

I Have a Violence in Me:
Gender, Violence, and The Unreal in Maggie Nelson and Sylvia Plath

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I make it real by putting it into words. It is only by putting it into words that I make it whole; this wholeness means that it has lost its power to hurt me; it gives me, perhaps because by doing so I take away the pain, a great delight to put the severed parts together.

– The Red Parts: Autobiography of a Trial

Maggie Nelson and Sylvia Plath are female writers with commendable careers. Their work explores similar themes of physical violence and gender, and their confessional writing styles are each marked by a frank narrative voice. Nelson and Plath's propensity to participate in similar literary habits, and the fact that Nelson wrote her undergraduate thesis on Plath, illustrates how these writers are prime for scholarly comparison (Rowbottom). This paper will examine Nelson's nonfiction piece, *The Red Parts*, and her prose-poetry collection, *Jane: a Murder* (and to a lesser degree her essay, *The Art of Cruelty*). It will also examine Plath's poetry collections *The Colossus* and *Ariel*. Because it is more contemporary, Nelson's work has received less attention from scholars than Plath.¹ This paper will spend more time addressing her writing as a result. By conducting a literary analysis of the primary texts, this paper investigates manifestations of violence in the male and female figures in the works of Nelson and Plath. Comparing these authors allows connections to be drawn between the themes of gendered violence in their work: *specific violence* (violence that seeks a specific object) and *general violence* (violence that seeks a nonspecific object). A close reading shows that female expressions of violence in the primary texts occur in non-real frameworks (i.e. non-realities such

¹ *The Art of Cruelty: A Reckoning*, *The Red Parts: Autobiography of a Trial*, and *Jane: a Murder* were all published between 2011 and 2005. Conversely, Plath's *The Colossus* and *Ariel* were published in 1960 and 1965, respectively.

as the imagination, dreams, fantasies, etc.). It also clarifies how Nelson and Plath combat this dynamic with instances of female violence that resist the limitations of frameworks.

BACKGROUND

As is demonstrated through her books *The Red Parts: Autobiography of a Trial*, *Jane: a Murder*, and *The Art of Cruelty: A Reckoning*, Nelson is comfortable engaging a variety of written forms, from true crime autobiographies to art criticism. Alongside her teaching career at the California Institute of the Arts, Nelson writes lyric essays, which are a new genre of nonfiction writing that is subtly argumentative, formally fragmented, and poetic.² Themes of sex, love, art, gender, violence, and trauma appear repeatedly in her published essays, most notably in *The Argonauts*, *The Art of Cruelty*, and *Bluets*.³ Brutality and suffering are explored through Maggie Nelson's contemplations of a psychological state she calls "murder mind," which she encountered while writing her book *Jane: a Murder*. The book, published in 2005, is a fragmented "eulogy" for Nelson's aunt, who was murdered in 1969. "Murder mind" caused Nelson to dream of "sickening images" and to "feel like a ghost, a stranger to [herself]" (*The Red Parts* 9). In *The Art of Cruelty: A Reckoning*, Nelson examines these same themes in the poems of Sylvia Plath, who like Nelson, delved into these upsetting subjects and "set up shop in '[their] blackness'... [and] with steely serenity... went about sketching the landscape she found there" (pg 260).

Plath herself began writing in earnest in the late 1950s, during which she attended poetry seminars led by Robert Lowell alongside creatives like Anne Sexton. This was a formative

² For examples of these features in Nelson's writing, see *The Art of Cruelty*, *The Argonauts*, and *Bluets*, respectively.

³*The Argonauts* is a meditation on Nelson and her spouse's sexuality and gender; *The Art of Cruelty* investigates brutality's relationship to art; *Bluets* is a poetic reflection on heartbreak, love, and romantic loss.

