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Days of the Dim

The Postmodern Poetics and Hope of Anne Waldman

Language defines the survival and persistence of the human species. No other organism on the planet is capable of the complex thoughts, sounds, and patterns as the human mind is able to produce and understand. Our existence orbits the beauty in breath and music; our thoughts and lives build themselves around daily communications between the conscious beings called people. Before invention, science, or religion, there was the spoken word. We live by the words of our parents and our peers, even by the written works of minds long since passed. Wars have been fought for words—the Koran, the Bible, etc.—and people have been inspired by those who master the crafting words—Dr. Martin Luther King Jr., the Beatles and other historic entities. Poetics has been one of the most revered forms of both oral and written languages. Over the ages, poetry in the English language has morphed and evolved into new shapes and forms. Most striking is the recent transformation from the high modernist ideals left over from the Victorian period into the new, variable, powerful style of postmodern poetics. One poet to command the dominion of the postmodern poetic style is the seductive and passionate Anne Waldman. She builds on all masters of language, particularly those closest to her, such as Allen Ginsberg or Jack Kerouac. She inspires zeal among her mass audience, makes them thirst for more in both life and spirit, and she commands attention from those who fear her most.

Before we try to discover Waldman as an entity of poetry, we must first understand the origins of the postmodern form. Postmodern poetics acts as a communication between the strict standards of high modernism and the contemporary need for open, expressive form. The different schools of poetry, beginning in the 1950s, were the chosen approach to match the changing ideals of the time. Dramatic upheavals in values and high flying emotions, as in the civil rights movements and Vietnam War, called for a new, unfastened poetics which the outdated ideals of modernist poetry could not fully express. The foundations of the fresh movement reside with poets such as Allen Ginsberg, Robert Lowell, and Charles Olson. The postmodern poetic style acts to describe poetry not only through the restrictive and basic forms of rhythm laid down by high modernism, but by means of the natural and organic rhythms of breath and body to aid in determining the path a poem will take. Language, in its own way, becomes a living organism. The sound, along with the appearance of the words on the page, takes on a new role, guiding both reader and audience toward a deeper understanding of poetic purpose. According to Olson, the way the poet displays her/his words on the page “[indicates] the breath, the pauses, the suspensions even of syllables, the juxtapositions even of parts of phrases” to the performer (“Projective...” 618). The page acts as a blue print of the vocal sound. In the eyes of Olson, the breath is the most important thing to take into consideration when writing; the physical layout of a poem’s lines reflects how the poem should be read in terms of rhythm and emphasis. The natural structure to the line allows for the classical techniques of modernist but also takes into consideration new creative means for constructing poetic literature. The new verse is to be dictated by the breath and the body, allowing for the free-flowing meaning of simple sound and rhythm to permeate even the most alien of audiences. In this way, postmodern poetry both questions and utilizes modernism to reach beyond “acceptable” poetic forms.

Contemporary movements and schools, such as the Beats or the Black Mountain School of poetics, startled and inspired their audiences, not only with a raw presentation of emotion and performance, but with outright gnarly descriptions of sex, drugs, and violence. They were overtly political, commandeering poetry for a purpose beyond that of fine arts. Jazz hugely influenced the flow of the new style. A raw and sexual musicality damned the conservative ideals of how poetry and language was bound. The awe-inspiring *Howl*, shocked and thrilled audiences with breath-taking lines, such as, “who copulated ecstatic and insatiate with a bottle of beer a sweetheart a package of cigarettes a candle and fell off the bed, and continued along the floor and down the hall and ended fainting on the wall with a vision of ultimate cunt and come eluding the last gyzym of consciousness” (Ginsberg, “Howl” 133). The uncomfortable graphic nature of this poem remains unchallenged, even today. The manifesto of contemporary poets, such as Waldman and her peers, followed from such great works of the time. Both Ginsberg and Olson, as master poets, acted as mentors to Anne as she grew to become a powerful wordsmith with shaman-like abilities.

In regards to her poetic origins, Waldman states, “Allen in particular gave me tremendous encouragement by his example—his expansiveness and compassion,” and goes on about Olson’s inspiring nature as he recited his work in 1965, “He was dancing—his feet were literally off the ground...” (*Vow...*108). Her close relationships with the mentors above, especially the help of Ginsberg, aided her in defining poetic expression. The confidence of her language describes the journey toward her to the current role of spiritual wordsmith. Ginsberg’s description of his masterwork, *Howl*, defines a base understanding of organic form: “Ideally each line of *Howl* is a single breath unit...My breath is long—that’s the Measure, one physical-mental inspiration of thought contained in the elastic of a breath” (“Notes...” 635-636). The emphasis on the breath

as the measurement of the line starkly rejects the old modernist forms, in which lines are dictated by syllabic feet. When one views the structure of Waldman's poetry on the page, at first it seems chaotic and confusing. It allows a raw power to emit from the page itself, which molds the speaker's words. Every placement and break dictates the breath. The speed of speech is determined by how the lines are seen; as in Ginsberg's mind, long and flowing lines are to be explosive and fast moving, where as short lines demand a pause for contemplation and distinctive annunciation. This is demonstrated beautifully throughout many of Anne's song/chant-inspired pieces. The overtly controversial and political subject matter that Ginsberg's poetry commonly deals with requires the new, organic style. Such subjects are thought incorrect or inappropriate by high modernist ideals, so they must be separate by content, diction and style; for these reasons, Ginsberg and Waldman's poetic styles are often criticized; they are many times demoted to the realm of propaganda.

