art and polemics, Loy not only focuses on the commodification of woman's flesh; she also focuses on racial and class disparities. Loy's vision of race and class by the end of her life was that of a hybrid racial ideal. We see the beginning of this vision in *Anglo-Mongrels and the English Rose*. Loy's engagement with race, in many instances, is ambiguous in terms of

what racial theories and opinions she held. For instance, in “Photos of Pogrom,” Loy is extremely sympathetic to the Jewish victims of the holocaust, yet, in *Anglo-Mongrels*, Loy is antagonistic towards Jews though part Jewish herself. This contradiction is understandable when one considers Loy’s childhood in a mixed race family, and though abrasive at times, *Anglo-Mongrels* simultaneously criticizes both her parents’ heritage while showing the vulnerability of each culture Loy belongs to. Though this contradiction is present, Loy ultimately sees race as a creative aspect of evolution, both physical and spiritual as seen in *History of Religion and Eros*. Her views were eugenic based, which was common during the time; however, Loy ultimately advocates for cultural hybridity. The fact that Loy was multi-ethnic and had children who were multi-ethnic is proof of my own theory that by the end of her life, Loy viewed race as directly linked to the creative element of sexuality, which she saw as causing the creative blending of a new humanity inspired by the ecstatic nature of sexuality, particularly a female sexuality that Loy considered directly linked to the evolution of humanity. Ultimately, as we will explore, Loy’s benevolent views on race shine through in her artistic creations.

Loy intended to be hard to label or classify, and this is why I think she will be a continually ‘rediscovered’ poet in the canon. Out of the spectrum of Loy criticism produced, the most informative recent criticism for my project is Jessica Burstein’s *Cold Modernism* and Susanne Zelazo’s “Altered Observation of Modern Eyes’: Mina Loy’s Collages, and Multisensual Aesthetics.” Both of these works connect Loy’s abstract complexity linguistically and visually to her personal philosophy. In the case of Jessica Burstein’s *Cold Modernism*, we have a theory wherein the “the mind does not exist, let alone matter—or it does matter, but in the physical sense” (2). In other words, the mind does not exist in cold modern aesthetics in any ethereal sense. Instead, it is just another point of the body, another piece of human body. We



get the sense of this mind and body relationship in Loy's work in that Loy creates emotions and experience into objects through analogy. Loy disconnects ideologies from logical materiality. Burstein notes that "when mentioned today, Loy is cast primarily as a poet, but it is my hope that future readers will see her as something more like an entrepreneur whose work included words as well as objects, like lampshades" (6). When Burstein likens Loy to an entrepreneur, she illuminates one aspect of Loy's ekphrastic aesthetic identity. Loy invests emotional and intellectual energy into objects. The body and the material world is the supreme channel for all creativity to Loy. As we will later see in "History of Religion and Eros," this aesthetic investment produces a world wherein we find ecstasy and temporary spiritual and physical harmony through sex. Burstein's analogy is also useful because it illuminates Loy's pragmatic approach to her art and philosophy. Loy easily adapts theories from a variety of intellectual and spiritual branches. For instances, as Carolyn Burke exhibits in *Being Modern*, Loy converted to Christian Science after her child was 'cured' by a Christian Scientist healer; as can be seen with Loy's conversion to Christian Science, Loy uses parts of any philosophy that worked for her and ignores or makes fun of the rest of the philosophy, just as she jumps between genres visually and linguistically. This creative use of ideological parts aligns with Loy's aesthetic use of parts in the form of collage and montage to capture the essence of arguments concerning feminism. We also see this entrepreneurial spirit in Loy's many sketches of fashion and home inventions that Burstein has recently analyzed. Loy's collage method linguistically and aesthetically corresponds with Burstein's theories of cold modernism in the way that Loy disconnects the body from its traditional depictions and thus challenges our own concepts about our bodies.

We further see how Loy's visual art engages with her literature through Suzanne Zelazo's recent theory of multisensuality, a theory central to Loy's ekphrasis. Zelazo argues that it is not

possible to disconnect Loy's visual art career from her literary endeavors because the style in both is the same. This "multisensuality" is similar to Pound's logopoeia ("a dance of intelligence among words and ideas and modification of ideas and characters") (1), a term Pound came up with to describe the works of Loy and Marianne Moore. Multisensuality is further defined by Zelazo as "somatic-orientated aesthetics: theories and practices that aim, fundamentally, to substantiate the female artist" (2). Zelazo explains that "multisensuality attempts to hold on to the body in the face of the machine, but also uses the body as a machine, expanding the limits of normative sensual experience" (2). This perspective of the body is similar to Burstein's theories concerning Loy's cold modernism in the sense that the body is treated like a machine, a vehicle for action and experience. Technology and the body work in conjunction in both Burstein's and Zelazo's theories. Loy's multisensual art combats the objectification of women's bodies by providing experiences to the readers so they can experience her world and body—thereby moving woman's body away from objectification. Zelazo characterizes Loy as having "integrationist tendencies" (1) in that in her work she integrates different genres while also creating an international network of friends and colleagues with other artists and writers. To understand the integration of visual and textual artistic techniques, Zelazo redefines collage, which she argues can also explain Loy's "appreciation of her own body as sensually charged and relational." This aesthetic disposition "enabled Loy to ascertain the simultaneity of present absence, connectivity and juxtaposition characterizing collage" (1).

Zelazo's theory illustrates as well that language, like the body, is a physical vehicle for Loy and that she likes to experiment with the relationship between the material world, including the human body, and language. Zelazo points out that Loy's typographical innovations should be tied with this physicality articulating "a gap in our traditional use and understanding of the

English language, realizing its insufficiency and defying gender authority as Loy satirizes . . . patriarchal misogyny” (8). Loy is very aware of the limitations language can put on our perceptions and by extension our consciousness, but she also saw it as a tool connected to the physical world. The major point that Zelazo focuses on is the fact that “Loy’s textual explorations of linguistic materiality are not distinct from the progression in her visual work from symbolism to surrealism and from painting to collages and assemblages. The progression of Loy’s aesthetic occurs between genres and must be considered as reciprocally influential rather than as independent” (8). In other words, Loy uses words as a painter would use paint, which opens up her text to break through illusions of reality. By using language as a paint palette or other matter, Loy encourages the reader to revise their ideas of consciousness and human perception. In addition, this linguistic materiality that Zelazo describes is what makes Loy’s work ekphrastic in that Loy’s art is constantly attempting to capture that “thauma” or thing as Cunningham describes it through the constant dialogue with visual arts, an art form dependent on the material world and connected to the material world in ways language-based arts cannot connect because of the distance of the material world from language. This claim is also important in regard to her feminism because her art’s ekphrastic nature reflects women’s experiences.

Since Loy’s work engages with the reproductive politics of the time, it is important to understand the texts that influenced Loy’s feminist views. These connections are mapped out well in Paul Peppis’s analysis of scientist and reproductive rights advocate Marie Stopes’s influence on Loy’s literature. Peppis’s main focus is on Stopes’s *Married Love* (1918) and Loy’s “Songs To Joannes” (1914) and “Feminist Manifesto” (c. 1914). These works map out the reconfiguration of gender roles during the WWI period through Stopes’s and Loy’s similar

rhetoric. Stopes and Loy intermingle scientific, religious, and sentimental discourse, and “understand language as the scene and material of conceptual change, [that] enables and constrains reform” (562). Peppis sees both Stopes and Loy as liberators of language from Victorian tradition and inhibitions. The comparison of these two writers illuminates the feminist ideas Loy was engaging with while writing “Feminist Manifesto” and further illustrates the hybrid nature of Loy’s work in that she is utilizing sexology and reproductive rhetoric along with futurism. Though Stopes and Loy were working in extremely different genres, they were also using much of the same language. Both advocated a woman owning her sexuality but under different conditions.

Peppis finds that both women compromise in their rhetoric with their use of common propaganda of the time. According to Peppis, “Loy’s and Stopes’s texts, by bringing together arguments of social purity and free love, resist certain oppositions of the debate. Both writers reform these arguments by altering the languages in which they were framed” (566). Though Stopes’s work is essentially a marriage manual, this work has much in common with modernist texts by such authors as Woolf, D.H. Lawrence, and Loy in light of Stopes’s awareness of the power of mixing sentimental and scientific discourse and thereby changing gender and sex culture. Whereas Stopes does this through her advocacy of mutual orgasm in sex within marriage, Loy stresses the limitations of liberating language from old gender structures. Particularly, in “Parturition” and “Feminist Manifesto,” we see the echoes of the *Freewoman*’s rhetoric that reproduction under the right conditions (intense passion) will produce a “Love Child,” insinuating that these children are hardier and more evolved than children produced under other circumstances. In “Parturition,” we see how the mother is experiencing another level of consciousness while giving birth, and in “Feminist Manifesto,” Loy calls for the right for

women to reproduce whether single or married. In one sense, Loy illuminates the cracks within this hybrid rhetoric of femininity, but she also shows possibilities for women to reclaim their bodies through changing language and artistic subjects (“Parturition”).

Where Peppis traces the reproductive rhetoric employed in Loy’s polemics and poetry, Harris explores Loy’s “Feminist Manifesto” from the standpoint of Futurism. Loy repudiates old values put upon women, and, as Harris points out, “femininity is precariously situated in this manifesto” (20) with Loy presenting seemingly contradictory concepts of femininity. According to Harris, Loy’s early writing portrays femininity as “debilitating” and even degrading, but it nevertheless insists that through this degrading state women have the ability to “become everything” (21). Harris shows us that Loy was most likely influenced by parts of *Sex and Character* by Dora Marsden in the *Freewoman* of 1912 who “attempted to imagine and will into being a radically new woman in opposition to the mass of ordinary or typical women” (22). Though creation of a new woman was a project for both Marsden and Loy, there is a clear line of gynophobic rhetoric in both women’s works, and their attempts to create this new woman often involve repudiating characteristics associated with womanhood. Harris traces the majority of Loy’s gynophobic rhetoric to the influence of Futurism on her philosophy during that time, but Harris also points out that Loy never completely gives up the label of woman or certain aspects of womanhood in her literature.