period for her style (Keenan 88). Her professions of interior pain and cynicism earned her a place within the confessional movement, which included, among other contemporaries, Sexton and Lowell. The movement itself denotes literature that tears through an author's veil of privacy, placing their internal struggles on display and pulling readers into a sudden (and often uncomfortable) proximity. Over the course of her career, Plath's poetry increased in its violent overtones and graphic confessions, moving from metaphors for figurative cruelty in her collection *The Colossus* to a more exhibitionistic tone with her descriptions of failed suicides in "Lady Lazarus" (from *Ariel*). *The Colossus*, which will be this paper's main focus during its discussions of Plath, was published in 1960, and is the only collection that was published prior to her death. Containing poems such as "Hardcastle Crag" and the collection's titular piece, *The Colossus* illustrates, in the words of Helen Vendler, how "Plath has come of age as a poet, first of all by casting off the spell of her predecessors... and then by achieving... a style of her own" (Vendler 132). In her book *Women, the New York School, and Other True Abstractions*, Maggie Nelson describes Plath's poetry as being concerned with a "dissolution" of the self that is "both desirable and traumatic" (pg 43). This characterization of Lady Lazarus' mental and physical states as "fragmented" is not only apt but interesting, as Nelson herself captures a similar disintegration of the self in her lyric essay *Bluets*.⁴

While the texts referenced in this essay (particularly those by Maggie Nelson) have undergone fewer scholarly examinations, the critical landscape surrounding these writers is generally well populated. Plath's *Bell Jar* and *Ariel* have inspired innumerable articles that investigate her themes of suicide, motherhood, and femininity (Clifford; King; Boyles). The

⁴ The titular piece of Plath's collection *Ariel* has a distinctly disjointed voice that exemplifies Nelson's observation. Nelson's *Bluets* is similarly fragmented in that it is a series of anecdotal stanzas that explore recurring images and ideas.

handful of researchers who have addressed the writings of Nelson have trained their focus on her *Argonauts*, and consigned their efforts to situating it in conversation with sexual identity, gender, and genre (Rendle-Short; Dicoski; Silbergleid). The absence of research devoted to Nelson's *The Red Parts* and *Jane*, and the absence of articles juxtaposing Nelson and Plath for the sake of locating a relationship between their themes of gender and violence, has prompted the production of this essay. Having said that, because there is a lack of academic articles that examine *The Red Parts* and *Jane*, this paper will occasionally reference reviews of these books in lieu of peer-reviewed articles.

TERMINOLOGY & FRAMEWORKS: NELSON'S *THE RED PARTS* AND *JANE*

Being as Nelson's writing is the greater focus of this paper, more of her works will be analyzed, and because the primary texts *Jane* and *The Red Parts* revolve around historical events that are not well known, these books require a more detailed introduction than Plath's *The Colossus*. In 1969, Maggie Nelson's aunt, Jane Mixer, was murdered during a series of killings known as the Michigan Murders. Mixer was shot and left in a cemetery, where she was found the following morning. At the time, it was thought (but not officially declared) that Jane's killer was same individual responsible for the deaths of six other girls: a man named John Collins (*The Red Parts* 13; *Jane: a Murder* 144). Despite never knowing her aunt (who died before Nelson was born), Nelson became fixated on Jane's life and death. She chased after the fragments of Jane that had remained in the years after her passing: diaries, photographs, stories. In doing this, she sought to reassemble a woman whose shadow had fallen over her life.

The book *Jane: a Murder* is the result of Nelson's attempts to revive Jane's memory. The book is a collection of prose, poems, and police reports, and it functions as a eulogy. The

collection's most notable feature is its inclusion of excerpts from Jane's diary, which not only allow readers to feel closer to Jane, but gives them the sense she is alive within the book's pages.

Towards the end, one of the excerpts shows Jane recalling her experience as a stagehand in a school play: "You can't truly enjoy or understand this until you've been there... / Humor, gratitude, and joy overflow and brim and yet I know no words to describe it" (pg 213).

Emotional declarations such as this allow Jane's character to shine throughout the book. These lively quotes also help to balance out the collection's "heavier" sections (i.e. poems that deal with Jane's death). Michelle Deschene-Warren makes a similar observation in her book review: "The subject matter is inherently disturbing, but here, it is not put on sensational display... I wouldn't say Nelson shields her reader from the darker, stomach-twisting aspects of these crimes, but opts to shine her light elsewhere" (Deschene-Warren).