The nature of Waldman's poetry rests within three main spheres: performance, persona, and Kali Yuga. The three essences meld together in different ways to create a unique poem, containing its own personality and emotional attachment to the audience. Waldman's opinion on the first of these essences—performance—resonates very strongly. She states in a 1989 interview, "Performance is implicit in the role of the poet. I work on the page; I work off the page. It's not a problem of choosing one over the other" (*Vow...61*). To her, there is no question of whether poetry is meant to be read or heard. It is something to be *experienced*. Performance should be innate in the poet; a poet without the drive to experience his/her work through the body is not a poet at all. Now is age of dramatic poetics. Though the overall performance of a piece is much stronger than the contemplative reading of it, the audience is still able to absorb the presence of the poem through the written form as well. The words stand alone

to the willing reader, and their appearance on the page (in regular or erratic fashion) allows her/him to understand the flow and pace of the poem as it would be heard by the ear.

To see Waldman perform is to engage in a spiritual drama. Her body undulates and writhes with the pulse of her words. She is sexual and frightening, mysterious and god-like. In her chant poems, she will many times bow and take praying postures, humbling herself to the greater universe which escapes her mind's eye. As she takes on her different guises throughout her readings, her entire body changes. Speaking as an aging woman, she curls in on herself, with shoulders hunched in close and chin tucked beneath her face; as a male figure, her entire upper body seems to broaden, stretching itself to meet the classic masculine form face-to-face. It is as if she has a different posture for every character demonstrated. Her willingness to offer her body to the audience in this exhausting way aids the poem's emotional effect. Her viewers are able to not only hear the words with their rhythms and rhymes, but visualize them, as if in some dramatic play. We as the audience literally see the words come to life through the movement of her body and the strong influence of her voice. The trembling of a poem will reflect itself in the trembling of her voice and limbs. She projects in a chorus of moans, screams, and anger, and in the next moment she will fall utterly silent, if not for a whisper. Her passion is reminiscent of Amiri Baraka's cool and terrifying recitations, in that she pushes all her emotion into her work; her fierceness frightens and silences anyone unacquainted. Not a brief moment is left without influencing the mind in some way during any of Waldman's recitals of her work.

When writing a poem to be performed, careful detail is taken in forming a structure. As in the minds of Olson and Ginsberg, the breath and natural rhythms of the body and universe take priority. Many times she will even write an introduction/instructional paragraph, explaining to the orator how to perform which phrases and what cues to follow from the page. Every line

break represents a slight pause in the continuation; every elongated space is allowed a breath.

Her poem “Curse” clarifies a soft start, slowly rising in volume to a great crescendo (*Kill or Cure* 110):

You loathsome miserable draconian TV patriarchs,
 Obsolete Senators,
 Questionable House of Reps,
 Lie-of-the-land Admirals
 Perjuring Lieutenant Colonels,
 Dishrag attorney generals,
 Namby-pamby political Pentecostals,
 Macho drug smugglers,
 Killer arms dealers,
 Consultant traffickers in blood money,
 Multimillion-dollar-fraud Pentagon schemers,
 Techno-military-industrial-complex corrupt Wedtech lowlifes,
 Silverado mainliners,
 Slimy presidential wannabes

SHUT OFF

Not a woman amongst ya!

Ye lily-livered walloping big wheels

Judges of my world?

I’ll make your semen dry up

YOUR GENITALIA WILL WITHER IN THE WIND

The spacing of the lines hints to the way “The Curse” is intended to be performed. The long, frequently hyphenated insults roll off the tongue; their closeness allows the speaker to easily move from one line to the next. The gradual lengthening of the individual lines moves with the initial command to crescendo. Through the simple reading of the page, one can feel the supernatural power of the words grow. The appearance of the first capitalized line, “SHUT OFF,” startles the reader when combined with the wide spacing; it knocks the audience off guard

for the curse to come. Waldman's new way of composing the latter half of the poem is what truly gives the words their strength. Without consciously taking into account how the words on the page appear in the minds of a reader, "The Curse" would be nothing more than a joke. A similarly feministic poem, "To the Censorious Ones," has a more light-hearted instruction as a prelude. She instructs, "This chant accompanied by a chorus of women flexing their muscles" (148).