Harris concludes by arguing that many of Loy’s early works, such as her unfinished novel *Possession*, have been wrongly categorized as pure memoir when they should really be studied as Loy’s first forays into experimental writing and Futurism. This assertion leads Harris to the conclusion that one of Loy’s main intentions as a writer is to reveal women’s true experiences of sexuality. These explorations, especially in “Songs,” are steeped in scientific

rhetoric but “produce no consistent scientific elucidation, but rather a disaggregation of voices, emotions, poses, declarations and vocabularies” (39). Harris sees the speaker’s engagement with femininity in “Songs” as slippery, simultaneously taking on designated femaleness while also leaving certain aspects of femaleness intact within herself. In conclusion, Harris argues that the strong new woman of “Feminist Manifesto” must also be put beside this weaker speaker we see in “Songs” in order to understand the contradictions Loy was working with in an attempt to develop a new feminism.

Janet Lyon’s analysis of Loy’s manifestoes coincides with Harris’s arguments in many ways. Lyon argues that “Feminist Manifesto” reproduces restrictive cultural roles and reproductive ideology. She also argues that Loy’s advocacy for the right to maternity “is tied to the most corrupt component of the contemporary birth control movement”---“the eugenics argument that certain ‘undesirable’ populations must be offset by the offspring of ‘superior’ women” (155). Here, Lyon’s critique of the eugenic connections in Loy’s work illuminates the intimate tie between Loy’s feminism and views on race. It is not possible to give Loy’s work a balanced critique without acknowledging this connection. For Loy, men and women are equally culpable in being “the parasitic and the exploited, hinged together by ‘the sexual embrace’” (155). In addition, Loy’s “Feminist Manifesto” is steeped in the apparatus of avant-garde production, “which is to say that she wrote as a self identified woman artist,” as a reflection, then, of how she was unwilling to hand over the term “woman” and how Loy used female identity to “deconstruct avant-garde masculinism” (156).

Loy criticism overall falls into the two above categories: aesthetic theory or feminist theory. Theories that work and give Loy justice acknowledge the multiple influences on Loy’s

feminism and aesthetics since these two elements are central to understanding Loy's art and life. These multiple influences are also one reason why Loy's work can appear contradictory. The text, body, and spirit are plastic and electric for Loy, and this is why ekphrasis is a key term to utilize when attempting to understand this enigmatic artist. Like a magician who shocks with her magic, Loy uses art as a way to jar society away from oppressive ideologies. In Loy's ideal world, the artist is priestess and queen. Loy sees herself as a Cassandra of aesthetics and by extension philosophy because of the emphasis she puts on the female artist's supreme worldview. This thesis will trace and define what high consciousness is to Loy and how it relates to the body. Like Jean Toomer and Adrienne Rich, Loy attempted to create utopias through her art and polemics. I will also show how Loy's eugenic theories analyzed by some critics as racist are a projection of our current culture onto Loy's culture. Ultimately, Loy aimed to move beyond race to reach a form of high consciousness. And just as she aims to move beyond race, Loy aims to move beyond genre, blending different aesthetic point of views from visual, aural, oracular, and linguistic aesthetic systems.

Understanding Loy's contradictions requires a deep dissection of her major polemics such as her "Feminist Manifesto" and her related poetry such as "Songs to Joannes," "Parturition," "Anglo-Mongrels and the English Rose," works I like to think of as Loy's body politics and, thus, deeply involved with ecstasy and eros. I will show how Loy's art is often a reaction to the values of the generation of Victorians preceding Loy and how this generation's values are deeply tied to Loy's identity and views on race. Loy's art attempts to offer a vision of race that goes beyond the body and beyond eugenics as much as was possible employing the rhetoric with which she was working. I will also show how Loy is not a gynophobe but, instead, a gynocentric feminist. She believes women have special powers of creation because of their

physical ability to create children, and she ultimately thinks that both the human body, male, female, or otherwise, has the ability to create through Eros and thereby become closer to God. Loy's art is the ultimate view into Loy's philosophies and worldview. She understands the limitation of human perception and shows this in her art, which brings me to my main argument that Loy was a mystic artist who viewed the body and art as a channel to raise human consciousness, and she attempts to be a part of this development of consciousness through the application of modernist and aesthetic hybridity, in other words, through modern ekphrasis. I conclude this project with an analysis of my argument and research in relation to the classroom with two developed lesson plans for fifty-minute classes. I will also conclude with an analysis of the utility of Loy's literature in the classroom



## Chapter I: Electricity and Eros

Loy values sex, sexuality and sensuality while also being ambivalent about the structures around sexuality. To understand Loy's outlook on the body, we must first understand her views on the unseen. According to Loy, "man is a covered entrance to infinity" (244). The sensual world is the gateway to the spiritual. This universal use of 'man' implies her vision of potential for all humans. Loy's vision of spirituality, aesthetics, and eros are thus interlocked, though at times conflicted, and this interlocked nature is mirrored in Loy's ekphrastic practice. Spiritual and philosophical systems interested Loy throughout her life, and she blended ideas from these systems with her aesthetics. According to Maeera Shreiber, Loy's "spiritual journey included dipping into Christian Science, metaphysics (Bergson), theosophy, and non-denominational versions of mysticism" (469). Her later dedication to Christian Science was because of its foundations in idealism, not faith (Vetter 50). "History of Religion and Eros," most likely written in her later years, is one of the most telling essays Loy wrote concerning her views on spirituality. This work tells us how Loy connected the body to power and explains the history of "system[s] for investigating the Power Universe to further man's 'Domination over all things'" ("History" 237) as well as showing us how Loy viewed universal power in relation to the human body. These forces combined give individuals the ability to break free from the constructs of gender, race, class, and religion. Further, the ekphrastic nature of her more technologically and metaphorically illuminated poetry is a reflection of the new invention of electricity Loy engaged with as an artist and, more specifically, as a lamp designer<sup>1</sup>. Electricity acts as an equal opportunity technology that gives humanity the means to move beyond our societal constructs.

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<sup>1</sup> "Shades of Meaning: Mina Loy's Poetics of Luminous Opacity" by Julie Gonnering Lein gives an in-depth overview of Loy's lampshade designing and Loy's poetry. This chapter only briefly hits upon one of Loy's many careers.

When looking at Loy's poetry in the context of "History," we are given insight into how Loy viewed the material world in relation to the human spirit and the capability of the human body to channel electric-eros, a unifying principle of creative evolution.

"History" tells the history of power in the universe, and Loy divides the investigators of this power on a Western and Eastern line with "Asiatic-mystic-scientist" taking one approach and "occidental scientist" taking another approach (238). Loy explains that "the Asiatic-mystic-scientist contacted Power" through meditation. Power here is defined as a "creative dynamism consciously operative, [and a] solely constructive" force (238), which corresponds with Bergson's theories of creative evolution, especially the theory that life evolves out of the desire to create (Russell 793). By contrast, "the occidental scientist contacts 'force,'" which Loy defines as "merely a derivative of Power isolated by limitation of intellect from its conscious motivation. In force lies peril, destruction, fragmentation RELIGION'S DAMNATION" ("History" 238). Loy's introduction seems to mark her as sympathetic to mysticism, but she soon clarifies her stance by summarizing the mystics' devolution since early contact with Power. Loy initially describes these mystics as "sufficient for cooperating with the electric inspiration of Deity. The fingers tapered to point upward serving as antennae" (224), but later on she turns this mystical and electrical act into a satire in which mystics, "exercisers of Spirit sat, incessantly asleep in public places, their finger-nails growing through the palms of their hands" (245). These early mystics did make contact with power through meditation, but they disconnected with the rest of the world, which caused their knowledge to become inaccessible to non-mystics. The arcane texts mystics left behind created dogma, which led to religion.

Westerners, by contrast, "easily accepted it as the mystery to end all mysteries: the nothing-at-all" ("History" 239), which speaks to the scientific method embraced by Westerners.

This Western reasoning nevertheless destroyed mysteries through logic. Loy states, “to the earliest disciples, the mystic system proved communicable. But all systems of spiritual exercise come to a crisis incurring decreased comprehension.” As such, “books of mystic instruction, written in code conveyed nothing of their real significance to the uninitiated” (245). This complex summary brings Loy to her thesis. Sex or “eros” is the means by which humanity can come into contact with “the secret Universe of omniscient creative impetus” (“History” 237). Religion brought about the moral disassociations with eros, whereas the Western scientist denies its existence because of the demand for physical and quantifiable proof, a world view unfriendly to the concept of mystery. Loy’s revelation of the suppression of sex’s power risks disrupting both the spiritual and secular world since “eros is the one transmission from the power universe to cross those frontiers unmodified metaphysically intact, yet available to sensate experience” (251). Eros transfers power from the power universe without modification of the energy and is immediately available through the senses. By contrast, the occidental scientist and Asiatic mystic must use technology or tools to harness this “power universe.” Loy illustrates this with verse:

The oriental attained levitation.

The occidental flies a bomber.

The oriental aspiration contacted Power

The occidental, force:

The distinction:--

POWER: creative dynamism, consciously operative, solely constructive.<sup>2</sup> In

contacting power, lies immunity to the destructive Religion’s salvation.

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<sup>2</sup> “The agonies of life-into-death result from the undeveloped consciousness of other larger dimensions of our animation” (FT1 “History”).

FORCE merely a derivative of Power isolated, by limitation of intellect from its conscious motivation. (238)

Loy's electric eros connects mind, body, and spirit. According to Loy, "Eros is also an electric release (The '*Flesh*' again, like the terrain, an instrument.) Safety valve for an electro neural system in its stress of sensitizing the human organism. Eros recharges the electric battery of the nervous system" (250). Loy implies that healthy morality is sexually uninhibited and calls for the "substitution of 'sex morality' for humane morality" (250). She even goes to great lengths to begin reclaiming the sexual act by giving it the name eros explaining that "*Sex!* This word, at last, so overflows with misassociations. To clarify its future significance, sex must be renamed. Meanwhile, for 'sex' let us substitute *Eros*. Somehow the sound of the Greek cupid survives unsullied; unlike longer words derived from it" (247). And it is easy to forget that sex as we know it in scientific terms is a fairly new way of viewing the act of intercourse. The OED cites the first use of the word "sex" to mean sexual intercourse in 1921. This change reflects the increasingly scientific view of intercourse.