Following the publication of *Jane* in 2005, Nelson was notified by police that Jane's case had been reopened, and new suspects were being investigated for ties to Mixer's death. Written as an addendum to the information covered in *Jane, The Red Parts: Autobiography of a Trial* not only updates readers on new legal proceedings in Jane's case, but functions as an "examination (both implicit and explicit) on [sic] our cultural fascination with voyeurism, death, sex and misogyny" (Brottman). The book's "storyline" is the discovery of new evidence that links Gary Leiterman, a Detroit nurse, to the murder. In addition to attending to the nuances of court proceedings (describing post-mortem photos of Jane, recounting the specialists who spoke on behalf of the case), Nelson makes frequent detours to recount dreams and anecdotes from her childhood. *The Red Parts* also illustrates the case's capacity to raw the hearts of Nelson's family. On page 167, following Leiterman's conviction, Nelson witnesses the fractured resolve of her

grandfather: “This is not the face of a repressed, aloof old man. This is the face of a father now cracking apart with animal sobs.”

Before proceeding with an analysis of the aforementioned texts, it is necessary to introduce this essay’s central concepts: *specific violence* and *general violence*. This paper’s understanding of specific violence is violence with a clear motivation; or violence that pursues *specific* objects or goals. General violence is understood as violence that has *nonspecific* objects or goals; or violence that is spontaneous, impulsive, or unpremeditated.

To better explain *specific violence*, which is the term this essay will devote most of its attention to, it is helpful to first demonstrate what does not constitute a specific act of brutality. In chapter nine of *The Red Parts*, Maggie Nelson revisits her concept of “murder mind” by examining serial killer Michael Ross. Like John Collins, Ross was arrested for the murder of several women, but unlike Collins, he created a website after his incarceration that was dedicated to his reputation as a killer. Page 77 features an example of that which this paper considers general violence. An excerpt from his website details the functionality of Ross’ mind:

“I guess the easiest way to explain it is everybody’s had a tune stuck in their head... It just plays over and over again... I have that... And that kind of thing could drive you nuts. But if you replace that melody now with thoughts of rape & murder & degradation of women...”

In this excerpt, Ross’ desire for violence seeks no specific object. That is, the “melody” in his head compels him to harm “women” in general, as opposed to a specific woman. Also, his yearning to “rape & murder & [degrade]” women has no apparent motivation; Ross does not cite a singular event or experience that resulted in his desire to kill, leading readers to conclude that his killings were random. It is because his violent desires seek nonspecific objects, and his brutal

acts were unpremeditated, that Michael Ross' actions embody general violence. Conversely, an example of specific violence can be found in the same book on page 19. Here, Nelson relates a dream in which a man has come to "gas" her house:

He acted very affectionate and kind... yet I knew he was going to kill me. I [make] my way out of the house... Later when he comes back he tries to act unsurprised that I am still alive... I hog-tie him and put him in a black garbage bag and go to burn him alive.

In response to the attack, Nelson retaliates with specific violence: she captures a specific man (the one who tried to kill her) and goes "to burn him alive" in order to meet a specific goal (revenge and/or self-defense).

Specific female violence (i.e. specific violence executed by women) is this paper's focus, but a brief exploration of general male violence provides a valuable contrast to the scenes that will be examined in following sections. At the end of Nelson's *The Red Parts*, Gary Leiterman is convicted of murdering Jane, and is sentenced to life in prison. The decision to find Leiterman guilty rested on the fact that a "mother lode" of his DNA had been found in Jane's pantyhose. As his attorney pointed out in their concluding remarks to the jury, "there was no apparent motive linking his client to her death," all the court possessed that connected Leiterman to Jane was his DNA on her clothes (pg 177). In other words, Gary Leiterman's murder of Jane can be classified as general male violence because Leiterman (allegedly) didn't know Jane. Similar to Michael Ross, he killed her for no reason; his violence was "general" in as much as he could have killed anyone, it didn't have to be Mixer. Another example of general male violence can be found in Plath's "Daddy," from her collection *Ariel*. As the title states, the piece was written to Plath's father, who in the poem is addressed as "you." The opening line establishes the piece's frustrated