It's thrusting into your point of view, your private property

O Men of War, Censorious Ones!

GET READY BIG BOYS GET READY

I'm coming up now

I'm coming up with all that was hidden

Get ready, Big Boys, get ready

Again, there is an instance in which she capitalizes her words in order to instruct the performer; this is particularly powerful in this poem due the uncapitalized repetition of the line a little further down, demonstrating the metaphorical muscle which the page flexes. It is playful and inviting, offering an unseen power to the female figure.

The long, paragraph like poems, such as "Feminafesto," require a different approach (Waldman, *Kill...* 142). The long, endless lines are meant to be read as a rant, much like Ginsberg's "Howl." The juxtaposition of Anne's life to that of her mother's drives the female fervor into over drive. As one reads this poem on the page, it is as if the lively poet were reading aloud (very loud) into your ear. The simple sight of the words on the page is enough to grant a vision of the performance. It is breathtaking and beautiful. To an untrained eye, this appears to

be more prose than poetry; the words form around paragraph organizations, rather than the line. And still, this is poetry. She takes great care in deciding her diction and which words are fit to end which lines. Everything is calculated! For instance, we look at the first few lines:

How different are times now for women writers, you ask. Women anything. Women scientists! Women Buddhists! My mother suffered her creativity a scant generation ahead of me. She didn't have a "room of her own." Her children were her work. Only in her sixties did she have the confidence...

The end-breaks of this small segment of this powerful poem implant strong after-images into the mind's eye. The first line's end, "Woman any," creates a sense of both independence from the masculine opposite, "Man," and a collective individual of woman-kind. Any woman is all women, and you may ask any of them about the differing times. She juxtaposes men and women with the then and now, alluding to "now" as the time *of* Woman, and "then" as the time of Man. There is a hope for the future and a confidence in the now, revealed through her struggles as a woman writer and spiritualist as well as the shy defiance of her mother's generation. Another of my favorite end breaks of this portion is the second line: "Woman Buddhists! My mother suffered her..." It is humorous in a way, seeing as Anne demonstrates a deep enthusiasm towards practice of Buddhism. She subtly remarks on a plausible strain between her and her elderly mother, despite the confidence she exudes in her mother's durability. Perhaps it acts as an inside joke between the two women about their shared past. The line breaks of this piece speak of the delicate calculations Waldman makes throughout all her pieces and performances; no word is unprovoked.

A second aspect to performance often exemplified by Waldman is that of music. At any given poetry reading, she will use her powerful voice to belt out a line in a high soprano or low bass. The beauty and fear invoked by her sound against the quiet background of the stage emotionally jolts the reader. A quivering, single note carried through out two or three lines gives Waldman a spiritual authority, much like that of a minister reciting from the hymnal. Through her hymn-like recitals of not-hymn-like poems, she controls her audience, forcing them to connect an unspiritual language with the spiritual, emotional mind. She allows the world at large to become mystical, with everything in its own way contributing to the powerful existence of our universe. Another way she brings music into her poetry is through cooperative works. Many poems throughout her career have been the embodiment of two or more people. The jazz of Miles Davis and the rock of artists such as Bob Dylan influence the sound and rhythm of her poetry, but also result in collaborations with musical artists. In such situations, her poems break away from the conventional readings and stretch into the realm of song. This allows the identities of poetry and song to fuse and redefine each other. Both are a form of literature and creative expression, simultaneously activating the mind and soul.

Persona goes hand in hand with performance. Every poem composed by Anne demonstrates a new guise which she contorts her body and voice to. Her very essence seems to change in front of the viewer as she takes on the different characters of poetry. Two common personas in her poems are the Hag and the Shaman. The Hag is her most powerful voice; she is old, ugly, yet wise and powerful beyond her mortal existence on this earth. Her presence not only exudes the deep female mind, but in the Hag's haggardness, a type of male essence also comes out. I am reminded of the ugly witch, both feared and revered for her knowledge of the spirit and life of the natural elements. Waldman herself puts the Hag as "terrifying, liberating at

the same instant. She's exhausted her hope and fear" (*Vow...* 109). The channeling of the Hag allows the female speaker to become the embodiment of all the exciting emotions and roles which the Hag may play. She becomes older and hunched, as a Hag would be, letting her tongue become sharp and her vocal chords rough in sound. Though the persona is elderly and infertile, a tense sexuality continues in her being, aiding to an other-worldliness about her performance. As Ginsberg demonstrated through his raunchy poetics in *Howl* and other poems ("America" and "First Party at Ken Kesey's with Hell's Angels"), Waldman continues the tradition of postmodern form, looking to shock and disturb with her sexual, subtly violent lines, while urging her readers to seek a deeper knowing through understanding her reasoning for using such tactics. Like Ezra Pound, no word is without meaning in her work.