According to Loy, genres and bodies are living systems that should interact with one another and collaborate. This call for collaboration between bodies implies that bodies are vehicles for the spiritual much like a piece of technology. Sex acts as a calibrator to the human body and spirit. When setting "History" beside earlier works such as "Feminist Manifesto," Loy's theories are better understood. For instance, in "Feminist Manifesto" Loy argues:

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

personal evolution--- For the harmony of the race, each individual should be the expression of an easy & ample interpenetration of the male & female temperaments (155).

Some critics, such as Janet Lyon, focus on the eugenics thread we can see in this passage. Though it is eugenic in its essence, I don't see where the rhetoric is aiming for an ideal race rather than the human race when Loy advocates superior motherhood. When Loy says that women should aim for certain ideals, Loy advocates for "psychic development," not racial development. Also, because of Loy's circular and complicated writing style, it is hard to see at first glance that Loy is arguing for planned pregnancies. Loy's focus in this passage is geared towards pushing women of all races to be conscious of their reproductive powers in practical and philosophical terms. Loy's focus for her vision of human evolution lies in the act of sex and reproduction, not on the color of the participants. This early writing of Loy's actually is consistent with "History" in envisioning a future human evolution in psychic and spiritual terms. In Loy's world, we evolve from the sex act on multiple levels: physically, emotionally, intellectually, and spiritually.

Loy ends "History" with a tirade against Freud and psychology, a tirade she returns to in "Conversion." "Conversion" aligns with Loy's accusations towards religion in "History" but takes her argument from "History" further by claiming that psychology is the new religion of the 20<sup>th</sup> century. In the last paragraph of "History," Loy argues, "Satan's blame has now been transferred to the psyche" (251). By contrast, "Conversion" opens with the proclamation that "the obsessions prescribed by the Holy Church of Rome, are re-edited by the Psychoanalyst" (227). Here we see a continuation of "History" through the Psychoanalyst's "re-edit," which also implies that the Church did not invent the first set of obsessions but instead inherited them

from the mystics before them. Loy goes on to argue that psychoanalysis is the “confessional for neurotics and it will not be long before they are fitted with domestic appliances” (227). Women are clearly concerned with this editing more than men, as seen in Loy’s use of “neurotic,” a word commonly associated with women in the early twentieth century. In this essay, women are predators of the psyche:

Our Virgin Mary has resuscitated in the incest complex. . . . In psycho-analytic literature, at least, we are offered no escape from the post-natal womb of the Eternal Mother/ And the Eternal Mother devours her literary kittens. . . . (227)

One of the major criticisms Loy has of psychoanalysis is the oppressed position it keeps women in symbolically. Loy’s often quoted statement that “the aim of the artist is to miss the absolute” comes from “Conversion” and is part of a larger critique of D.H. Lawrence and other artists who rely on the theories of psychoanalysis to create their art. Loy sees this indebtedness as a corrupt alliance with Freud and a subtle continuation of the Church’s project of sexual purification. Suzanne Hobson points out that Loy’s critique of psychoanalysis is a reaction to a trend of modernist authors such as H.D. who had essentially created a religion out of psychoanalysis. According to Loy, Freud “had turned a mysterious life-force into a dogmatic duty,” which replicates the institution of marriage in many religions. Ultimately, Loy’s central criticism of Freud is that his theories do not leave room for creativity (Hobson 252). Loy is arguing that Freud created a new system that undermines the positive power of human sexuality. Sex is simply demonized within a new system of taboo that can also be found in Church ideology.

Loy would find the “creative evolution” she was looking for in the works of Henri Bergson. Though Loy criticizes her contemporaries for turning psychoanalysis into a new religion and by extension, a moral system, Loy bought into her own theorist in Bergson, who, as

Allen Dunn notes, had his own dangerous ethos. Dunn describes Bergsonism as establishing “the primacy of immediate consciousness but only by rendering this consciousness inaccessible to both language and rational thought” (234). This dislocated reason and consciousness fit well into Loy’s dislocated and fractured spirituality, and it is not surprising that Loy, like many of her Modernist peers, was influenced and attracted by Bergson’s scientific and visual rhetoric. Henri Bergson was not only a popular theorist among modernist intellectuals, but also, as Bertrand Russell points out, Bergson’s theories are based in the assumption that the world is essentially creative, “that evolution is truly *creative*, like the work of an artist,” and I suspect that this is one of the reasons Loy’s philosophy, and particularly “History,” uses parts of Bergson’s philosophy in conjunction with Christian Science (793). We can see this Bergsonian influence in the way her art focuses on movement and time and in Loy’s ambivalence towards the intellect. The ekphrastic nature of this borrowing can be clearly seen in Loy’s “Parturition” wherein she replicates the rhythm and pain of parturition but also advocates for a different ideology of motherhood by insinuating that the modern archetype of the mother should be different from past icons of motherhood.

“Parturition,” one of the first poems published by Loy, demonstrates the ecstasy and electricity found in “History.” Loy opens “Parturition” with “I am the centre/ Of a circle of pain” (1-2), signifying the speaker’s center in pain and also the circle as a symbol of the vagina. Within “History,” circles also play an important part. Loy describes

the eastern attitude of prayer, the joined palm, the soles of the feet pressed flatly together, precluding the ego-electricity from running off into the ground as in our bi-ped activity, constrained it, through circling and recircling, to vivifying accumulation sufficient for cooperating with the electric inspiration of Deity. (“History” 244)

The pain of parturition acts in a similar way as does eros in propelling spiritual reintegration. Pain, pleasure, or prayer allow us to transcend intellect to access instinct, yet another element of Bergsonism we see in Loy's writing. Instead of the pleasure found in sex, parturition brings pain, which "surpassing itself/ Becomes Exotic/ And the ego succeeds in unifying positive and negative poles of sensation" ("Parturition" 62-63). Here, the description of "poles" corresponds with Loy's subtitles in "History" such as "The Elevational Magnet" and "Electric Eros." A similar vocabulary is used in "Parturition" as in "History of Religion and Eros" with such phrases as "Pain is no stronger than the resisting force," "physiological potentiality" and "congested cosmos of agony" ("Parturition" 24, 19, 6). Eros and pain are inextricably linked in their ability to make us exceed our own boundaries of human potential.

Woman in parturition is positioned as an elevated being but also ironically juxtaposed to female social inferiority: "The irresponsibility of the male/ Leaves woman her superior Inferiority" ("Parturition" 49). The poem ends with these lines:

Each woman-of-the people  
Wearing a halo  
A ludicrous little halo  
Of which she is sublimely unaware. (125-128)

In "History," "this light, a lucence transpiercing the light of the world, is handed down to us in the symbol halo; now passed off as primitive decoration, while modern science uses the infra-red" (7). Loy here illustrates the polar differences between mysticism and science. The infra-red and halo are only remnants of the energy making devices they represent. Further, woman's sacredness in childbearing is desecrated by the cheap glorification of religion. Religion's role in "Parturition" coincides with religion's treatment in "History" in the sense that religion devalues



the physical and spiritual aspects of life. “Parturition” is directly connected with the spiritual developments that can occur through experimentation with power because pregnancy and parturition are examples of matter exceeding itself by producing another human being. These connections also emphasize the importance Loy put on childbearing. In many ways, “Parturition” is a poetic demonstration of the rhetoric in “History” while also serving as a modern replacement of religious motherhood symbolism. This new vision of creation integrates evolution, ekphrasis, and energy.

Electricity, energy, and light are thus central themes in Loy’s “History” and poetry. The focus on these elements in Loy’s writing should not surprise us since electricity and artificial light were still new and spellbinding inventions in the early twentieth century. Any new technology simultaneously triggers excitement and fear in consumers, and we see both these emotions in Loy’s writing (Lein 617). This is reflected in the way, for instance, that Loy categorizes electricity into different types. In several instances she refers to deific electricity and electric eros, with electric eros appearing to be her supreme type of electricity. Power, force, and electricity are channeled forms of the supreme power universe Loy introduces in the first section of “History.” Though Loy’s usage of “electricity” is confusing and illogical at times, it speaks to a lineage of poets who connoted electricity with the human body. As Paul Gilmore points out in “Romantic Electricity,” not only was there Walt Whitman’s body electric but a range of poetics being associated with electricity in the mid-nineteenth century (473). In the examples Gilmore provides,

the electric. . . . seems to refer to some intensified level of consciousness connected to the insights of poetic genius. And such a connotation seems, at best, to locate the electric

in some ideal sphere, a product of consciousness, imagination, or affective sympathy detached from the material world. (473)

Loy's twentieth-century electricity is similar in that the body is a channel for electricity and Loy claims that future eros will "subordinate mere flesh to vibrational co-ordination promoting release of the intrinsic electrification inducing Eros-Bliss" (History 249). Gilmore explains, "by the mid-eighteenth century, electricity functioned as a powerful metaphor of emotional connection, bodily excitement, and artistic power" (474). Though Gilmore is describing mid-eighteenth century views of electricity, we see similar views throughout Loy's body of work, with the usage of electricity and, by extension, the same thing, energy, often playing a central role. For this reason, Loy's short career as a lampshade designer creates other implications for her lyric. Loy is in dialogue with the human inner spark but also the new sparks of technology. Electric-eros is the means to evolve beyond our flesh and connect us to a universal power larger than ourselves.