tone: “you do not do, you do not do” (pg 49). Here, the repetition of Plath’s scolding emphasizes her force of feeling; her aggravation with her father is so great she must denounce him twice. Also notable is the fact that this line is composed of monosyllabic words; when read aloud, their brevity allows them to sound like “beats,” or, in the hostile context of this poem, “punches.” This anger towards “daddy” stems from Plath’s historically difficult relationship with her father (“Sylvia Plath Biography.”). Her discomfort can also be glimpsed in her allusions to the Holocaust: “I have always been scared of *you*, / with your Luftwaffe... / And your neat moustache / And your Aryan eye, bright blue.” These descriptors liken Plath’s father to Hitler, who had a “neat moustache” and who, as dictator, oversaw the “Luftwaffe,” the aerial branch of the Nazi-German military. In this excerpt, the rhyme between “you” and “blue” links Plath’s fear of her father to his “Aryan” gaze. This fear of his eyes—of being *seen by him*—makes sense, as Plath notes she “may be a bit of a Jew.” By using the Holocaust as a metaphor for their perilous relationship, Plath compares her father to a man whose actions are an example of general male violence. Hitler targeted and murdered a general body of people to serve a nonspecific purpose (ethnic intolerance). He also did not know his millions of Jewish victims personally. As with Ross and Leiterman, Hitler could have placed anyone in his concentration camps, so long as he considered them “non-Aryan.” It is interesting to note that Plath’s metaphor gives her father power over her (like Hitler had power over the Jews in Germany). That she is liable to suffer in this poem from his general male violence leaves room to speculate how Plath is expressing not just fear towards her father, but fear towards men’s ability to oppress women through general male violence.

The primary texts offer multiple examples of specific female violence, but the majority of these scenes operate within “frameworks” that separate them from reality.⁵ Returning to the dream sequence in Maggie Nelson’s *The Red Parts*, readers notice that the entire paragraph is italicized, emphasizing the unreality, the “dreaminess” of the narration. The author notes that “[putting] [her assailant] in a black garbage bag” to “burn him alive” should have been impossible, due to “how heavy the bag [would] probably [have been] because he is such a big guy.” And yet, because her actions are taking place within a dream, the weight of the bag “doesn’t give [Nelson] any problem,” because there is no actual weight to begin with. As a result, Nelson can retaliate against her attacker with an act of specific female violence, because the unreal framework of her dream removes the barriers of reality (e.g., the man’s weight). On the other hand, *Jane: a Murder* offers readers a more conceptual kind of framework. The book, as has been mentioned, incorporates emotional quotes from Jane’s diary. On page 45, Nelson pulls a passage from the diary that reads: “At this moment in my life / hate is so fierce / that I would give anything to kill my mother.” The rage is palpable here, primarily because the excerpt has been broken into short lines, causing it to adopt a clipped tone. This breaking also allows “fierce” and “mother” to become the end-words of the final two lines, emphasizing the passage’s main idea.⁶ Jane committed this thought to the pages of her diary with the impression that it would never be read by anyone except her. The diary’s illusion of privacy prompted Jane to write the aforementioned words, meaning the sensation of privacy that the diary offered acted as

⁵ “Frameworks” meaning non-real contexts and settings, such as dreams, fantasies, and the human imagination. In the case of Jane’s example, the phrase also refers to imaginative constructs that are preconditions for violent expression (e.g. “privacy”).

⁶ In her preface to *Jane: a Murder*, Nelson states that she has taken the liberty of formatting some of Jane’s diary entries, which likely included introducing lineation to passages such as this one.

a framework that allowed her to express specific female violence (specific because the specified person is her mother).

FAILURE BEYOND FRAMEWORKS: NELSON CONT'D & PLATH'S *THE COLOSSUS* & *ARIEL*

Female violence is capable of being expressed within these unreal frameworks, but not outside of them. For evidence of this, one turns back to page 21 of *The Red Parts*. Despite dreaming of vengeance only two pages prior, when Nelson sees Gary Leiterman in court for the first time, she feels “disoriented.” Furthermore, when a shaft of sunlight drifts across the courtroom and visibly blinds Leiterman, Nelson reports a strange “urge to shield him, to block the sun with [her] body, or at least pull down a shade.” While she is capable of righteous female brutality in the framework of her dream, Nelson in the waking world is incapable of violence; she even feels something akin to pity for the suspected killer upon noticing his discomfort. *Jane: a Murder* struggles with a similar conundrum. Within the realm of her diary, Jane was free to express feelings of dissent, to admit she had a “hate [that] is so fierce.” In the real world though, she was “a gusher,” an optimistic chatterer whose friend group consisted of “serious students” and who was part of her high school’s “compliment club” (pg 47, 49, 64). Jane didn’t engage in specific female violence outside her diary because there wasn’t a framework to support such uncharacteristic behavior in the physical world.