The Hag combines with music in many of her pieces, giving a terrifying sense of awe, or an otherworldly prestige. In the poem "Crack in the World," a combination of repetition, musical interventions, and rasping vocals demonstrates how the collision of persona and music changes the work itself (Waldman, *Never Grieve...* 51-54). It appears confusing, yet invigorating on the page and life-altering in person and dangerously seductive. Anne's 1991 performance of this poem in a Lannan Foundation film shows how the Hag, through music and movement, can represent feminine wisdom, youth, humor, and passion; though nearing 55 years of age at the time, she easily wields a dark sensuality about her, even in a poem about menstruation (Waldman, *Perf.* np.). Her body moves and shakes, her voice howls every time she says "crack in the world." It is a simultaneous power and sarcastic hatred for the female body. The Hag invokes a fear in the audience, likening "that time of the month" to lycanthropy or werewolfism (*Never Grieve...* 52-53):

This is periodic

It comes at the full moon
 Let me go howling in the night
 No man to touch me

The mark of failed conception damns the female body, yet liberates it as well. The Speaker goes on, “The curse, glorious curse is upon me,” an odd depiction of that female time of the month, but none the less a powerful one. An allusion to a transformative passion also resides in the line. The female condition is celebrated; it is a form of flesh, blood, and creation. The monthly cycle describes an eternal continuation, fluctuating between a readying for pregnancy and a renewal/cleansing of the reproductive organs. “Man hasn’t done it” points towards the absence of masculine power. This sacrificial blood is purely female; it comes forth from the direct lack of male seed. There is a rage in the words regarding the male form. At first, there is a simple absence, but as the poem progresses, it turns into a power or entitlement. The man is not needed, the sacrifice in the blood grants a divine power to some nameless female deity. She destroys her own flesh to control the flesh of man through birth. The blood calls for a religious celibacy and celebration; women are to go “out on land” or “out on water” to bleed. There is no secrecy behind menstruating in this poem. The Hag, being wise and forward, confronts the feminine stigma of blood and transforms it into a female prestige. It is the “enchantment” of women—the power of life and death.

“Abortion,” a second Hag poem follows the urge towards female power in “Crack in the World” (Waldman, *Kill...* 114-115). Though the subject matter is undoubtedly political and publically controversial, that does not keep Waldman from supporting the right to control one’s own body and economic situation. The speaker here is different from the one in the previous poem. She is not as powerful and therefore attempts to borrow power from women of the past:

the hag, the madwoman, the goddess, the madonna. All seem to have a madness about them, but at the same time demand respect through childbirth.

What hag might I invoke?

What madwoman who ate her own children
gobbled them whole

What goddess of ache & sweat troubled & abandoned

What Madonna who suckles the babe strokes troubled head
in wee hours he's feverish can't breathe body heaves
she'll gladly exchange her life for his

The point Waldman wishes to make with these four women is to show the pain and suffering a mother must go through initially; this strife of childbirth, however, is not the reason for wanting the right to choose the life of a child or not. The struggle of childbirth is something which all/most mothers go through, and the reward is a healthy baby, a beautiful thing. However, the hardest part of being a mother is hardest to articulate. This poem puts it beautifully; "Already 3 swollen bellies to feed.../Hungry in another country, how many girl children drowned?" The reason, according to this poem, to grant women the right to their own bodies is to prevent the worst suffering a mother can go through, the loss of a child to malnutrition, social constraints, etc. Childbirth is nothing to losing something so precious. "What hag can pacify pain of mother & baby untimely ripped from womb" explains the sorrow that goes along with the ability to choose. No hag can save a mother from the pain. It is not easy, yet Waldman stands by the argument that there should not be any law encouraging mothers to forgo their bodies, voices, minds for the later suffering of their own children.

Juxtaposed to the Hag, the Shaman is usually portrayed as male, brimming with passion and structure. He demonstrates the masculine energy which cuts and shapes the world of the

feminine energy. Many times, his appearance in Waldman's persona performances accompanies rhythmic chants. The channeling of a male identity through a female form, such as Waldman, gives an ambiguity to the poem, making the classic persona effeminate and the speaker masculine. This strategy both stresses and challenges the audience, separating traditional gender roles from their respective bodies. The female performer of the Shaman creates a middle gender. The new she/he gender contains a power which compounds the male energy with that of the female. The speaker is granted both the power of foundation/birth and the power of annihilation/war; one may be reminded of the Hindi figures, Shiva or Kali, gods of destruction and creation. Despite some audience members being unaware of the particular workings of spiritualism and female/male energies in Waldman's persona of the Shaman and the Hag, no one can deny the power communicated in the performance and words during a recital.