We can see this dialogue with technology in one of Loy's *Lunar Baedeker* poems, a title which signifies an otherworldly guide to the magical, luminescent qualities of the moon. *Lunar Baedeker*'s opening poem "Lunar Baedeker" opens with a "silver Lucifer" who "serves/cocaine in cornucopia/ To some somnambulists" (1-4). This imagery conveys a white and silver world of sleepwalkers being jarred to action by a drug. "Stelleric signs" surround us, announcing "WING SHOWS ON STARWAY/ ZODIAC CAROUSAL," and "NOCTURNAL CYCLOPS/ CRYSTAL CONCUBINE" (24-26, 47-48). Eros enters this poem, yet it is inactive and departing from this lunar world:

Onyx-eyed Odalisques  
and ornithologists

[who] observe

the flight

of Eros obsolete. (lines 39-43)

According to Loy biographer Carolyn Burke, “it is clear that while we might attend to the poem’s ‘spectacular’ verbal surface, [an earlier] generation read [*Lunar Baedeker*] differently. Attuned to a mental universe inhabited by Heaven and Hell, God and Lucifer, they saw in Mina’s rosary a yearning for spiritual solace” (Burke 323). Even amidst seeming chaos and fantasy, Loy brings order through rhyme, alliteration, assonance, and consonance. Burke points out that the original order of the poems conveys a devotional quality, with “Lunar Baedeker” followed by “Apology of Genius.” Concerning *Lunar Baedeker*, young American poet Yvor Winters wrote that “whether her poetic subject was understood as the soul or as the subconscious . . . one could not help noticing in her treatment of it” a “strange feeling for the most subterranean of human reactions” (Burke 323). But these explanations are not quite satisfying when you consider the antagonistic relationship Loy had with the moral structures imposed by religion. Though I do think Loy was mimicking devotional books, I think she was critiquing what we perceive as spiritual and how the material world relates to the spiritual in a humorous way. In Loy’s spiritual world view, the material world and by extension the human body cannot be ignored, as some artists wish. The use of Lucifer complicates the religious elements that Burke and Winters argue as dominating the poem. That is, Lucifer, a fallen angel, a messenger of divinity fallen to the material world, our earth, complicates the devotional genre “Lunar Baedeker” replicates, with Lucifer dominating this poem rather than God.

Though “Lunar Baedeker” has clear connections to religious devotionals, the lunar theme of the poem is also connected to a changing world view wherein science and technology

dominate our psyches along with our ideas of God. The moon, as we can easily forget, was an intriguing mystery in the early twentieth century in ways we have never experienced. Loy most likely was aware of the cultural speculation around the moon such as the Great Moon Hoax of 1835 published in the *New York Sun*. The hoax included illustrations similar to Loy's vision of the moon in that the inhabitants look devil-like and there is a surreal quality to the inhabitants, which include these flying devils along with unicorns and other bizarre animals.



Figure 1. Museum of Hoax

Though I was unable to find any evidence that Loy was inspired by this hoax, it does capture the speculation spurred by a developing scientific world view. As a woman born in 1892, Loy could have been exposed to such phenomena as this hoax. Her fantastical visions of this lunar landscape is a product of the twentieth century as much as the nineteenth century. The concept of the Baedeker is a nineteenth century invention. As with most modernist creations, *Lunar Baedeker* and the poems in it are deeply connected to the nineteenth century. Loy subverts the genre by creating an unworldly and modernist Baedeker while also challenging symbolic significance of nineteenth-century inventions.

“Apology of Genius” continues with this focus on light and subversion of genre but with geniuses who proclaim they are

Lepers of the moon

all magically diseased

we come among you

innocent of our luminous sores. (4-8)

Within this poem, genius is “Ostracized . . . with God” (1), thus a part of the divine, but simultaneously persecuted for this divine elevation. The title “Apology of Genius” implicates Loy as a fellow artist and as the subject, but also what Suzanne Hobson calls the “artist-angel-bum,” a figure prevalent in Loy’s early and late work. I think we can take Hobson’s argument one step further and say that artistic genius and the divine are embodied in bum figures who are grotesque and disfigured. It is as if these figures’ break from the pain of the physical world brings them closer to a spiritual and supernatural world. In the case of Lucifer in “Lunar Baedeker,” we have the opposite, a spiritual, luminescent being falling to the material world and further away from God. As Hobson points out, these artist-angel-bums often miss the absolute—they show the limitations of the human consciousness, especially in Loy’s late works (253). Though these artist angel bums are connected to a supernatural world based in divinity that most of us cannot connect to, these bums pay for this privilege by being outsiders in the extreme. In “Apology,” genius is an outsider but one “with God,” which corresponds with Loy’s description in “The Artist and the Public” of the artists creating “divine jokes.” The artist genius is misunderstood just as God is misunderstood. Artistic genius is further connected with the “divine joke” with this declaration: “We are the sacerdotal clowns/ who feed upon the wind and stars” (15-16). “Apology of Genius” concludes in parallel to “The Artist and the Public” with genius making the following claim:

we forge the dusk of Chaos

to that imperious jewelry of the Universe

--The Beautiful—

While to your eyes  
A delicate crop  
of criminal mystic immortelles  
stands to the censor's scythe. (31-38)

"Censor's scythe" echoes Loy's condemnation of the Public's "prejudice" and the cryptic nature of mysticism that bars humanity from the power of the universe in "History of Religion and Eros." To Loy, the artist contacts divinity and the power of the universe in a purer form than any mystic. Indeed, Loy positions herself as a special communicator of the unseen through "Apology to Genius" while recognizing her audience's inability to grasp completely what the modern artist and, by extension, she offers through her art.

Though luminosity is connoted with divine light in "Lunar Baedeker," we see a more muted, mundane light in "Songs to Joannes." Here, we return to Loy's favorite topic, eros, and she once again challenges society's ideas concerning love, sex, and relationships. The introductory poems of "Songs" set an iconoclastic tone with a strange mixture of bawdy humor and lofty inspiration. In song I, Loy uses a phrase connected with fairy tales, "Once upon a time," with the description of "Pig Cupid his rosy snout/ Rooting erotic garbage" (I: 3-5). After noting the extensive modernist obsession with time, I think it is fair to connect this line also to time, and then placing the poem in a time beyond time because of the phrase associated with fairytales. This continues with the second stanza, which has a lulling effect with its parade of phallic and vaginal imagery. The speaker wishes for

an eye in a Bengal light  
Eternity in a sky-rocket  
Constellations in an ocean. (I: 8-10)

This lyricism eases us into a trance with its lullaby quality and imagery, yet this luminous, stellar imagery quickly changes to base, earthy vision with the phrase “rivers [that] run no fresher/ Than a trickle of saliva” (I: 11-12). Further into the poem, sacred and mundane imagery continues to blur together when Loy imagines that “we might have given birth to a butterfly/ With the daily news/ Printed in blood on its wings” (III: 6-8). But “might” is a key word here. It is as if there are remnants of the technology that create new media, yet its creative evolution is tainted by the industry behind its creation. There are limitations to eros when love falters, at least in Loy’s world. Here we see Loy continuing with Bergson’s concepts of creative evolution, but here we also see an example of when it does not work, when creation ends up being only a fantasy.

To make any significant conclusions about Loy’s views on the unseen electric eros, we must conclude with an account of Loy’s engagement with Christian Science, a religion that ended up having a significant impact on Loy’s art, especially in her later career. As mentioned earlier, Loy converted to Christian Science after her daughter Joella was “cured” by a Christian Scientist healer in 1909 (Hobson and Potter 12). Maybe this explains why Christian Science actually clashes with Loy’s own worldview in many ways even as she is in dialogue with Christian Science through her aesthetics. As Tim Armstrong points out, Mary Baker Eddy, the founder of Christian Science

represented the future of religion, de-mythologised into a Hegelian idealism in which Christianity is folded into divine Mind . . . represent[ing] a highly conservative form of middle-class idealist piety, frozen into interpretive stasis by the peculiarly restrictive strictures issued by Eddy – who controlled its structures, scriptures, and forms of worship; attempting, with a fair degree of success, to prevent its development of a

midrash, a living interpretive tradition. Its writings are stultifying; formulaic; almost impossible to read for outsiders – indeed, they have a peculiar negativity. (205)

Unlike Bergson's influence, Christian Science's influence on Loy engages with material in the negative hidden from us, "a stress on the timeless, on a hidden order in which the clutter of the world may be reconciled in the mind of God" (Vine, Armstrong 206). When Loy's later works are examined from this viewpoint, Loy's angelic bum subjects are illuminated from a different angle. Bergsonian philosophy's destructive qualities, i.e. the capturing of experience in the moment and without regard for intellect, and Loy's own essay "History" are contradicted. The body and material world are not supreme vehicles to divine mystery. How does Loy work with these contradictions, and does she even attempt to address these contradictions? According to Armstrong, Loy attempts to have her subjects transcend the material world in her later poems. I think we can also see traces of this worldview before Loy's later works, too. As in "Apology of Genius" and "Lunar Baedeker," it is the outcast, the ill, and the poor who can transcend the reality of the material and bodily world. The artist's connection to the material world is a site of access to the divine just as the body is only a site through which to channel electric eros, which is, in turn, connected to the spiritual. Essentially, Loy is not a strict adherent to Christian Science dogma in that she does see a certain agency in the material world in that the material and bodily world is something that we can transcend but only through manipulating these worlds. Christian Science denies the validity of the material world (Armstrong 209), and this is something Loy does not consistently adhere to when you consider "History"; however, since we do not have a date for "History," it is unclear if "History" is in actuality a reflection of a younger and sexually active Loy, which was not the case for Loy after Loy's last husband, Arthur Craven, went missing.



Loy's spirituality and views on religion, though contradictory at times, are in constant dialogue with her aesthetics and feminism. This was unavoidable for Loy when you consider the impact religion had on her own life. Being forced into a marriage contract after finding out she was pregnant put Loy into a lifelong engagement with spirituality and materiality in that she became very aware of the conflict between religious dogma's influence on the way we treat sexuality and reproduction. Loy was aware that the biggest impacts on women's rights were religious beliefs that kept them from reaching their own creative potential beyond the creative function of motherhood. After analyzing Loy's views on religion and spirituality, we can also see why Loy claims women have the right to motherhood, the epitome of creation, creating and conditioning another human being. In the next chapter, we will take this connection further but from the stance of race. We will see how Loy's spiritual and feminist views often confuse contemporary critics because of their relationship with race, an unavoidable topic in the early twentieth century. We will also see how ekphrasis works with Loy's racial, political and spiritual prerogatives and how the concepts of eros and ekphrasis explored in the present chapter and introduction become the solution for Loy's dilemmas with race personally and philosophically.

