
“Abandon This Palace of Language:” On the Rhetoric of the Body in *A Yellow Silence*

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A BLUE WOMAN SHAPES A PREMONITION



LUIS OTHONIEL ROSA

When I¹ first imagined *A Yellow Silence*, it was from some desire to construct a physical and collaborative kind of poetry. I was theorizing about silence, listening, the body, and agency, though I did not fully realize it at the time. I was theorizing “because I was hurting,” as bell hooks articulates, and because “I was desperately trying to discover the place of my belonging” while going through a divorce (2). So much of my experience of separation and divorce was about

trying to discern if I was wrong for wanting to end it. *A Yellow Silence* was about creating a space where the question of blame did not exist, or at least did not rule—not because I wanted to forgo responsibility and assume some position of innocence but because I could not register why my body felt so terrible in a marriage to a person I loved.

Abstract

This dialogue reflects on *A Yellow Silence*, which was a collaborative, sonic, intertextual, outdoor art installation based primarily on the poetry of Alejandra Pizarnik. We discuss our experiences of embodiment and identity, feminist theories of silence, and the nature of interdisciplinary collaboration.

Keywords

rhetoric, embodiment, poetry, feminism, queer

1 Though we composed this essay as a kind of dialogue, our decision to write in the first person without clearly indicating to whom the pronoun *I* refers at any given moment was motivated by a desire to disrupt normative perceptions of identity and authorship and to reflect the fluidity that existed between us as we talked and wrote. We are indebted to Haneen Ghabra and Bernadette Marie Calafell for demonstrating the possibility of this formal choice in their essay “From failure and allyship to feminist solidarities: negotiating our privileges and oppressions across borders.”

Cornerstone

go to the sink
 self wanted order
 find it
 refrain there
 resembling a place
 place brief down on a train
 in where encounter centers high treachery
 spine that could not begin
 where fusion placed movement
 starting might that any only but the
 undo fastening
 want of the I doll²

My theorizing about the project was a matter of description first. I described how I wanted the public art installation to feel on a psychological and physiological level—mind and body together but also separate because that separation is a daily lived consequence of colonialism. This was spiritual. I talked in intuitions, afraid of sounding obscure and untenable. I have often felt anxiety when translating the images inside my mind into the sounds we register as language. The divorce allowed me to stumble through all this with more awareness. I stumbled through how this had to do with race and gender and age on some level. I earned my BA from a small Christian liberal arts college that was predominantly straight and white. I married and divorced young. That I could not name my desires, both in relationship to marriage and this project, terrified me. I wondered if my obsession with naming obscured what was actually taking place in my body. "Indeed, the privileged act of naming often affords those in power access to modes of communication that enable them to project an interpretation, a definition, a description of their work, actions, etc. that may not be accurate, that may obscure what is really taking place" (hooks 3). When others tried to name what was happening in my life, as a way to offer advice or care, I experienced even more obscurity. When I tried to name it, I was filled with more fear. The language wasn't there and so I often fell silent. I made it a habit to walk through [Richard Serra's sculpture *Greenpoint*](#) as a form of meditation and reverence. The sculpture consists of two brown steel curved walls that face each other, almost like parentheses with nothing inside. *A Yellow Silence* was conceived there. I wanted people sitting close to each other, silently, in an enclosed empty space. I wanted them to look at each other, to be together, without really hearing or talking to each other.

For years, I thought of silence primarily in the terms of Audre Lorde's 1977 essay "The Transformation of Silence Into Language and Action." Lorde writes of silences wherein "each of us draws the face of her own fear—fear of contempt, of censure, or some judgment, or recognition, of challenge, of annihilation" (42). I first

read that essay shortly after I began to accept and to act on queer desires that I had learned from a very young age, as nearly everyone in this country does, to associate with contempt, judgment, and censure. I began to act on those desires but I still feared to speak of what I was doing, of what I had always wanted and who I was becoming. And I particularly feared speaking of these things to the people I loved. So I turned to Lorde:

We can learn to work and speak when we are afraid in the same way we have learned to work and speak when we are tired. For we have been socialized to respect fear more than our own needs for language and definition, and while we wait in silence for that final luxury of fearlessness, the weight of that silence will choke us. (44)

Seeing the ways my own silence had always been wedded to fear, and beginning to accept the reality of that fear rather than fleeing from it, made it possible for me to participate in a community of queer writers groping toward a language for aspects of our lives that had been, for years, unspeakable. But as I read and reread Lorde's work over the course of a decade, often in the moments of crisis we seem to be constantly living through, I began to question the binary Lorde sets up, where silence is always coupled with fear and language is always coupled with action. There were moments in my life when silence felt active, transformative, even healing. And while I had begun to write through fear, I had not yet begun to heal certain wounds through which fear had entered me.