Jerome Rothenberg, another mentor and friend of Waldman's, acts as a possible source of origin for her great reliance and security in using the shamanic voice and prowess. In the essay entitled "New Models, New Visions: Some Notes Toward a Poetics of Performance," Rothenberg describes poetry as being something inherent to all humanity, something which connects us to the stars and earth, to the ancestors which left us behind for a different plain of existence. There is a primal sound to the poet's voice; it comes from the natural rhythms of the cosmos and the soul/heart of every living being in our world. Performance, and therefore poetry, "goes back to our pre-human biological inheritance—that performance and culture, even language precede the actual emergence of the species..." (641). The need to express ourselves through verbal or bodily communication is deeply ingrained into our beings. The audience is to disappear, becoming a participant in the performance. Every individual becomes some type of tool for the poet/shaman (643). In the performing of the poetic ritual, the minds of the audience

unknowingly alter the words of the poet, by means of interpreting and understanding the words/movement on an individual level. There is no right or wrong answer to the performance, with the exception that the audience is willingly perceiving it and deducing its purpose or meaning based on individual mood and history. There is no single interpretation, yet there is a single performance being viewed simultaneously by many people. The power of the poet comes from this understanding of infinite meanings. No two individuals and likewise no two performances are ever identical; the knowledge of this fact is how the ritual and repetition of a poem are able to grant power to the shaman—a power which can change souls.

The Shaman appears as a spiritual guide to the reader of Waldman's poems. The most fascinating way in which she portrays the Shaman is by personifying him through her postmodernist mentors. In her poem entitled "Jack Kerouac Dream," there is a loose, yet distinctive vision of the troubled author (*Kill... 12*):

He's talking speedily about the evil of the feminine but he likes it. O bitter tones of the demon feminine. He's in a repressed New England winter room, but oddly it's like the old whorehouse in Eldora with bats inside the walls. There's peeling wallpaper of gold fleur-de-lys pattern on green on the far side. And his "coat of arms," or rather "his mother's arm coat (arm chair?)" is close by.

The title gives the subject of this poem, it is the description of a dream; the continuity of the sentences stands on shaky grounds. The narrative questions itself, changing colors, verbs and even objects around. It questions its reality and the sanity of the speaker in the line, "And his 'coat of arms,' or rather 'his mother's arm coat (arm chair?)" is close by." In the uncertainty, we

can only be sure the narrator can see something near to her/him, and even that is questionable. A few lines down, a muddling of sounds, “est peur” (to fear) and “espoir” (hope), continues to create a blurred and confused unrest in the poetic reality. What is clear is that the speaker is somehow removed or separate from Kerouac’s haunting abode. It is purely spiritual, yet tragically reflects the author’s short, distressed life. Though the speaker is younger than him, she wishes to offer some comfort, wishes she could somehow care for him in his madness. The comparison of Kerouac to the Shaman persona is seen in his knowledge of the Alice-in-Wonderland-like surroundings. He wishes to “hunt and gather” but refuses when seeing how the “sky is broken.” The poem seems to end with his contemplation; “‘Ummm.’ He’s off somewhere else, his eyes moist and glassy.” He leaves the speaker in a cold place, transcending to a new existence. The muddled, indefinite end alludes to his drinking himself to death, and an ultimate unknowing. He is not a true shaman, but the speaker wishes him to be.

Perhaps the true Shaman is the poet/songwriter Bob Dylan. This appears to be so in the poem “Shaman Hisses You Slide Back into the Night” (Waldman, *Kill* 49-69). The opening dedication describes the inspiration, which at its heart is Dylan’s love of language. Waldman describes him as “the word-worker, and ‘technician of the sacred,’ i.e., shaman.” The speaker simultaneously acts as the Shaman and a loyal follower. In a way, it is the story of Waldman channeling Dylan into her words, especially on the repetitious “shaman” lines throughout the poem. In these segments, the speaker will describe the Shaman’s actions, his clothes, his mind (53):

shaman touches the ocean

shaman don’t drown

shaman echoes himself

shaman bites down hard on the wind
 you'd better well listen to shaman

The identity of the speaker and the Shaman is indistinct. It is unclear as to whether the speaker is the Shaman speaking in third person or if the speaker is simply a follower, preaching of the Shaman. If it is the Shaman in third person, an almost tribal, primitive understanding is given to his identity. He refuses proper grammar, making his words more powerful and distinctive; he only implements what is necessary. The preference of line breaks and elongated spacing over proper punctuation in other parts of the shaman sections also lends to this idea. Using the “progressive,” “civil,” or even “mascualine” forms of punctuation and grammar dilute the power of the language. This type of deconstructed language amplifies the divine authority of the Shaman’s mind/soul. If the shaman is not the speaker, the same rules still apply. The speaker’s choice in using the Shaman’s language to describe the Shaman continues the amplification of the persona. In a later appearance of the repetitious shaman-lines, the identities of the speaker and shaman are separated. Now the speaker turns on him, with questioning and shamefully mocking tone, “shaman please snarl for us/shaman you know about dalliance?/shaman you a ladies’ man?” (57). The uninitiated disregard his power as superstition, scorns his sensuality as strictly sexual nature. To the speaker, the shaman now is full of lust and carnal urges. It is a reaction against the un-masculine communications with the vision world portrayed earlier in the poem.