## Chapter II: Loy's Ekphrastic Bodies: *Anglo-Mongrels and the Rose*

You cannot talk about Loy's treatment of the body without confronting the complex labyrinth of race culture in the early twentieth century. Perceptions of race in the early twentieth century reflect the ekphrastic moment and practice in which Loy participated. Loy's aesthetic philosophy and, by extension, her modernist experimentation inspired by autobiography, are deeply connected to her mixed race heritage. An added level of complexity to modernism's obsession with the new is the constant undertone of race throughout modernist culture (Seshagiri 9), and this focus on innovation, particularly the idea of racial hybridity, is inescapable in Mina Loy's work, especially *Anglo-Mongrel and the Rose*. Many of Loy's polemic works, such as "History of Religion and Eros" and "Feminist Manifesto" touch on the matter of race. Multiple races and cultures are welcomed by the modernist imagination on aesthetic principle, yet many artists' use of ethnicity would be considered racist in today's terms (Seshagiri 6). Loy attempts to move away from race while being restricted by racist rhetoric and a very conflicted relationship with her own mixed race heritage, and these attempts are directly connected with her ekphrastic practice, the key element that unites the more perplexing elements of Loy's feminism and aesthetics.

Loy's work is largely autobiographical. She places a strong emphasis on the shifting culture of the interwar period in her aesthetic practice, a culture tense with racial theories that influenced her perception of her own identity and her vision of the ideal artist. Race is a continual theme in Loy's work because of her mixed heritage, which led her to many confrontations with the concept of race. Loy's father was a Hungarian Jew who immigrated to London where he met Loy's English mother, a Christian who reflected the Victorian values of

her time (Burke 17). Loy was a conflicted person because of this mixed religious and racial upbringing. As Carolyn Burke explains, Loy's mother, Julia,

was unsure of herself. Suspicious of strangers and hostile to foreigners, although [Julia] had married one, she tended toward anti-Semitism as well. Even though Lowy had already joined the better class of tailors, a certain taint of exoticism clung to him, and Julia was dismayed by his refusal to adopt either her religion or her prejudices . . . .

Julia's attitude remained that of her lower-middle-class origins, where support for the British Empire often joined with virulent jingoism and anti-Semitism. Under these circumstances Mina's emotional life became a battleground of contradictory loyalties.

(19)

Loy wanted to please her father, but in one sense her father did not perceive her as Jewish, and, as a result, her father perceived her as a foreigner. Conversely, Loy was constantly in conflict with her stiff English Victorian mother, and her mother also saw her as a foreigner. In addition to this subtle form of parental rejection, Loy's parents were at odds with one another, and this created a turbulent family home. Loy reproduces substantial aspects of her family life in *Anglo-Mongrels and the Rose*. Like other modernists using autobiography in their art, Loy uses her autobiography as a platform to critique and aestheticize the society into which she was born.

Loy began writing *Anglo-Mongrels* in her forties, a time when many rites of passages had passed; she was mature enough to be deeply introspective about her coming of age and the society that shaped that coming of age. Published in 1923, *Anglo-Mongrels* was written during 1922. Michael North argues in *1922* that 1922 and the rest of the twenties were a period of transient citizenship, which created the modernist fascination with experimentation we are so familiar with: "formalist experimentation becomes its own international language and the

medium, of paint and letters, an alternate homeland quite separate from any real country or community” (qtd. in Potter 60). This “alternate homeland” is visible throughout Loy’s *Anglo-Mongrels* and in the rest of her literary work. Loy uses a fractured collection of mythical and nationalistic symbolic scraps as a medium to capture the zeitgeist of the time by beginning her poem with a large segment entitled “Exodus,” the story of her father’s coming of age. This title matches this father character’s name and signifies Exodus’s position as exile and representative of an exiled Jewish people. Exodus, the character, encapsulates the common experience of immigrants in a new nation, and Exodus is triply exiled in cultural terms. His grandfather is “a Patriarch” who “erected a synagogue/ for the people.” Exodus’s father is never actually named, but his mother, Lea, is mentioned and introduced as Lea

of the people

she sat in Synagogue

her hair            long as the Talmud

her tamarind eyes . . .

and disinherited

begat this Exodus. (111)

Though Lea’s story does not directly align with the Biblical story of Leah, the name Lea brings up connotations of the Biblical Leah through her association with *Anglo-Mongrel’s* Exodus. This symbolically connects Exodus with the twelve tribes of Israel that Leah generated (Genesis 29). But even more interesting are the definitions of ‘lea’ and what they imply about Exodus’s destiny in the poem. Appropriately, ‘lea’ is defined as an unploughed field, which aptly coincides with Lea’s virginity at the beginning of *Anglo-Mongrels*. ‘Lea’ also means a measure of yarn, and this particular definition is significant since Exodus becomes a tailor later in the

poem (OED). Put together, these associations imply that Exodus is bringing the twelve tribes of Israel to England by his exile, weaving a new race into British society. By using these associations, Loy amplifies Exodus's placement as outsider (Jazoski 351), capturing the outsider position of any new immigrant while also giving religious significance to Exodus in the poem.

The associations with Exodus's name and identity are even more significant when you put these concepts together with the seemingly unrelated concept of genius. Loy's use of Jewish symbolism elevates her reputation as an artist. Exodus becomes

The highest paid tailor's  
cutter in the City  
Exodus Lord Israel  
nicknamed from his consummate bearing  
his coaly eye  
challenging the unrevealed universe  
speaking fluently 'business-English'  
to the sartorial world  
jibbering stock exchange quotations  
and conundrums of finance. (I: stanza 16)

This stanza simultaneously elevates Exodus to the status of Lord Israel, the same name God gives Jacob in the Bible, while again reinforcing Exodus's position as an outsider in a new land. It also gives Loy (Ova, in the poem) an artistic heritage in the fact that Exodus is a successful tailor. Exodus's tailor trade also signifies his power of weaving together Ova's fate as his daughter and, by extension, the family she will reproduce in the distant future. Though this puts Exodus in a powerful position, he is handicapped by and from his immigrant position. Carolyn

Burke points out that Exodus's "languages (Hungarian, German and Hebrew) are replaced by 'stock quotations' he learns" (Burke 350). His languages are also replaced by 'business English,' capturing Exodus's shift into the crumbling English empire. The Exodus character is representative of the outsider immigrant trying to blend into a new culture and thus disconnected from and by his own powerful heritage. Yet, this outsider position is what will give Exodus's future daughter, Ova, her own genius, what Ova proclaims as "my gift, the Jewish brain" (132). In addition, Exodus is not only a tailor, he is also a painter, and his vocations foreshadow the gifts Ova will be given. Like many male artists who preceded her, Loy is advocating her own genius through her autobiographical art; yet, in a world dominated by men, this is a brazen and confident act. I think this goes unnoticed during her lifetime because she was a woman, whereas a male artist would have benefited from such aesthetic advocacy of his own genius.

This focus on the artist-genius is an obsession for Loy. In the same year she was in the process of writing *Anglo-Mongrels*, Loy wrote "Apology to Genius" and "James Joyce's Ulysses." In both works, Loy responds to the censorship of artists and connects this censorship to society's misunderstanding of the artist-genius. Sandeep Parmar explains that "in Loy's writing, the genius is both bound to and separate from mankind: the genius points towards a reformist social order based on the importance of individuated consciousness: and the genius is unheeded, ostracized and (usually at society's peril) censored" (Parmar). Parmar's use of the word "ostracize" is appropriate. Loy opens "Apology of Genius" with this same word: "ostracized as we are with God/ The watchers of the civilized wastes/ reverse the signals on our track" (4). We also see a connection between God and outsiders in the opening of "Joyce's Ulysses":

The Normal Monster

Sings in the Green Sahara

The voice and offal

Of the image of God. (20)

Ironically, the same ostracized artist-geniuses, and by extension Loy's version of God, have a deeper understanding of the very society that ostracizes them. The genius is a monster who channels the image of God, and this is the classic act of ekphrasis, what Cunningham calls "the imperative that literature seems to feel to picture such nonverbal items, to incorporate them into text, to have us picture them along with the writer" (57). This monster's voice attempts to bring God to the Green Sahara, but can only do so through the image of God, not the language of God. The image has the ability to bring us closer to the reality of God because of its connection to the material world.

In contrast to Exodus, the character who elevates the future Ova to genius status, the 'English Rose' Exodus marries is portrayed as

Early English everlasting

quadrate Rose

paradox-Imperial

Later in the poem she is described as having

A tepid heart inhibiting

With tactful terrorism

the Blossom Populous

to mystic incest with its ancestry. (121)

The 'English Rose,' later called Ada, has the symbolic backing of a crumbling British empire. This empire is a 'paradox,' and though Loy gives the 'English Rose' a royal air, she reveals that Ada's ancestry is a continuation of the British empire in that it is incestuous and has an ancestry of 'divine right,' but this divine right is present only because "of self-assertion" (121). Yet, just like Exodus, the English Rose is a victim of what she represents. Potter argues, "Ada is unable to read or penetrate, as Loy puts it, this pink curtain, which perhaps signifies femininity, or a more bloody, obscene physicality. The body, in its sexual or procreative functions, is both a shameful thing that needs to be administered, and the thing, like the 'unseen Bolshevik,' around which Ada's fears can circulate" (65). We see this intricate web of challenges for all mothers' selfhood in Loy's other works, such as "Parturition" and "The Feminist Manifesto." It would be erroneous to focus on either character, Exodus or the English Rose, as the villain of this epic poem, though they both serve as nemeses to Ova while simultaneously bringing her into the world, since "the public conflicts of British Imperialism and the colonized are mapped onto the private relationships of a family: more generally the mother often becomes 'The Christian,' the father 'the Jew'" (Potter 61). Both characters are thus demonized as personifications of Jewishness and English culture through Loy's ekphrastic technique while also serving as the catalyst for Ova's creative genius. As Exodus and the English Rose join in marriage, Loy illustrates the interweaving of Judaic and Christian cultural influences in Ova's parent's union.