Functional frameworks also appear in the writings of Plath, specifically in her piece “The Eye-Mote” from *The Colossus*. In the poem, the speaker (strongly assumed to be Plath) was “looking / At a field of horses” and admiring how the “sun was striking / White chapel pinnacles over the roofs,” when suddenly a “splinter flew in and stuck” in her eye, “Needling it dark” (pg

12). The resulting pain and tears caused Plath's vision to become obscured; she saw "A melding of shapes in a hot rain" where once she observed "the horses, the clouds, the leaves" (pg 12). This violent perception of animals being "warped on the altering green... Grazing at the margins of a bad monochrome" is facilitated by the disorientation Plath experiences, making *the discomfort inflicted by the splinter* the framework for this poem's violence. The splinter remains in Plath's eye for a week, and during this time her female violence becomes specific. She feels "blind to what will be and what was," and "[dreams] that [she is] Oedipus" (pg 13). In comparing herself to the Greek legend who famously killed his father, Plath insinuates that she harbors rage towards her own father. The extremity of her metaphor, likely provoked by the "Red cinder" "Abrading [her] lid," also suggests she wants to enact physical violence towards her father, as Oedipus did to his. All of these brutal visions (the warping horses, the "hot rain," the "Beasts of oasis") stem from the physical agony of the splinter in her eye. It causes suffering and blindness—sensations which prompt Plath to make violent visual and metaphorical associations within her poem. Thus, physical agony is a framework that enables Plath's specific female violence within this piece. "The Eye-Mote" proves one point as well as another. Prior to being impaired by the splinter, Plath feels "Blameless as daylight" as she observes "a field of horses, necks bent, manes blown, / Tails streaming against the green / Backdrop of sycamores" while "sun [is] striking / White chapel pinnacles over the roofs" (pg 12). Her demeanor is calm, something that is not only reflected in the text, but in the poem's formal qualities as well.

- 1 Blameless as daylight I stood looking
- 2 At a field of horses, necks bent, manes blown,
- 3 Tails streaming against the green
- 4 Backdrop of sycamores. Sun was striking

5 White chapel pinnacles over the roofs,
6 Holding the horses, the clouds, the leaves

7 Steadily rooted though they were all flowing
8 Away to the left like reeds in a sea
9 When the splinter flew in and stuck my eye,
10 Needling it dark. Then I was seeing
11 A melding of shapes in a hot rain:
12 Horses warped on the altering green,

13 Outlandish as double-humped camels or uni-
14 corns...

In the opening stanza, most lines are enjambed, causing them to visually glide into one another. The first period does not occur until the middle of the fourth line, by which point readers have accumulated a pool of vivid imagery: horses, sycamores, wind-blown manes. Even the horses' tails suggest a kind of flow when they are described as “streaming.” There is a melding of sound in this stanza as well; the phrase “Sun was striking” contains an abundance of “s”s that create a sweeping sensation when read aloud. Combined, these qualities create an atmosphere of harmony, one that the splinter disrupts in the second stanza. It appears in line three of the second stanza. This line has been end-stopped by a comma, meaning it shatters the “flow” established by previous enjambed lines by forcing a grammatical pause. It is followed by two more end-stops (lines 11 & 12) that serve the same purpose. To further inhibit the piece’s cadence, this sentence’s dependent clause, “Needling it dark,” is extremely short; it contrasts with the poem’s previous lengthy clauses by bringing the sentence to an abrupt end. The halving

of the word “unicorns,” and the radical enjambment of “corns,” serves as the final and most obvious instance of visual disturbance within the piece. These interruptions only occur after the introduction of the “eye-mote;” there isn’t a trace of formal unrest preceding its mention because without the framework of anguish that the splinter provides, Plath’s violent thoughts and desires cannot adequately manifest, and the poem’s form cannot deviate from harmoniousness.

Returning to page 19 of Nelson’s *The Red Parts*, one notices that because Nelson’s violence occurred in a dream, it had no effect on the real world. Because of this, her specific female violence can be deemed *passive*. Likewise, Plath’s suffering in “The Eye-Mote” had no impact on anything in the world aside from herself. The horses in the field remained horses in a field, despite her perceiving them as “warped.” Her pain and her violent thoughts were hers alone, making her violence passive.