The Shaman, though likely male, is not particularly man or woman. Waldman communicates this throughout “Shaman Hisses You Slide Back into the Night,” most especially in the closing stanza (69).

a man-woman a shaman a man who makes a song to heal

a woman-man a sha-man a woman makes this song to heal
 a mannerism a shaman has a man who plays a drum to heal
 a woman singing a woman dancing a woman makes a place a meal

The mixing of words emphasizes the language behind the word “shaman,” the root of the word is “man,” yet the poem clarifies the lack of gender identification of the piece’s main Shaman. The speaker either refuses or lacks the knowledge to call the Shaman man or woman, so there is a refraining from doing so. The Shaman is simultaneously male and female, the speaker and the subject. The possibility that we are all potentially shamans defines the end of the poem.

The Shaman/Hag dichotomy often portrayed in Waldman’s poetics stretches from the dichotomy of male/female energy. Female energy is understood as a chaotic, passionate form, which as shown above, is focused on the cycle of birth, death, and rebirth. Male energy is a violent, cutting force; it shapes the female energy and is described as “potent” and “instable” (*Vow...113*). The two auras seem to control and balance each other, determining our actions, our language, and our views on the world. The piece entitled “Men & Women” explores the relationship between the two energies, as they take form in humanity (*Room...27*):

Men refuse to open themselves up
 Unprepossessing however, if not lightheaded
 At times instincts are perverted to hieroglyphs
 Meaning “I stand in the name of going home”
 Myopic scrutiny abounds in “home”
 While all component entities revert to
 The woman again...

The male energy restricts the female energy, forming it into the domestic shape through its “myopic scrutiny” (line 15). Men are shown as carving, shaping beings; men wish to “correct the woman,” as if something is wrong or unnatural (or too natural). Female energy is raw, instinctual. The male energy, being one of cuts and corrections, is restrictive towards both itself and the female energy. It suppresses the natural emotions and becomes separate from nature. Intellect is prized over gut-feeling; male energy is the origin of war. However, though women are portrayed at first as a chaotic energy, the speaker goes on to argue their unchanging nature; “Women are fixed in a constellation of forms” (line 23). This inference suggests natural energy, such as that of the “chaotic” female, is more permanent than man. Whether or not Waldman speaks of just men or women, it is decidedly true that nature will continue living long after humanity has lost its way.

The third essence, Kali Yuga, describes a poetics of the “end-times.” In the Hindu tradition, “yuga” is a measurement of time. Kali Yuga is the final yuga in the cycle of existence. At this point, humanity suffers a steep decline in spirituality and no longer communicates with the gods. There is a barbarism about the age; war, natural disaster, and animosity between individuals are at an all time high. It is an age of vice, which can only be corrected by the utter destruction and recreation of the universe (Stoddart 4). The goddess for whom this age is named is striking. Her infamous portrait vividly describes her, flailing tongue and limbs; wielding a curved, menacing blade; a man’s severed scalp is clasped in hand, with more heads strung together, creating a long necklace which nearly touches the floor. She stands on an unconscious Shiva, the creator god, signaling death and chaos (Bey 85). The present day is marked as being Kali Yuga. This is understandable with the amount of violence, terror, and power such horrors wield despite the vast amounts of knowledge available to society today. Humans recklessly

suggest solutions to the waning economic times, without knowing how to properly value human lives; earthquakes and other natural disasters devastate the rest of the world, straining what sanity remains. Poetry offers both a means of understanding and relief to the apocalyptic hell awaiting humanity at the end of this ancient age. The poets are prophets in times when prophets wield little to no power and are looked upon as babbling sooth sayers.

Nothing can be done to rectify the age of darkness; the only salvation is in accepting our physical limitations and honoring the supernatural forces which govern the universe. In his book *Remembering in a World of Forgetting*, Stoddart expresses a realization of current times (4):

The clock cannot be turned back...But whoever is capable of understanding the falseness of the progressivistic current around him, thereby liberates himself inwardly from the thralldom of a mortal error, even though outwardly he may not, any more than his fellows escape its physical effects.

The Kali Yuga seems to be an age of forgotten enlightenment, where progress is preferred over faith. In her apocalyptic poetry, Waldman seemingly agrees with this idea, and through her words, a type of spiritual hope and can be gathered, transcending the physical situations of the present.

To see this hopefulness towards acceptance in action, we go to Waldman's piece from *Kill or Cure*, "Pulse" (130). The subject matter masquerades as the taking of mind-altering substances, but it possibly represents the search for spiritual enlightenment:

the sky. The sky was a screen for her mind to play upon. She wanted to melt with the trees, with the rocks, with the flesh of all the nameable world.