I developed persistent major depression and generalized anxiety disorder around the time I hit puberty, and I have been in and out of therapy, on and off various medications, ever since. But it didn't occur to me until I was in my thirties that these disorders might be, to some extent, expressions of gender dysphoria. I did not recognize or know how to name that pain until I had come to know and love more than one trans person. I had known for some years that trans people existed, but until I was in my mid twenties the only trans people I knew or saw represented in our culture were people who transitioned from one binary gender to another, from female to male or vice versa. Those narratives are vitally important, and I did identify with them to some extent, but I was still looking for language that might describe my lived experience without doing violence to it, or without appropriating the experiences of other gender nonconforming people. So many of the terms we use to name and describe our experiences "have been shaped by something that can't imagine you," as Katie Schmid puts it in the opening line of *A Yellow Silence*.

I recorded Schmid saying those words at a book club we had three years before I ever imagined this project. I remember hearing her and immediately asking if she would repeat it so I could record that sonic moment on my phone. I was in awe. I sensed the mysticism

² This is a poem I made with words from one of my favorite paragraphs of Pizarnik's poem "Cornerstone," which can be found in her chapbook *A Musical Hell*. This chapbook is included in *Extracting the Stone of Madness* translated by Yvette Siegert.

in her language, some future need for those words. I only stumbled upon the recording again when I started using my phone to record myself talking through my ideas for *A Yellow Silence*. Schmid's voice had seeded this project long before it became a reality. [Listen to "Conditions."](#)

Every book we've ever read by a woman has a throat or scream in it. Screaming creates a kind of silence.

the blue woman shapes a premonition a yellow
silence I am afraid of the grey wolf that disguises itself
in the rain the word for desire possible unions
what I want from this poem is the loosening
of my throat the real celebrations take place
in the body and in dreams when I say "I" I mean
the luminous dawn I want to share
a different silence laugh at yourself/laugh
at myself the music is always too high or too low
never at the center that place of our
fusion and encounter

Cheryl Glenn theorizes silence as "a rhetorical art for resisting discipline(s)" (261). The word "discipline" means many different things, but in this context I'm talking about resisting the forces that discipline women and other marginalized people who dare to interpret, to define, to describe their experiences. Glenn works and writes in a more conventionally academic mode than Lorde, but her theory of silence is not abstract; she is just as concerned with the material impact of disciplinary forces on women, and specifically on women of color. Glenn argues for the validity of Anita Hill's decision to remain silent about the sexual harassment she endured from Clarence Thomas until she was subpoenaed, for instance, and the many ways we might understand that silence: not only as protection in a situation where neither silence nor speech are safe but also as a refusal to speak when the language isn't there, a strategic refusal that does not preclude other forms of action. [Listen to "Ruidomudo."](#)



HILARY WIESE

WHEN I SAY "I" I MEAN THE LUMINOUS DAWN

A Yellow Silence enacts a particular relationship to sound, to the body. It leads us into listening. There is an architectural rhetoric at work that not only implicates the participant's body in the text but also asks the participant to forego speech in favor of listening through the simple act of putting on a pair of headphones. It was fascinating to watch people enter the inflatable structure, look around, pick up a pair of headphones—there's a moment when the participants try to orient themselves; you can see them simultaneously trying to figure out what's happening auditorily while also becoming conscious of their own bodies. *Where do I look? Do I want to make eye contact with my friend in the next chair? The stranger across from me? What is my face revealing or betraying?* For me, the particular kind of silence and the particular kind of listening that happen during that moment of rhetorical instability have transformative potential. A shift occurs in my consciousness of myself, of how I relate.

