

STRATEGIES OF SILENCE IN AMERICAN WOMEN'S POETRY

Fellowship winner studies the use of innovative forms in the work of Louise Nedecker and other twentieth-century women poets

by Maggie Evans, PhD candidate, Department of English

The final lines of Marge Piercy's "The Woman in the Ordinary" exemplify a familiar strain of contemporary American women's poetry:

In her bottled up is a woman peppery as curry,
a yam of a woman of butter and brass,
compounded of acid and sweet like a pineapple,
like a handgrenade set to explode,
like goldenrod ready to bloom.

The poem celebrates the potential uncorking of a "bottled up" womanhood and laments the self-effacement of women who suppress their brassiness. It values the expression of repressed or devalued aspects of femininity, and the final similes of the poem depict this eventual expression as an explosive blossoming—both destructive and vital. The violent flowering of female expression is an image that resonates with the mainstream of feminist poetry. Indeed, feminist literary effort has largely focused on the recuperation and encouragement of writers whose voices have been systematically silenced. This has been an important goal, and it has helped readers to discover (or to remember) the work of many women writers. However, despite its usefulness, the conception of the creative work of women as a means of speaking out against oppressive silences has now become limiting: this concept cannot apprehend the silences that are endemic to poetic language, making it difficult to appreciate the strategic uses of silence that are central to many women's poetic practice. As a result, women poets who favor leaving out rather than speaking out are sometimes relegated to the margins of literature. This is due to a masculinist literary history that makes them a footnote but also to a feminist narrative of finding voice that does not accommodate poems steeped in silence. My research seeks to complicate prevailing notions about speech and silence in women's poetry to account for poems by women writers who resist language as well as those who triumphantly claim it.

Lorine Nedecker's poetry is not widely known, in part because her work has been considered ancillary to the male-dominated Objectivist movement but also because her short poems, her refusal of narrative cohesion, and her obliquity make her an unlikely candidate for mainstream feminist reclamation. Nedecker (1903-1970) spent most of her life in rural Wisconsin, where she worked as a laborer while writing and publishing her poems. She was a reticent person who avoided publicity and kept her social and professional circles small. Perhaps it was this personal restraint that led Nedecker away from the confessional, talkative style of many of her contemporaries and toward terse poems like this:

Something in the water
like a flower
will devour
water
flower

The poem is cryptic, briefly describing an unnamed "something" that "will devour." The information the poem provides about its purported subject, "something in the water," is strictly circumscribed. While the simile, "like a flower," evokes an aquatic blossom, the only certain thing is that the "something" is not a flower; it is only like one. Further, because of the grammatical ambiguity of the first three lines, the phrase "like a flower" could apply to the noun "something," the prepositional phrase



"in the water," or the verb "devour." Thus, the something could simply be like a flower, it could be located in the water like a flower, or it could devour like a flower does. In this final instance, the isolated nouns of the last two lines, "water" and "flower," may be the things that a flower, and by analogy the "something," devours. But they may also simply be ambient description, setting the scene for the action of the first three lines. Ultimately, the poem undermines its own sparse imagery, characterizing the relationship among its objects as

devouring but refusing to articulate exactly what devours what.

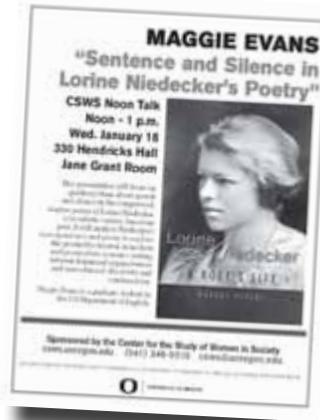
The poem's formal silences—particularly brevity and omission—intensify the undecidability of its meaning. Its extreme brevity is representative of Nedecker's aesthetic of silence. In particular, the shortness of the individual lines works to separate the objects of the poem, interrupting the connections the syntax suggests. The phrase "Something in the water like a flower will devour" establishes grammatical relationships, however uncertain, but the curtness of the lines suppresses those interactions in favor of self-contained phrases. This brevity also creates more white space around the lines—further emphasized by the extra spaces surrounding the final single-word lines—which visually isolates the individual lines of the poem, pulling against the relationships implied by the sense of the words. In addition to brevity, Nedecker uses strategic omissions to resist language. The poem refuses to provide narrative context that might clarify the significance of its images, and it erases the conjunctions and punctuation that would integrate its short lines into a sentence with determinate grammar and meaning. Any punctuation would inevitably limit the possible readings of the poem, resolving at least some of the ambiguity. For instance, even the simple addition of a final period would convert the poem into a single sentence, requiring the integration of "water" and "flower" into the grammar of the previous phrase, foreclosing the possibility that they exist independently. And certainly the inclusion of conjunctions or prepositions, especially in the final two lines, would more strictly delineate the proliferating meanings. The poem omits these elements, silencing important relational functions of language like subordination and coordination and leaving the interactions between its objects indeterminate. The poem refuses to say what its mysterious "something" is, leaving it to float beside "flower" and "water" in a wash of uncertain connections.