CHALLENGING THE GENDER BINARIES OF VIOLENCE: PLATH & NELSON

The medium conveying these frameworks and their acts of violence is writing; Plath’s experience with the “eye-mote” is recounted in a poem, while Nelson’s dream is revisited in her autobiography. The act of writing is itself not fully passive or active. To hit keys on a computer or move a pencil across a page requires physical action, making writing active.

At the same time, writing can be considered passive because of how the words being produced have no initial visible impact on their surroundings (compare it, say, to the act of punching.

Striking another person produces an immediate effect: it incites physical pain and an emotional response. Writing is less “active” because it does not have an immediate impact). Nelson and Plath’s frameworks (dreams & fantasies) can be made real through writing, because the act commits the frameworks to a material space on a page. Recording them in this manner allows

their frameworks to become physically present in the world, which endows the acts of specific female violence therein with a certain tangibility that reduces the passivity and “immateriality” they were previously defined by.

Plath takes this opportunity to create a “real” framework through writing and pushes it further with her poem “Lady Lazarus.” This piece, located on pages six through nine in *Ariel*, follows the poet as she presents her suicide-scarred body to a “peanut-crunching crowd.” Readers will notice that the poem’s images are carnivalesque; Plath summons her audience by shouting “gentlemen, ladies” (a call commonly used by carnies). There is also the mention of peanuts, a popular circus snack, and the idea of “a charge / for the eyeing of [Plath’s] scars.” By having her piece function as an exciting demonstration, a “big strip tease,” Plath generates an atmosphere of activity in her writing which “animates” the specific female violence (i.e. the suicides) within. Plath achieves this activity despite the fact that her violence in the poem is metaphorical (and should therefore be passive, because it is not real).

In her essay, *The Art of Cruelty*, Nelson addresses this notion of women engaging art forms (such as writing) in order to make their female violence more active/visible. In chapter five she notes how female essayist Valentine de Saint-Point, in her 1914 essay “Manifesto of Futurist Women,” called for women to act like “Furies, Amazons, Semiramis, Joans of Arc... Cleopatras, and Messalinas” (pg 67). In imploring her female audience to mimic these historical figures, Saint-Point was asking women readers to behave violently, to become “sublimely unjust once more, like all the forces of nature” (pg 67). What is notable here is that Saint-Point does not direct women to be brutal towards a specific person, or to act violently for a precise reason. She merely calls them to be cruel like “the forces of nature,” which are themselves generally violent

(because they impact *all* people). In other words, Nelson has located an instance of female violence that is not only seeking to transcend the paper it is written on (by having its readers behave with similar violence); she has also discovered a moment in which female violence is attempting to be general. Such a discovery is momentous, because it violently disrupts the gender binaries set up in the world of this paper's primary texts; in which female violence tends to be specific and restrained to unreal frameworks, and male violence tends to be general and free of restraints.

Taking a cue from Valentine de Saint-Point and Plath, Nelson expands upon their demonstrations of active and general female violence by publishing her book *Jane: a Murder*. As was mentioned in the beginning, *Jane* contains countless excerpts from Mixer's private diary. By taking those excerpts and publishing them, Nelson destroyed the diary's nonreal framework of privacy, and allowed Jane's "fierce hate" to become visible to the world. Nelson's dismantling of the journal's framework did not detract from Jane's violence, meaning she achieved what neither Plath nor Saint-Point could: Nelson made specific female violence real; she found a way to make Jane's brutality functional *beyond* a framework.

In chapter two of *The Art of Cruelty*, Nelson examines how artists from the 1960 Viennese Actionism movement sought to overwhelm their audiences' senses by presenting them with gorey performance art that bordered on "Dionysian revelry" (pg 21). She notes that Actionist art was designed (in part) to combat peoples' desensitization to the physical world, and that "artists" such as Hermann Nitsch used extreme violence in their work because they felt images of cruelty and "bloodshed... [were] the ultimate means of giving participants and audience [sic] a 'feast of the senses,' of 'returning them to life'" (pg 21). Nelson's discussion in

this chapter provides a new way to consider this paper's explanation of writing as it relates to violence. In addition to materializing Nelson and Plath's frameworks for brutality, the art of writing can be viewed as something that has helped to "awaken" them to their senses, via allowing them to engage violent topics. On page fifteen of the preface to *The Red Parts*, Nelson recounts how, after attending Gary Leiterman's trial in 2005, she experienced:

An intense rush to record all the details [of the court proceedings]... to transform [herself]... into an aesthetic object, one which might stand... as the last impediment to, the dull speechlessness that makes remembering and formulating impossible.