I wanted people to listen to their bodies and the bodies of others, so turning off sound in one way and turning it on in another seemed crucial. I hadn't named this project until Luis Othoniel Rosa, one of my professors and dear friends, gave me



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the time and space to fully imagine it. What do I mean by "a yellow silence?" The phrase actually came from a short nonfiction piece I was working on around the same time called "What Divorce Is." Near the end I write: "We're quiet. We are the nicest kind of cruel and it's true we don't want to be cruel. My prayer has been for a yellow silence. I wonder if I've been praying for this my whole life." I wrote the words, but it felt like the phrase just showed up out of nowhere. And it somehow encapsulated what I was looking for sonically. The word *yellow* is bright, but it's also low. It screams and hums. The color stretches. It can overwhelm. The sun. Jaundice. Cumin. French's Mustard. A sunflower. Dividing lines on the road. The ochre shawl my Grandma gave me which has been in our family for decades. In honor of improvisation, I looked up the etymology of *yellow* on Google. Some web sites highlight how *yellow* has been used to represent the aura of God and also the idea of cowardice. According to Kate Smith, an [international color maven](#), its first written usage is found in the epic poem *Beowulf*: "The unknown author used it to describe a shield carved from yew wood." And a write-up on [The Wood Database](#) web site says, "Yew wood is perhaps the hardest of all softwood species" (Meier).

I love Glenn's essay on silence. The way she uses sections and epigraphs to create a precise and unruly form. Silence can act

as a shield, so the question of protection comes back up. Who was I protecting myself from when I fell silent in my experience of divorce and in the making of this project? I was protecting myself from myself. Adrienne Rich says,

The liar leads an existence of unutterable loneliness. The liar is afraid. But we are all afraid: without fear we become manic, hubristic, self-destructive. What is this particular fear that possesses the liar? She is afraid that her own truths are not good enough. She is afraid, not so much of prison guards or bosses, but of something unnamed within her. ("Women" 417)

Because I could not put what I was feeling into language, I feared it was not good enough. I was afraid of the unnamed, and it would take me the next two years to get close to articulating why I felt so terrible. I also feared that people, people I loved, would misread me or categorize me as wrong, as out of touch with reality, or as crazy, that ever-charged word often ascribed to women who try to liberate themselves from capitalism and white supremacy. Rich wrote those words in 1977, the same year Audre Lorde wrote,

These places of possibility within ourselves are dark because they are ancient and hidden; they have survived and grown strong through darkness. Within these deep places, each one of us holds an incredible reserve of creativity and power, of unexamined and unrecorded emotion and feeling. The woman's place of power within each of us is neither white nor surface; it is dark, it is ancient, and it is deep. (36-37)

I often think about how women attempt this liberation without knowing the names of the systems from which we need liberating. I will always be trying to improvise and fashion a sonic landscape of liberation. I think *A Yellow Silence* was the real beginning of that work for me.



HILARY WIESE

One thing I find powerful in the way you define "a yellow silence" is that it creates space for the illegible. Jonathan Alexander and Jacqueline Rhodes write, "[Q]ueerness is most attractive—theoretically, personally, and politically—in its potential illegibility, its inability to be reductively represented, its disruptive potential. In a word, its impossibility, in another word, its excess" (181). I am deeply attracted to the queer in this sense, both affectively and theoretically. For instance, I am very drawn to what most people would understand as conflicting gender markers, like the way spaghetti straps emphasize a broad pair of muscular shoulders. So how does an illegible feeling or an illegible body come to be defined as wrong or crazy? And how does the constant questioning of whether one's feelings or one's body might be wrong or crazy—regardless of how those questions are answered—become a part of our identities? What are the mechanisms at work here, and how do we resist them through language, through silence, through action? I often think of June Jordan writing, "*I am not wrong: Wrong is not my name / my name is my own my own my own*" (italics in original).

But I have also lived my life in a body that is legibly masculine by most standards, with all the privileges masculinity confers, so I am wary of the ways those privileges might enable me to romanticize or fetishize more visibly queer and trans bodies. And I have only become more conscious of those power dynamics as my own gender presentation has gradually shifted toward the feminine. One expects this of course, to some degree, but I have been surprised by how much of it has come from within communities we call "queer." When I shaved my beard and started posting pictures on Scruff where I was wearing lipstick and more feminine clothing, there was a drastic decline in the number of messages I received, and some of the messages I did get were harassing in ways they never had been before. These gendered silences and attacks feel personal in one sense, but they are more fundamentally a response to how the feminine presentation of a male body disrupts the homonormative ways gay men tend to read bodies offered for their consumption on these apps. What they find threatening, what I found threatening for so many years, is the fear that I might be reading my own body and the bodies of others wrongly, that all our bodies might be less legible than we imagine or pretend, that the signs and symbols of our gender system might be fluid, unstable, illusory.