The use of formal silences to destabilize linguistic relationships among objects is central to Nedecker's poetics because she wanted to acknowledge the separate identity of objects. The silences in a poem like "Something in the water" allow its objects to escape both poet and reader and remain unfixed by language, slippery and resistant. Further, since

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women have been the poetic object par excellence, explored by male subjectivity, Niedecker's silences have feminist implications: they are the tools of a protective poetics that seeks to represent without appropriating, refusing to transgress the boundaries of objects and insisting on the limits of the poet's power to dictate an object's meaning. Her quiet aesthetic of omission and its recognition of the otherness of its objects is a form of feminist resistance entirely distinct from a poetry of explosive blossoming.

My work on silence in Niedecker's poetry is part of a more wide-ranging project exploring how 20th-century American women use innova-



tive forms to manage conflicting desires for speech and silence. I argue that women poets often seek both to extend and to limit language, and I investigate how their poetic experiments allow them simultaneously to achieve these contradictory goals. My hope is that the finished work will be useful to literary scholars studying the complexities of form in American women's poetry. Further, I hope it will contribute to the growing conversation in women's studies seeking critical methods responsive to the variability and complexity of women's experiences and their ways of representing, or refusing to represent, those experiences. ■

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children. I observed that some first generation women see their heritage as a resource, a skill set for navigating "both worlds" of the ethnic community and mainstream France. Others, such as young women who resent the pressures of their parents' community and use marriage to escape it, mistrust their heritage.

The immigrant Mauritanian Pulaar-speaking (aka Haalpulaar) community has strict societal pressures for young French women of Haalpulaar origin. Immigrants have a mocking nickname, "mad cows," for girls and women of Haalpulaar origin who are born or raised in France, which makes reference to the mad cow epidemic that occurred in Europe when meat was improperly butchered and consumed and to the fact that Haalpulaar Mauritians were traditionally herders of cattle. The community uses this term in partial jest, but also as indirect communication and admonishment to young French women to behave in ways culturally appropriate to the Haalpulaar community. For example, one young woman told me that her mother calls her a *mad cow* when she says that she doesn't want to cook for her husband.

Gendered socialization and discrimination has profound effects on identity. Discrimination for these women comes from both mainstream French society, when searching for a job or while pursuing higher education, and from within the migrant community. Young women may feel frustrated with parents who hold them to standards and cultural values they don't feel that they share.

And yet, on the other hand, many first generation women expressed that when they grew older, they appreciated the cultural values their parents passed on to them through indirect communication. They found that these values were resources for them, enabling success in professional life, scholarship, or in overcoming discrimination with patience and grace. I



Large community gatherings such as this provide a support network for ethnic Peul in Paris.

witnessed many examples of first generation women embracing their bicultural and transnational identities in professional and personal life. Ameena, for example, is studying international diplomacy; Maimouna is studying hospitality, and is excited to develop tourism to Mauritania. French women of migrant descent in their mid- and late twenties often strongly embrace the immigrant community when they marry and have children; Genaba is one example of this evolving relationship to heritage and community. Community events, with free childcare, provide a support network and social network for women negotiating the delicate balance of working outside the home and childrearing.

The idea that heritage can be a resource gives voice to a new definition of women's empowerment grounded in their personal experiences. Mainstream France views immigrant women who cannot speak French to their children as dangerous to their children's possibilities for integration, and unable to empower them to succeed in mainstream French society. Yet successful first generation women revealed in their discussions with me that the cultural values and skills from their nonliterate mothers, who could only speak to them in Pulaar, empowered them to succeed in their professional pursuits.

Their insights also illustrate a more nuanced understanding of "assimilation" than that posed by Right-wing politicians or activists. Discrimination comes from both mainstream French society and from within migrant communities. Rather than conceptualizing "assimilation" as a certain type of identity formation and way of life, it is important for policymakers and politicians to understand the many ways that first generation women and men may make successful lives for themselves, using combinations of cultural identifications and knowledge from both migrant traditions and mainstream France. Indeed, the term "assimilation" may be entirely meaningless, as many women find success in this difficult context through bicultural identification and community building. ■

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