Exodus

. . . had been reading

Proverbs

Making sharp distinction

Between the harlot



And the Hausfrau arraying  
her offspring in scarlet  
approving  
such as garner good advice like grain  
and such as know enough  
to come in from the rain. (LB 125)

Though different in a multitude of ways, Ova's parents have similar value systems in regard to the ideals of female purity, and this similarity brings about their union at one level. By referring to Proverbs, Loy brings Judaic ideas of purity to the forefront, giving us a history of purity culture through this reference, yet this purity culture is distinct from Victorian Christian purity culture in its perception of purity. Referring to revealing journal entries by Loy alongside *Anglo Mongrels*, Potter explains that "despite the fact that the father is an enlightened and secular Jew he has a residual belief in women's impurity and places an extremely high value on female virginity. A belief in women's shame, it seems, extends across the Judeo-Christian traditions" (62). In biblical proverbial terms, the ideal wife is pure as a wife in the sense that she is monogamous. She is not considered damaged goods if she has been married before and is now a widow, for instance. Proverbs is, in one sense, a marriage manual for young men, categorizing women into the wise and unwise, the pure and impure (New Oxford Proverbs Introduction 904).

Exodus

The would-be  
Secessionist from Israel's etiquette  
(shielding pliant Jewesses from shame  
less glances

and the giving  
of just percentages  
to matrimonial intermediaries)  
is spiritually intrigued  
by the Anglo-Saxon phenomenon  
of Virginity  
delightfully  
on its own defensive! (125)

Exodus circumvents his own cultural tradition of marriage arrangements through an intermediary within Judaic society and is instead attracted to the Western idea of virginity, whereby a woman does not engage with sexual intercourse of any form. By contrast, the Judaic culture Exodus is turning away from does not have the concept of virginity though there is an emphasis on sex within marriage and avoiding pre-marital sex. The English Rose, on the other hand, is not only influenced by religious texts that advocate the wonders of virginity. Where Exodus spends his premarital life reading Proverbs, the English Rose peruses other texts:

Maiden emotions  
breed  
on leaves of novels  
where anatomical man  
has no notion  
of offering other than the bended knee  
to femininity. (LLB 124)

Though the English Rose's virginity is prized by herself and her culture, Loy's reference to the culture of women novel readers reveals the hypocrisy of Victorian values. In order to stay pure, women are kept ignorant of the mechanisms of the sexual act, causing the initial sexual act to be a betrayal of innocence. This would resonate with Loy deeply since she was the product of such a union and since her first marriage was such a union. Yet, this concept, of course, is not unique to Victorian England. We see it continue today in contemporary purity culture that attempts to stop sex education in public schools and American society in general. Loy also uses this union of cultural opposites as a means to critique virginity as a tradition with no practical purpose other than offering a conceptual idea of purity. It is important for Loy to establish this cultural divide early in the poem since the concept of virginity will influence Exodus's and the English Rose's marriage and Ova's upbringing.

Central to these conflicts that arise from virginity culture is reading culture. We can see this when Exodus meets the English Rose and tells her "open your mouth!/ and I will tell you what you have been reading" (LLB 125). The novels Ada reads only hint at the realities of sexuality, putting her in a vulnerable position as a sexually inexperienced young woman. Yet, Ada's reading habits also are encouraging fantasies of romance. That is, Ada's reading encourages her to move towards sex without fully understanding what sex is or the possible ramifications. In a metaphorical sense, reading, like sexual pleasure gives us pleasure through the rhythm of lulls and climaxes of a story's narrative and also by fiction's ability to reveal the central rites of passage of human experience. As in sex, we are always walking a tightrope between mystery from our ignorance of the book's plotline or a person's personality. In this case, Loy's focus on the English Rose's novels reflects her advocacy for uncensored books, something that would be close to her heart during this time period because of the serialization of *Ulysses*

being published in the *Little Review* and the censorship trials that followed when there were attempts to publish *Ulysses* in full in the U.S. Loy's advocacy in this arena is intimately tied with her feminism. As you may recall, Loy argues for the "surgical removal of virginity" and a break in the divide between mother and mistress in "Feminist Manifesto," which moves imply that virginity culture creates an unhealthy sexual culture and self-identification for women. The continual theme of subversive material in Loy's poetry is an attempt to destroy these cultural paradigms and give women the same sexual freedom as men. This sexual equality could come about only through realistic portrayals of sex and sexuality.

The central extended metaphor of "Exodus" and "English Rose" simultaneously critiques Loy's own heritage and the zeitgeist of Loy's childhood. Jaskoski captures the complex associate symbolism of the English Rose section, and argues that the English Rose

incorporates [British] society with a depiction of its emblematic representative: the English woman. The poet indicates the wider scope of her associations by using interchangeably both the generic 'English Rose' and the particular 'Alice' or 'Ada.' In this section, Loy introduces a complex analysis that equates sexual repression with class and ethnic/religious barriers and, ultimately, with the international political oppression of colonialism. (354)

As Jaskoski aptly argues, the English Rose (and Exodus) are representations of their cultures and an illustration of the relationship between class, race, and religious affiliations. Loy uses multiple names to show the numerous associations connected to each character. For instance, when Exodus pursues the English Rose, he is treated as an extension of Jehovah:

And Jehovah strikes---  
through the fetish

of the island hedges---  
Exodus  
who on his holiday  
(induced  
by the insidious pink  
of Albion's ideal)  
is looking for a rose. (LLB 122)

Here, Albion and Jehovah serve as gods manipulating humans who are extensions and representations of these gods. Loy uses dashes both to personify Jehovah's striking through Exodus and to illustrate the connection between Exodus and Jehovah. This technique also adds symbolic richness to *Anglo-Mongrels* while showing the limitations of our own agency, how we are only extensions of the societal structures we live in and are conditioned to and by.

But this name changing of characters is not unique to *Anglo-Mongrels*. Name manipulation can be seen throughout Loy's work and her biography. Roger Conover appropriately labels Loy a pseudonymaniac because of her extreme self-identity manipulation. As he suggests, this pseudonymania blurred the visibility of her reputation as an artist. She began life with the name Mina Gertrude Lowy (Conover lxiii). Mina Lowy changed her name to Mina Loy, explaining that "the name is an assumed one, adopted in a spirit of mockery in place of that of one of the oldest and most distinguished families of England" (lxiv). Loy was hyperaware of the limitations and creative possibilities, but also uses character names and her own name as a platform to critique societal paradigms. This is yet another practice that underscores the ekphrastic nature of Loy's art in that through the manipulation of her emblem of self, her name, Loy connects (or disconnects) her identity with aesthetics by illustrating the creative possibilities

of naming as a means of making selfhood an aesthetic practice.

Loy's history of manipulating her own identity and name adds to the symbolic implications of the heroine of this poem, Ova, who corresponds with Loy's self-fashioning. The choice of the name Ova is significant since, as a common noun, ova means "a female egg" (OED). As such, Ova represents female reproductive potential and Ova's potential as an artist. But this name also implies that Ova's art will be, in part, a reproduction of her identity into new forms through the art and children she will create. This also explains the placement of the sections "Esau Penfold" (Stephen Hawais) and "Collasus" (Arthur Craven) in *Anglo-Mongrels*, identities that mirror Loy's two significant romantic relationships that produced children.<sup>3</sup> This use of the common noun ova and the creation of *Anglo-Mongrels* is Loy's own statement of her genius. By extension, Loy is also making a statement about women artists, reiterating her argument from "Feminist Manifesto" that women hold power by their ability to reproduce children.

Ova's entrance in the poem is through her birth as "a breathing baby/ mystero-chemico Nemesis/ of obscure attractions" (131) under the section "Mongrel Rose." Each member of the family is a nemesis to each other, even as Ova's presence is a reminder of Exodus's and Ada's choice to consummate their attraction. Unwelcomed, Ova has one gift--"the Jewish brain." At least, this is the most straightforward presentation of Ova's biological gifts; the stanza that follows this line further elevates Ova's genius while revealing the mystical gifts she holds. The narrator explains

So is the mystic absolute

the rose

---

<sup>3</sup> Loy also had a child via an affair. I suspect that she did not include this lover because she never married him and Loy and Stephen Hawais raised the child of this relationship.

that grows  
from the red flowing  
from the flank of Christ  
thorned with the computations  
of the old  
Jehovah's gender  
Where Jesus of Nazareth  
becomes one-piece  
with Judas Iscariot  
in this composite  
Anglo-Israelite. (132)

Like a yin-yang, Ova's selfhood is made up of darkness and light, yet this is a very confused presentation of Judeo-Christian culture and reflects the hypocrisy of the English who disconnect Jesus from his Judaic origins, connecting him instead with their Anglo heritage. Also note that Ova's introduction in *Anglo-Mongrels* is substantially fragmented in comparison with Exodus's and Ada's sections, which I infer as a statement of the dominant power Exodus and Ada have in shaping the culture Ova is entering into and Ova's selfhood. Yet, it is also simply a reflection of Ova's infancy and undeveloped selfhood, a selfhood that is revealed in a disjointed fashion throughout the whole poem. We see this most in the next section that focuses on Ova, "Ova Takes Notice." Here she becomes aware of the power of color and words, foreshadowing Ova's future artistic career. Potter notes that this new awareness and language acquisition is intimately tied with the body, with the word "iarrhea" echoing "diarrhea." Potter unpacks this as creating "new language out of obscene excrement" and

Not only does the physical consistency of diarrhea allow us to visualize baby Ova's corresponding cerebral/mush, but the syllables of "Iarrhea" suddenly reveal something central about the nature of language: the "fragmentary/ simultaneity/ of ideas" which embody 'the word.' Further, the very vocables of "iarrhea" are transposed into the child's visionary new experience of language:

"A/lucent/iris/shifts/its/irradiate/interstice." (65, LLB I 140,141)

This need for Loy to connect her aesthetic to the physical world is an extension of her later ekphrastic practice. No, diarrhea is certainly not an epic poem or masterpiece, but it is connected to the physical world, and by placing this in the powerful position of Ova's first word, Loy grounds her linguistic development in the body. As mentioned earlier, Loy has a history of connecting genius and God with excrement with such terms as "waste" in "Apology of Genius" and "offal" in "Joyce's Ulysses." This illustrates how Loy views divinity within humankind and at large in relation to the physical world.