If I was not an easily recognizable person, a white heterosexual married woman, then who was I? If I was not commodified—the illegible packaged into a legible consumable form—who would have me? If I could not locate my identity in terms of a marriage where I belonged to someone, then where and how would I belong? My fucked definitions of love were breaking down. I was beginning to recognize love outside the constructs of commodification.

Luis's class "Feminist Literature across the Americas" exposed me to writers who were conceptualizing liberation and silence in a way that felt vital to my growth and my ability to make art—texts

by Silvia Federici, Sor Juana Inés, Julia de Burgos, Octavia Butler, Raquel Salas Rivera, Gloria E. Anzaldúa, Sara Uribe, and of course Alejandra Pizarnik. And there was this idea of rhetorical listening as defined by Krista Ratcliffe: "Just as all texts can be read, so too can all texts be listened to. As a trope for interpretive invention, rhetorical listening differs from reading in that it proceeds via different body organs, different disciplinary and cultural assumptions, and different figures of speech" (203). These writers helped me shape a form for *A Yellow Silence* that felt closer to my experience. Luis suggested I consider an intertextual approach to this "sound project" I had swimming around in my head, and so I relied specifically on Anzaldúa and Uribe to envision a form; what they did in terms of hybridity on the page I did materially with sound and architecture.

In *Antígona González*, Uribe pieces together fragments—newspaper clippings, first-hand accounts, lines of poetry, and questions—to chronicle a sister's search for her missing brother, Tadeo, in Tamaulipas, México, a state with one of the highest reported cases of missing persons in the country due to narco violence and femicide. Alongside the search for Tadeo, Uribe makes the names of many other disappeared persons visible, what Judith Butler categorizes in the blurb on the back of this book as "emphatic graphic marks where there is no trace of loss." Though I understand Butler's categorization of writing, it makes me nauseous sometimes, this thing we do with language—that we write books as a form of presence where there is so much absence. Art is always a form of grief. As a reader, you begin to sense how Uribe cannot separate her own body from the bodies of the missing. She writes, "¿Qué cosa es el cuerpo cuando está perdido? / What thing is the body when it's lost?" (111). And later, "Somos lo que deshabita desde la memoria. / We are what vacates from the space of memory" (121).

Ghosts

This voice of our voices is fragile.
Our mouths a wooden boat on the lake of history.
We mean to say the sounds of our mouths are a boat
in our exile. There is no country for us except the body.

I would realize, through my divorce, that I had not dealt with or even faced my experience of childhood sexual trauma and how this intersected with the exploitation of women and violent drug addiction in my family. This is not to equate my experience with the violence to which Uribe bears witness, but it is to say a decolonial awareness of our historical context connected my constitutive trauma with something that far surpasses our individual I's. Uribe says, "Lo que sucede son los derrumbes / What is happening are collapses" (86). Something was collapsing in me, and I was trying to fragment any sort of healing together through art. I could relate to the various ways Uribe makes PTSD symptoms felt. On the final page she asks, "¿Me ayudarás a levantar el cadáver? / Will you join me in taking up the body?" (171). *A Yellow Silence* was one

way to participate in this "taking up," an attempt to demonstrate the confessional language of the self not as the goal or destination of the poetic journey but a potential bridge to collective struggle.

That I was reading in multiple imperial languages is important. I chose to keep the final version of *A Yellow Silence* mostly in English because it is my first language, but what's true is that the lexicon on which I normally relied to make things was breaking down. It always has been. I could not separate my specific pain from my understanding of colonization and its obsession with turning men into conquerors of body and land, its obsession with a kind of "taking" that causes the very absences to which Uribe's "taking up" responds. Perhaps I was drawn to sound rather than written work because I was trying to listen to these texts in the way Ratcliffe describes. It's interesting to note Uribe's work is often performed. It is often audible. My decisions, both in this project and in my personal life, were made on an unending impulse, a need to get my body alone and to recover on my own terms, to surround myself with the voices and memories of women who knew more than I did about this recovery.