Here, the author reveals herself to be Nitsch's ideal audience member: in an attempt to avoid "dull speechlessness," Nelson throws herself into recording the violent details of Jane's case. Her use of writing as a means of preventing emotional numbness demonstrates her desire to remain "sensitive" to the world. In this way, the art of writing can be viewed first as something that allows specific female violence freedom from passivity and immateriality and, second, as something that allows Nelson and Plath emotional/sensorial freedom.

THE QUESTION OF FEMALE AGENCY: CONCLUSION

That frameworks allow female violence to occur is important to note, because it is a sign that Nelson and Plath are attaining a kind of agency through them. In other words, these women writers gain freedom within nonreal frameworks; freedom which they use to manifest hidden violence. The agency that these frameworks "allot" is fascinating, due to the fact that it suggests female agency needs to be "allotted" in the first place. The sense of "allowance" attached to these frameworks points to a profound lack of ability (or will) to act freely and/or violently beyond them. Plath's poem "The Colossus" reflects these notions. The piece follows Plath as she

endlessly tries (and fails) to “put [a statue of her father] together” (pg 20). Plath notes that she has “pieced, glued, and properly jointed” her father innumerable times. The actions listed in this line (the second line in the first stanza) are all suggestive of restorative work. The repetition of words with similar connotations emphasizes how all Plath does is “work, work, work” on the statue of her father. This repetition also creates a feeling of stagnance by reiterating the same idea (“work”) and refusing to move on to a new one until the following line. This interpretation of a static atmosphere is supported by lines 4-6 in the second stanza, in which Plath laments that “Thirty years now I have labored / To dredge the silt from your throat. / I am none the wiser” (pg 20). Simply put, Plath’s father has failed to reward her hard work, despite how she has devoted thirty years of labor to his restoration. Her efforts have gotten her nowhere; this lack of progress indicates stagnance. It is crucial to note that unlike “The Eye-Mote,” this poem has no framework. Plath’s actions are not being suspended in any level of nonreality; they are occurring in real time within the poem’s environment. This means “The Colossus” depicts a version of Plath that is stagnant while functioning beyond a framework. This observation would not be different from previous discussions of failed female violence, were it not for the fact that in the final two stanzas, Plath describes herself at night squatting in her father’s sculptured ear, “counting the red stars and those of plum- / color” (pg 21). Throughout the poem, nearly every action executed by Plath has been placed in relation to her father (“I crawl like an ant in mourning / over the weedy acres of [my father’s] brow,” etc.), creating the impression that she cannot act freely of him (and enforcing the idea that these writers are not free beyond frameworks). Yet in these lines, Plath is gazing *away* from her father; her focus, for the first time, is not on him. There is a desire hidden behind this image of a star-gazing Plath, one which

the poem refuses to name in words. It can be identified, though, through a brief analysis of the formatting of the lines in question (lines 30-31):

28 Nights, I squat in the cornucopia
29 Of your left ear, out of the wind,

30 Counting the red stars and those of plum-
31 color.
32 The sun rises under the pillar of your tongue.

Line 30 is the first line of the last stanza; the word “color,” from the phrase “plum-color,” has been brought down and indented to sit beneath the first line. Because line 30 begins a stanza, there is a white space that separates it from the preceding section. This white space also serves to separate Plath’s act of star-gazing from the mention of her father in lines 28-29 (the “you” on 29 being her father). In a similar fashion, the radical indentation of “color” forces distance between Plath’s gazing and the poem’s final reference to her father on line 32. By creating this white space, the poet distances herself from her father, and physically separates her act of star-gazing from the rest of the poem, which thus-far has only depicted images of stagnation and servitude. This attempt to separate her actions from figures and themes of restriction indicate Plath’s desire for freedom. Furthermore, her act of “Counting the red stars and those of plum- / color” demonstrate a preoccupation with the night sky—with the real world—which in turn illustrates that hers is not merely a desire for liberation, but for agency within reality. Agency beyond frameworks. Imagining her like this, with her face lifted towards the sky, one has to wonder if, in spite of a framework’s ability to enable self-expression (and thereby agency), freedom achieved in a nonreal context is truly freedom at all.

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