She loved words. She would name the world now.

She would name it again. Again. Name it words again.

She would embrace that hill and everything upon it.

The speaker witnesses this woman's inspiration. Nature itself seems to flow around her, dancing a mythic ballet, interacting with her soul. She not only reaches out and touches the world, but she wishes to fuse with it through language. The beauty of these lines is in the very essence of the words. She cannot simply sit and wait for the sound/shape of her known tongue, but must create it new. The repetition of "again" suggests a cycle, simultaneously of the woman and of the divine. There is a destruction in "[naming] it again," but also a type of rebirth; the world will be made new in the name. This goal, however, is never reached; the drugged naming is not a truly spiritual renewal, but false. The woman is brought back in the following stanza to a materialistic, "progressive" world. Here, the narrator focuses on the woman's appearance, rather than the appearance of the world around her; "She checked her face in the car mirror. Her eye makeup was/ smudged" (lines 29-30). The lines follow a desperate urge to identify the world, without having the power to name it. She falls back to her face, her identity, and in cleaning her reflection and "[putting] on her fuchsia lipstick," she reclaims something of her lost spirituality. She can now "face the world" (lines 30-31). The poem, at its most basic, speaks to a desperate attempt to understand why Kali Yuga exists, why nothing can be perfect. Ultimately, "Pulse" concludes that we cannot know the truth behind it, but we can have some peace knowing the undetermined state of that truth.

Kali Yuga haunts most, if not all, of Anne Waldman's poetry and writings. She contemplates the current state of the Kali age as well as fights to give knowledge to the general public about the dangers of nuclear war and plutonium production, endangered species, and the

need for equality in sex and gender roles. For Waldman, the goddess Kali represents an ultimate female power; in mythology, she is full of sex, ambition, and violence, far set from traditional roles of western women. In “Kali Yuga Poetics: A Manifesto for Hakim Bey,” she describes the bloody sacrifices for the Kalighat as “beyond aggression,” and how the goddess “manifests an unconditional impassive, yet uncompromising awareness...Her image invokes both fear and comfort. She’s an aspect of the ‘feminine principle’ which is forever creating and destroying” (*Vow...*71). Poetics comes into the age as a call to action towards humanity (72). Though nothing can be done about the impending destruction at the end of this yuga, it may be challenged, and humans can change from monster to savior through realizing their role in the earthly cycles. Anne’s poetry, to the unknowing reader, hovers in literature as the ultimate pessimistic point of view, documenting the fall of the world as we know it. However, when taking into account her own attitude in regards to her words, she should be seen as the ultimate optimist; she hopes and dreams of peace. It is idealistic, but also heartwarming. She restores the ability to control our own destinies. Her words divinely grant freewill to the masses, and damn slothful actions that dismiss global crisis/catastrophe as a sign of the times.

The Hag persona comes forth once again in the pretense of Kali Yuga poetics. The poems presented earlier in which the Hag rages all stem from some piece of devastation in Kali Yuga. “Spel Against Specious Ones” is both a curse upon and plea to those blindly darkening the contemporary age. Taking the form of a list poem, the Hag’s rant dooms the leaders of dark/selfish ways to fates worse than Hell. They are to be “doused in hot roiling water” or “banished from the kingdom of poetry & music forever,” among other vivid descriptions of misery and ailments (Waldman, *Room...*10). Despite the horrid fate being wished upon them, the Hag does not entirely condemn them to their fate. Hope is offered in the last lines,

permissing that a realization of their wickedness will lift some measure of the curse. So long as they “have one shred of recognition” of their ill deeds and habits, they may not suffer to the greatest extent. In a way, this poem acts as the revelation of Kali. There is forgiveness in sin, but only if the sin is first identified and accepted. Kali Yuga therefore should be viewed as an age of hopefulness in redemption, not simply as a date with dark destiny.

Her newest book, *Manatee/Humanity*, rallies the troops (i.e., anyone who is willing to listen and to search for understanding). The book itself is dedicated to the many endangered species of the world, most particularly that wonderful creature originally mistaken to be a mermaid by unfamiliar mariners (the manatee) and those who strive to protect them. Anne’s performance of this piece in 2007 at Boulder Colorado is especially striking (“Manatee/Humanity” np.). There is no urgency to put her message into the poem itself. She explains the inspiration for it, yet treats it as if it were a piece made to go on a nature-education television program. Her voice, along with the accompanying music in the recital, provokes no ripples in the audience’s air. It is smooth and sensual, acting as the manatee in the cool waters. The passion is reserved for contemplation on language. The jazzy music is reflected in both the animal and her words. In comparing the sound of the words “manatee” and “humanity,” she intimately connects them, making it so that saving the animal acts as a saving of the human soul. “The manatee has no natural enemy/but natural man. The manatee” plays with language, binding man and manatee together. The language suggests humans and manatees to be sister species, placing a sin on the murder of the docile creatures. She wails in sorrow at the line “Man makes no concession to manatee;” the haunting truth in the phrase is that man makes no concession to humanity either. The good of the individual is preferred over the good of all, and man is willing to destroy everything for man’s own gain. Her love of both the animals and the

people of the world emphasizes the eerie parallels in the sound of the words. In a way, her words warn that humanity will drown itself if not careful; she stresses the importance of taking care of the earth and of people not our own. We all need each other, us and the manatee both.