My body became the site of the work, but I wasn't interested in putting forth my body in a material way. And expressing myself in written form only, meaning only on the page, didn't feel quite right either. I imagine this is why Pizarnik became central to the project. Her poetry is about language's failure to represent the body, and an architecture, some impulse to construct a space, looms large. You're inside her mind cave. The search for a room. For belonging. The self as prison and liberation. That dissident border that exists between the interior and exterior, between past and present. The essential paradox of Pizarnik's poetry is, as Fiona J. Mackintosh notes, "shoring oneself up in language as a defense against language itself" (115). Poet Valzhyna Mort, in her remarkably strange essay on Pizarnik's repeated use of dolls, imagines that the source of this obsession may be Pizarnik's awareness that had her parents not immigrated from Poland to Argentina when they did in 1934, "[she] would have been murdered in the Rovno ghetto at the age of five." Later Mort writes, "Pizarnik's memory is a memory of a would-have-been life. Its pull, however, seems stronger than her real life: the dead girl dominates her poems while the real Pizarnik seems to be only the shadow cast by that imagined death." I understand this. Had my mother not left Atlanta when I was eight, not moved us away from multiple dangers, I am not sure what would have happened to me. What threatened me was obviously not the same oppression that threatened Jews in Nazi-occupied Poland, but it was a life potentially filled with sexual abuse and the violence of addiction. I imagine this "would-have-been" girl often. Her body. What I endured and what I was spared from enduring. How leaving separated me from parts of my family I now constantly long for. Perhaps, in *A Yellow Silence*, I was working out the domination and pull of that girl. It was hard to decide which Pizarnik excerpt to use here, but this one feels especially poignant. It's from a section of *A Musical Hell* called "La palabra que sana / The Shape of Absence" (*Extracting* 116-17).

La palabra que sana

Esperando que un mundo sea desenterrado por el lenguaje, alguien canta el lugar en que se forma el silencio. Luego comprobará que no porque se muestre furioso existe el mar, ni tampoco el mundo. Por eso cada palabra dice lo que dice y además más y otra cosa.

The Word That Heals

While waiting for the world to be unearthed by language, someone is singing about the place where silence is formed. Later it'll be shown that just because it displays its fury doesn't mean the sea—or the world—exists. In the same way, each word says what it says—and beyond that, something more and something else.

TRAPPED INSIDE A WHITE ROOM

It was exciting and scary when *A Yellow Silence* got accepted to the show *Lincoln PoPs: Global Frequencies* and they gave us a budget. A sound installation where I could manipulate the words of poems I loved, poems I had not written, and intermingle them with words I had, where I could treat poetry more like a collage of voices, was an intoxicating prospect. It felt like I was positioning myself, the artist, as a listener first. Carrying this out was an attempt to show that position, to make an art piece where the content was the embodied listening itself. I had to physically move much more than I would writing a poem at my desk—trips to Home Depot, ironing plastic, loading and unloading materials. I felt more conscious of my agency, my intuitive impulses as an artist, because of this. The choice to focus on the audibility of poems was not about detaching them from a body—a voice is not just sound even if you only hear it, even if you don't see the body from which the voice comes. Sound on an anatomical level is touch. It is vibration. I wanted to heighten people's awareness of being inside their own heads and next to one another at the same time. I wanted to create a different kind of touching, one that was both haunting and revelatory.

[Listen to "Echo."](#)

At one point the participants hear an egg frying, which also mimics the sounds of crackling fire, as an allusion to the witch hunts that took place in Europe in the sixteenth and seventeenth centuries—the same time Spain began colonizing the Americas. I relied on Federici's theoretical work about how these witch hunts are directly related to the rise of global capitalism, and I quote Sor Juana Inés in the recording because she's working from the colonized lands of the Nahuas in the heart of the former Aztec empire, now México, as the witch hunts are starting. Sor Juana Inés is foundational in terms of silence as a rhetorical strategy. A group of priests afraid of her intelligence threatened to take away her books because of

their supposed effect on her psychological state. She responds by stating that even if her books are taken away, she will still have cooking:

What can I tell you, about nature's secrets as I've discovered them while cooking? I see that an egg becomes solid and fries in oil, while, on the other hand, it dissolves in syrup. I see that in order to keep sugar in a liquid state it suffices to add a small part of water mixed with sour fruit. I see that an egg's yolk and white have opposite characteristics. I don't want to bore you. I mention these cold facts to give you a full account of my natures. What can we women possibly know other than kitchen philosophies? If Aristotle had cooked stews, he would have written a lot more. I have no need for books.