The other sections in which Ova is the prime subject only reinforce the psychologically and physically unhealthy environment Ova is raised in. In "Ova, Among the Neighbors," Loy more explicitly illustrates the way in which the culture Ova is immersed in reinforces the hateful upbringing Ova experiences in her family:

New Life

when it inserts itself into continuity

is disciplined

by the family

reflection

of national construction



to a proportionate posture in the civilized scheme. (153)

Each following section details this immersion in a stifling and contradictory culture. Ova never completely belongs in her family and community. Her governesses reinforce the negative environment her parents have created in “Ova Has Governesses” and other her racial heritage in “Jews and Ragamuffins of Kilburn.” Unlike the case in most *künstlerromans*, Loy ends *Anglo-Mongrels* with the status of the father rather than the heroic artist child. This blurs the lines of who is actually the hero of this tale, Ova or Exodus, and, ultimately, this placement puts Exodus on equal footing with Ova as hero of the tale. We are dealing with a poem with two heroes, Exodus and Ova, and we can see this in how both of their stories begin with their origin and in the title of the poem, which makes *Anglo-Mongrel* plural. Yes, the English Rose is placed in the poem’s title, but she is not an artist. Exodus begins as a painter and ends this poem as a successful tailor, and Loy makes it very clear that Ova’s talents come from her father rather than her mother by the early reference to Ova’s “big Jewish brain.” Furthermore, both Exodus and Ova are outsiders. Exodus is described as “ostracized,” which is similar to the description of genius in Loy’s “Apology of Genius.” On the other hand, Ova is ostracized by her family and community because of her hybridity. Though Ova attempts to break free from her parents’ cultural indoctrination, she is pulled back into their fold even though she wants to break free, and she is forced to bow down to the religious instruction of her mother. Though, in reality, Loy does eventually break free from her family’s hypocritical blended Judeo-Christian culture, it is through an extremely complex process, leaving her scarred and weighed down by an unhealthy first marriage. That being said, Loy’s fictionalized version of herself, Ova, represents a hopeful vision in many other ways beyond her prison in *Anglo-Mongrels*. Ova, as seen with her name’s meaning (human egg), is Loy’s characterization of woman’s reproductive potential biologically

and artistically. As a hybrid figure, she has the potential to break the vicious cycle of racism through her self-fragmentation. This potential further reinforces that ultimately Loy does not intend to be destructive with her views on race and instead sees race as a medium for human evolution; in contrast to the general opinion of the time, Loy sees evolution as facilitated through racial hybridity rather than dependent on a homogenous vision of race.

In *Anglo-Mongrels* we see some of the high points of ekphrastic technique in Loy's literary production. Ekphrasis, as seen with the many examples cited in this chapter, is central to Loy's production of poetic bodies and characters for her poetic auto-biography, *Anglo-Mongrels*. Furthermore, these ekphrastic bodies, the characters and what they embody in *Anglo-Mongrels*, help us understand the history behind Loy's visions of erotic unification with the "Power Universe" ("History" 237). As a true Bergsonian, Loy attempts to exceed intellect and reach human instinct. Electric-eros of "History" is a consistently rewarding yet problematic energy found throughout Loy's texts and closely linked with ideals of a supreme human race created through electric-eros. The characters of *Anglo-Mongrels* move beyond autobiography through ekphrasis by representing that which is larger than themselves such as the English Rose who represents Ova's mother but also England's culture and history. The modernist experiment with literature along with the technological advances of the nineteenth and early twentieth century are cooperative forces in Loy's theories, acting as a catalyst to evolution through human consciousness grounded in sexuality.

Though the concepts in Loy's poetry are challenging, complex, and subversive, I believe it is possible to teach Loy at the high school and college freshman level. In the next chapter I will explore the possibilities and pitfalls of introducing Mina Loy in the classroom along with providing supplemental materials such as lesson plans and assignment sheets. The lessons and

assignments coincide with and illustrate practical classroom uses of some of the concepts of this thesis. By exploring the pedagogical implications of Mina Loy's literature, I hope to facilitate ideas for my future classroom.

### Chapter III: Teaching Mina Loy

#### *An Overview*

Modernist texts give us many gifts to offer students. Even in a remedial English level college class, the modernist focus on experimentation opens the classroom to numerous discussions about language, encouraging meta-awareness crucial in becoming a good language learner. Of course, there are also many learning opportunities in modernist literature for the composition classroom and beyond, too. As a modernist scholar and teacher, I am well aware of the reputation modernist literature has of being overtly experimental, arcane, and inaccessible. At a certain level, these are legitimate critiques, but I am afraid these critiques cause teachers to avoid the more challenging authors of modernism such as Loy or Joyce. This can be remedied with a change in presentation of modernism in the classroom.

The twentieth century is often neglected in the classroom because of its place on the syllabus in most survey literature classes at the high school and college level. I suggest that the ideal timeline of presenting literary periods should instead begin with the 21<sup>st</sup> century and move backwards. At the least, this course structure should be an option some semesters. This change needs to occur for a better representation of post-modernist and modernist works, works that are much more relevant to the current generation in our schools than those of older literary periods. By starting with this period in literature survey classes, I think we can actually prepare the grounds for better and more confident learning. I say 'confident' because if this material is presented well, the students should be able to relate to it more than works from other periods because of their own experience with modernity. The fragmented and experimental nature of modernity is still prevalent in our current age, and teachers should take advantage of this commonality between the present day and the early 20<sup>th</sup> century.

Though modernism has its particular challenges because of its complexity, all literary periods present readers with challenges in different ways. Many of the problems with teaching literature begin way before we step into the classroom to give our first lesson. As Martin Bickman notes in “Returning to Community and Praxis,” we have isolated the specializations of education and literary studies too much. The literary field’s focus on isolated work hinders our teaching *and* our research. Bickman has utilized a service learning teaching experiment to begin working towards solutions. His experiment entailed organizing a graduate level English class wherein students also co-lead an undergraduate literature class. According to Bickman, this pushed both the students and teachers to analyze the texts from new viewpoints rather than just relying on the tried and true theories with which we are familiar. Furthermore, by having pre-service secondary teachers and literary graduate students in the class, theoretical conversations broadened and diversified for both literary and education graduate students by exposing both groups to academic theories and culture they most likely would not have in their respective fields. As a graduate student, I think we need to implement more innovative experiments like Bickman’s.

### *The Lessons*

My particular practical application of Loy criticism in the classroom will be directed towards my English 102 class on gender and war (Inquiry into Bombs, Boys, and Babes). I chose this class because the activities and presentation topics would be very similar for a high school or community college audience. Loy’s biography and literature lends itself to a class that focuses on war since she lived through both World War I and World War II. Two poems will serve as the featured literature being analyzed in the class. The poems chosen will be “Feminist Manifesto” (excerpts) and “Exodus” from *Anglo-Mongrels and the English Rose*. I was hoping

to use a wonderful website created by Alexandra Edelbrute but unfortunately cannot because the site was taken down while I was completing this chapter. Her hypertext version gives direct access to central literary criticism related to “Anglo-Mongrels.” In addition, she includes footnotes that define words that may challenge students. Edelbrute’s site had limitations, though. I can see where more words could be given definition footnotes, though I understand that this site was geared to a university-level literary survey class. I think post-secondary literary studies would benefit from making criticism and literary texts of current interest more accessible to secondary institutions through sites like Edelbrute’s. Though seemingly very simple at first sight, the site has footnotes throughout the poem connecting the reader to basic information like definitions, encyclopedia entries, and literary criticism. In addition, there is a formal bibliography and brief introduction about Loy and the poem. The main limitation of the website is first and foremost any copyright issue. I suspect that this may be a reason for the site being taken down; however, there are many legal ways to make this poem and other works by Loy accessible in a digital format that would benefit students. High schools are replacing print books with iPads more and more, and I suspect that many high school and community colleges are going to encourage instructors to implement digital textbooks and literature. In addition, these kinds of projects can thrive in educational institutions. I could definitely see students working together to create some of these digital texts, thus creating a product while also learning.

Before the sessions on Mina Loy are implemented in the classroom, I would prepare students with a lesson on the basics of modernism. I found that EDSITEment, a website created by the National Endowment of the Arts gives a good overview that serves as a reminder of what is challenging for students with little to no exposure to modernism. This overview focuses on the fragmentation of the Self prevalent in modernist texts and the disorienting shifts of the early

twentieth century. Since mine is a research topic English 102 class with a focus on gender studies, I will focus on how major societal shifts caused major changes in how we view and engage with gender. I would then utilize the worksheet “Understanding the Context of Modernism” from the EDSITEment site, which helps students compare the Victorian and Modernist periods. The following lessons are the lessons that focus on Loy’s literature.

### **The Lesson Plan I**

**Readings:** “The Feminist Manifesto”

**Objective:** Students will have a basic understanding of the political and social culture Loy wrote in. They will also have a general knowledge of Loy’s biography and the manifesto genre.

**Focus Question:** What can we tell about the manifesto genre after studying Loy’s manifesto? How does the language ‘manifest’ Loy’s ideology? Why does Loy change font and spacing in this work?

**Overview:** This class will focus on how the futurist movement gave Loy the jumping off point to enter into poetry through the visual arts.