The subject matter in *Manatee/Humanity* is vast and various. The overall theme to the poetic compilation seems to be a reminder of our animal ancestry. She follows humanity's growth into something unnatural—away from nature. On page 14, she begins at the apex of human distinction:

Oldowan stone of irregular edge cuts another stone crudely
Stone of irregular edge cuts broodingly
old woman old woman hold the blunt instrument to soothe thee
or Acheulean more gracile hammer flakes off stone rue thee
& vocal in the cry of hunt "kill"—what? kill thee?

For those uninitiated in the world of anthropology—the study of humans throughout time and place—an animal, primal visage communicates through the ritualistic permanence of the lines. The language is primitive, yet refined. The subject of these lines is the distinction between our ancestors and the rest of the organic world. “Oldowan” and “Acheulean” refer to the stone tools first crafted by the genus *homo* nearly two million years before present. These bits of manipulated stone, especially the regular style of the Acheulean tool industry, separate our ancestors from the creatures around us. The Stone Age marks the beginning of humanity's dominance over nature; our minds allow us to not only fracture and shape the seemingly permanent world, but also give us the mental capacity to understand the world around us. In her lines we also see the beginnings of the Hag and Shaman. Our minds communicate the power to

create—create tools, religion, etc.—our tools allow us to destroy, or to “kill!” The cycle of life and death, the beginnings of the Yugas, come into being with the emergence of our minds. In the following lines, the speaker focuses on mirrors and reflection (14):

self-recognizing
 prosimian mirror
 neuron

 she stood up
 shrill, hurried conversation
 expressing sorrow
 “o snared swan”

 once in the mirror
 backlit by sun
 beauty “me,” a snared sawn

The focus on reflection and mirror images brings both speaker and audience to the realization that the connection between nature and humanity, though mostly forgotten, continues its existence past the birth of the human brain. All humans, even those who profess the study of evolution, are guilty of thinking the “now” is how things have always been and always will be. We look to evolutionary processes as a means to the end—the ideal end product being the human mind. The phrase, “self-recognizing,” points to humanity’s ability to recognize their own kind as well as a willingness to disregard those things inhuman, whether they be plants, animals, or humans of a different origin. The mirrors and reflections of Waldman’s poetry subtly ask her

audience to realize the human urge to shut out those creatures who do not share the same features that characterize the *Homo sapien* brand. In a way, the entirety of *Manatee/humanity* is a constant dialogue, asking to define “human” by features which are shared by all creatures, not by features which others lack. It questions the empathy urge, exploring our reflections in the mirror—are we human or something more primal; is the animal in us more civilized than humanity as a whole?

The juxtaposition of the words manatee and humanity, with their similar sounds yet starkly different physical entities, demonstrates the immortal questioning of sentience and consciousness. Are we, *Homo sapien*, the only creatures on this planet or in this universe to contemplate the vastness of the mind and the cosmos, the expanding infinity of space which may hold our wildest dreams and darkest nightmares? Is consciousness necessarily a product of only the largest and brightest of biological minds? As humans, Waldman argues, we are blinded by our own pride; we point to our conquering of nature as the pinnacle of knowledge, yet such conquering is destroying the earth on which we depend to survive. The cars, power plants, and continuous overuse of the once-fertile fields by industrialized nations are corrupting the once pristine garden.

“Humanitarian,” “spiritual,” “passionate:” these are the words with which Anne Waldman is best described. Her poetry, on paper and in person, dares its audience to strive for a better world. She does not idle in the background of the world stage, nor does she passively accept statements of “this is what is, and that is all.” She uses her words, her mind, and her soul to sway her audiences into understanding what it is to be male, female, in love or in rage. With the guidance of the goddess Kali, and the demonstrations of those devious wordsmiths who paved the postmodern poetical way, Waldman continues to put forth awe-inspiring presentations

of lingual might well into her later years. Her performances are ruled by two figures, the Hag and the Shaman, and dictated by the breath and rhythm of the universe. She sings, prays, and sways to her own music and the music of those close to her in accompaniments. Her legacy continues through both her and her contributions to the Jack Kerouac School of Disembodied Poetics and to the Outrider poetic society. Thousands of souls—students, language enthusiasts, and political/social activists—have been moved by her words, poetic or not; there is a will to better understand the world as not only physical, but spiritual and emotional as well. In the dark times of the Kali Yuga, there should be nothing for humanity, if not hope.

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