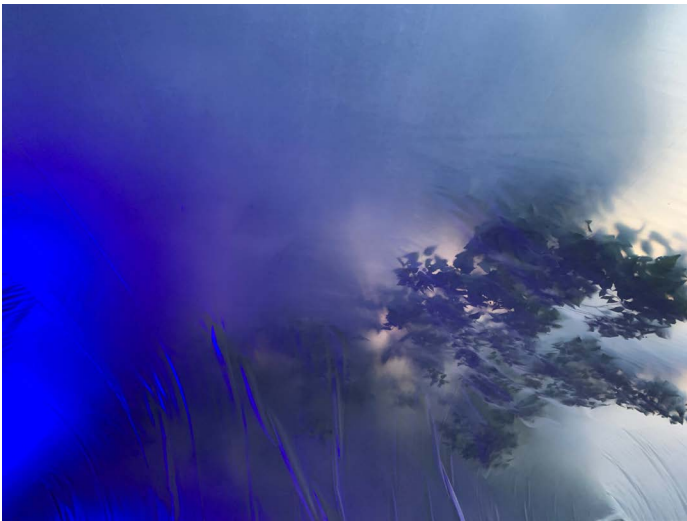
Sor Juana Inés does not confess to going insane like the priests want her to; she stays silent on that matter. Instead, she takes back her power by speaking directly to the thing they fear: not books, but her desire to learn and write what she wants. She locates rhetorical agency within the confines of the monastery, the only intellectual space open to her as an unmarried woman. She does this even as the fathers of the church actively try to discipline her, to extract a confession from her, to contain her influence. Sor Juana was able to resist the power of the church fathers, to some degree, because her excess of intelligence, her excess of language, found expression within discourses sanctioned by the church. I am interested in these excesses and in what *A Yellow Silence* does with excess in a temporal or historical sense. Federici presents us with the burned bodies of witches in far larger numbers than dominant historical narratives account for. Pizarnik's poems seem to exceed the boundaries of the genre, defying conventions of lineation and rationality. She follows the lead of the surrealists to some extent while also moving beyond their antirationality. *A Yellow Silence* takes these excessive texts, embodies them in living voices, lays them alongside one another, and asks us to listen to them. This is one of the ways the project prompts us to do what I referred to earlier as a "particular kind of listening." I think this is what Krista Ratcliffe is talking about when she writes,

[W]e choose to listen also for the exiled excess and contemplate its relation to our culture and ourselves. Such listening does not presume a naive, relativistic empathy, such as "I'm OK, You're OK," but rather an ethical responsibility to argue for what we deem fair and just while simultaneously questioning that which we deem fair and just. Such listening, I argue, may help us invent, interpret, and ultimately judge differently in that perhaps we can *hear* things we cannot *see*. (203)

Ratcliffe's insistence on a nuanced and critical ethical discourse resonates with me deeply, and I think that's the reason this quotation sticks in my mind. But as I have been reading and rereading

this article in the context of our conversation, I'm more struck by the last sentence, and how *A Yellow Silence* brings forth a voice of Sor Juana, a woman who was not silenced so much as she was rendered invisible—do we hear what we cannot see? Her body literally contained within the walls of a monastery, caring for the sick and dying, even as her writing emanates outward. Do we hear and see other kinds of labor crucial to human existence that are so often carried out in containment?

I have been obsessed for years with Octavia Butler's novel *Dawn*, which we read in Luis's class. The protagonist, Lilith, awakens naked, trapped inside a white room without any defined corners where light seems to shine from the ceiling itself rather than from any fixture. She is unambiguously a prisoner, but later in the novel, Lilith gains the power to create openings in these walls and sometimes seals herself and others behind them, exercising a kind of agency over her own containment and the containment of other humans. I didn't think about how much the literal architecture of *A Yellow Silence* had in common with those organic containment rooms until now, but the resemblance is striking. Though the inflatable structure of *A Yellow Silence* is inorganic—it's made of semitransparent sheets of plastic—it often feels alive to me because of the way light plays across its rounded surfaces, how tree branches rustle against it casting leaf-shaped shadows, the way it seems to take on a nocturnal personality as twilight settles over it.



HILARY WIESE

How *is* containment a feminist idea? It seems to me now that I'd been trying very hard *not* to think about certain psychological and social structures that had been containing me for decades. One way my anxiety manifests is through patterns of avoidance, particularly avoidance of difficult emotions. Right now, as I'm writing this paragraph, my mind skitters and wanders and stops, looking for a way out of the text. I do not want to write my body into the text, to write what I was struggling with at the beginning of this project. I want to retreat into some kind of silence. But even as I

write this sentence I think of how Adrienne Rich warned us not to misunderstand our own silence: "It is a presence / it has a history a form // Do not confuse it / with any kind of absence" (*The Dream of a Common Language* 17).