**Activities:** Students will write a mock manifesto on a topic related to the class.

**Lesson Timeline:** Class begins at 10:10 and ends at 11:00

10:10-10:10-Discuss Mina Loy’s biography. Begin with these questions:

What did you find out of the ordinary about Loy’s life from her bio? Why do you think she has only had critical attention recently?

10:10-10:25-“Feminist Manifesto.” Let’s look at this passage: “Cease to place your confidence in economic legislation, vice-crusades & uniform education---you are glossing over **Reality**. Professional and commercial careers are opening up for you. Is that all you want?” (153). What are the items in the first sentence of the passage? Discuss. What else could women want other

than a career? Discuss. Cover the focus questions if they haven't been covered at this point in the lesson. End by discussing other parts of the manifesto of the students' choosing.

10:25-10:35-Student-led discussion points--students will take over discussion with their own discussion questions.

10:35-10:45-I will take the points we discussed as a class and demonstrate how Loy's "Feminist Manifesto" fits the manifesto genre. I will then show my students how to do a creative imitation of a manifesto and give them an assignment sheet for the creative imitation.

10:35-10:45-Students work alone on a manifesto idea.

10:45-10:55-Students join in groups to discuss their ideas while I go around the class and ask students what their initial ideas are for their creative imitations.

10:55-11:00-Last minute questions about the assignment and any other class business.

## **Lesson Plan II**

**Objective:** Students will have a basic idea of the complex race culture in which Loy lived. Students will understand how eugenics was a catalyst to genocide.

**Reading:** "Exodus" from *Anglo-Mongrels and the English Rose* and "Eugenics Movement Reaches Its Height" (PBS website <http://www.pbs.org/wgbh/aso/databank/entries/dh23eu.html>). The PBS link takes students to the PBS article, which gives a brief overview of the history of eugenics.

10:10-10:30: Students will discuss the manifestos they are creating. We will brainstorm ways for these to be presented by editing fonts and other tools in MS word.

10:30-10:40 Teacher-generated questions on eugenics and *Anglo-Mongrels*: Why was eugenics harmful? How does it relate to the genocide documentary we have already watched earlier in the semester? Do you see the remnants of eugenics theories in our society today? If so, how?



10:40-10:55: Student-generated questions: Gear students towards further analysis of *Anglo-Mongrels* in the context of eugenics. Why would someone who is half Jewish speak disparagingly of her own heritage? Why is she also disparaging towards her English heritage?

10:55-11:00: Wrap-up: See if any students have questions about the manifesto assignment.

### ***Manifesto Assignment Sheet***

In your assignment for the forthcoming paper, you are supposed to unpack a primary artifact's texts and visuals and present what you find in an argument. This argument should answer your research question about the artifacts or a topic guiding the choosing of your artifacts. This is basically what we have done in the last two day of classes with Mina Loy's texts.

In your creative imitation homework assignment, you are analyzing a primary text in order to be able to imitate the devices used to create Loy's argument in "Feminist Manifesto." The subject you choose for your manifesto must be a noticeably different topic or argument; however, you can use topics on gender and even feminism, though your argument in the manifesto should be distinctly different from that of Loy. For example, you may want to write about feminism in our own times. Or, what would a manifesto look like from a male point of view? The purpose of this assignment is to prepare you for your primary source argument paper. By having to imitate a writer's style, you are basically giving a close reading through the back door. To create an imitation, you must analyze the style, grammar, and formatting, and this is how you will also gain the basic skills to write your primary source argument.

### ***Conclusion***

It is important to remember that there are a slew of public educators untrained in presenting literary works, let alone works that are challenging for even the best reader. Even at

the post secondary level, we are often forced into unfamiliar cultural territory. How can we be sensitive to the more heated and misconstrued aspects of modernism and related topics? I believe sticking with historical sources while also being conscious of your students' needs is central. Modernism challenges us in the classroom but also has the potential to be very rewarding to students. To encourage this reward, we need to have more training in teaching literature to high school students and undergrads. This is especially crucial for a specialist of the lesser known modernist writers and artists.

My ultimate goal as a teacher is to expose my students to literature and prepare them for writing in their profession, and I see that as a power and responsibility. Even though the product is not immediately evident, the writers I choose to share with my students do have a cultural impact over time. Just as well-known writers such as T.S. Eliot are a part of our cultural landscape, lesser-known authors, like Loy, can eventually reach that point of recognition. This expansion of the canon is an important part of a literary scholar's career because the more we expand the canon, the more we give readers broader access to writers they can relate to and be inspired by. Students benefit from being exposed to biographies of writers like Loy because they can see how cultural experience changes with every generation.

## Conclusion

Hugh Kenner describes Mina Loy as the “Electric-age Blake,” which I find quite apropos. Like Blake, Loy was both a visual and literary artist with a mystical edge. Yet, the major difference between these artists lies in the historical and technological development of technology such as electricity. Loy is even further disconnected from the natural world than Blake, yet she manages to find a unifying principle in electricity and sexuality. Ekphrasis ties these concerns together for Loy. It serves as the aesthetic glue that binds her theories on race and gender. We see this in *Anglo-Mongrels and the English Rose*. Though an autobiographical poem, *Anglo-Mongrels* connects the symbol systems of multiple cultures through the characters and, as such, reveals the complex relationship between culture, race, gender, and identity. Exodus and the English Rose represent more than just Ova’s parents. They represent Jewish and English culture.

Electricity, ekphrasis, and eros are deeply interconnected in Loy’s work with light being one of the consistent themes throughout Loy’s poetry. For instance, in *Lunar Baedeker*, Loy makes references to light and related subjects such as the moon, electricity, and light bulbs throughout the anthology. This focus on light is one of Loy’s aesthetic signatures the consistent presence of which keeps her poetry connected to the technological shifts of the early twentieth century. The constant presence of light and electricity throughout Loy’s work grounds her texts in the material world.

The avant-garde literature and art Loy creates, at first appearance, appears disconnected from mainstream culture in its enigmatic quality and attempt to break away from the expected, but this first appearance is misleading. The ekphrastic moments Loy creates are engaged with both tradition (such as the Bible in *Anglo-Mongrels*) and an expanding mass-market economy

(represented by the light bulb). For instance, when Loy describes Mazda light in “America-A Miracle,” she engages with multiple associations. A Mazda light is unique to her technological and cultural era, representing the Mazda light bulb, but it is also connected to the advertisements associated with the Mazda light bulb created by Maxfield Parrish, which imaginatively captured the magical quality of light in his paintings. Such references as this complicate the ekphrastic moment. In the definition established by Valentine Cunningham, ekphrasis is predominantly associated with tradition:

The old texts are made audible again; out of the silence of the historical and textual past come these voices, heard again, voices granted to the silent, voiceless object, in the act of ek-phrasis, literally a speaking-out, an audible speaking-out now in the present text, a speaking made out of the silence of the past, and the past and very silent aesthetic object, the painting, the sculpture, whatever. (64)

Loy does not let her nod to the past through ekphrasis take over her work, though. Instead, she utilizes ekphrasis as a way to engage with history and to breathe new life into it, just as technology was breathing new life into the human imagination in the early twentieth century. Loy’s career illustrates how, as a modern artist, she was in constant dialogue with the past. Through her art, Loy attempts to break the restricting structures around gender and race by engaging with the past. Where the ekphrastic moment in earlier literature connected texts to a history of aesthetic culture, Loy uses the ekphrastic moment to challenge orthodoxy and tradition.

Because of Loy’s own struggles with the public eye and the historical gender bias in the literary canon, Loy is still a side note to the canon. This became quite apparent as I researched classroom resources. For instance, though Yale holds Loy’s archives, she is not one of the

writers included in their educational site *The Modernist Lab*. And though most modernist scholars are familiar with Mina Loy, there is still more work needed in exposing students and scholars to her work. Continuing to encourage her work to be taught in the classroom and included in our anthologies is central to this endeavor. But I also think Loy's lack of exposure is inevitable because of the gender politics of the early twentieth century. Unfortunately, we cannot go back in time and give her the exposure she deserved over these many decades. This is why it is important now to find more ways to make Loy's work accessible to the public, not just materially but also intellectually. To do this, we need more sites like Angela Edelbrute's hypertext site of *Anglo-Mongrels and the English Rose* that was, unfortunately, taken down, perhaps due to copyright issues. This kind of site, with its many footnotes, makes works like Loy's accessible to students and scholars, opening up the text by defining foreign terms and taking the reader to some of the major criticism about Loy.

Ultimately, I believe Loy will not truly be rediscovered until our technology catches up with her art. In many ways, when people say that Loy was ahead of her time, the reality is that she was hyper-aware of the major shifts she was living through. To truly enjoy Loy's texts, we need access to footnotes that link her references and creative word choice to definitions and historical, sociological explanations. Furthermore, I think enabling access to Loy's work digitally opens up another world of possibilities for expanding her reputation. Just as Loy's art engages with early twentieth-century technology, her words need to be broadcast through various technologies. I would also be interested in seeing graphic designers and illustrators' work engage with Loy's poetry because of its visual nature.

Loy uses words like they are different colors she is mixing for a painting. You can see the visual nature of her poetry by the way it parallels her visual work with a focus on light.

Poetry, for a genius like Loy, must have been a welcome discovery enabling her to move beyond the limitations of visual art. Though Loy had a very scattered career, we also see her ability to develop concepts to their fullest because of this jump between a linguistic world and visual world. The few visual works we have of Loy's correspond with her poetry, showing how Loy was able to stretch her topics as far as possible. Loy's challenges, professionally and personally, are worked out in her art through ekphrasis. This is a very modernist form of ekphrasis in that Loy uses ekphrasis to critique and whittle away at societal issues around gender and race. In her more optimistic moments, Loy pairs ekphrastic objects with new technology such as electricity and light bulbs, elevating these objects while also pointing an accusatory finger at technology's destructive potential. Put together, eros, ekphrasis, and electricity are important elements central to Loy's feminist and racial theories. Loy simultaneously embraces styles of the past while also working with the pain of this past in her search for solutions to society's pressing problems.

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