Getting divorced means engaging with all kinds of avoidance and silence. Like I mentioned earlier, I struggled to explain why I wanted a divorce. Silence filled up my new apartment, my solitary bedroom; it filled the space between me and the mirror, between lighting candles and organizing bookshelves, between closing the front door and opening it the next morning. I resonate with the word *containment* when I remember that apartment. Sometimes it felt good to be there alone. Sometimes it felt like a trap I'd constructed for myself. I am thinking of how Pizarnik at twenty-three years old left Argentina to go to Paris, that European epicenter she saw as the ultimate place for creative expression and writing: "I would like to live in order to write. . . . Tengo que ir a Francia"—the privilege of her self-imposed literary exile (Ferrari). I relied so much on the poems she wrote in French there, which are translated and collected in *The Galloping Hours*. This goes back to how reading across and through multiple languages felt essential—the various sonic landscapes, the endless translating. Silence shows different sides of itself through the process of translation. The noises that became most familiar to me in that solitary apartment were cooking noises: frying an egg, the sound of water running into the sink, squeezing the last bit of soap out of the bottle. I learned to really feel there in my fluctuating perception of that space. I learned how I wanted to be a writer; I didn't want isolation, I wanted longevity. All of this made its way into the audio portion of the project in some form.



DAVID MANZANARES

THE LOOSENING OF MY THROAT

I had reached a point in my life where looking at myself in the mirror with any degree of attention made me feel disgust and nausea, for reasons that still resist what language I have for talking about

gender. Over the past year I have gradually begun to identify more openly as genderqueer, but what does that really mean except that I no longer consider the word *man* to be an accurate or adequate description of who I am? I'm not sure the word *genderqueer* communicates an identity in any defined or stable sense so much as it poses a question, or a series of questions. And isn't that part of what it means to queer language? To shift from speaking in terms of binary or essential categories to a more fluid mode of inquiry? As human beings moving through the world, and especially as writers, I think we are still looking for language that communicates the specificities of gendered experience. My body hair—which grows thickly all over me—has always felt alien, like something aside from myself but which I can't get away from. Maybe that's one of the reasons I see such possibility in the way Octavia Butler writes about aliens covered in sensory tentacles, which she describes as resembling writhing hair or tiny living snakes. These aliens have three sexes, and while some critics have read Butler's novels as biologically essentialist, my own reading aligns much more closely with Dagmar Van Engen's reading of Butler as a transfuturist envisioning a species for whom a nonbinary conception of gender is the norm. What would it mean to be contained by such beings, to be contained *outside* a Western gender binary rather than within it? For most people who have lived their lives within the confines of this gender system, to pass through its walls might seem unimaginable. But part of what makes Butler's writing so important to me is how she helps us envision possibilities beyond the binary that are terrifying—particularly in the ways they parallel colonialism—but that are also deeply seductive and potentially liberatory.

This resonates with Alexander and Rhodes's advocacy for the illegible, Glenn's thinking about silence as a form of resistance, and Ratcliffe's attention to excess. This notion of the queer I've been exploring throughout this essay, and through which I am reading Butler, suggests radical interventions, interventions that go further than demanding inclusion and representation, as vital as those demands are. It shifts our focus from thinking and writing in terms of those identities and experiences we already know how to name toward the margins where listening becomes the central modality

as opposed to knowing or speaking. Lilith's struggle in the novel *Dawn* is to locate possible agencies within her seemingly absolute imprisonment, and that is one way we can understand a lot of queer and feminist struggle. How do we learn to open and close the walls within which we live?

I mean art, really poetry, is my most focused intervention. Or at least the one that continues to make the most

sense to me. I try to examine the walls from the positions I inhabit. I am so drawn to the scenes where Lilith is in that room, pressing and running her hands against and along those walls. Nobody talks about how strange time becomes during a separation. Lilith didn't know two hundred years had passed and the Oankali just put people to sleep for wild amounts of time. I was separated for a year and a half before the divorce was final. Sometimes it feels like a whole decade passed. At other moments, it could have just been a single night's sleep. I want to say I often felt sure of myself during that in-between time, but that's not true. And even after I had practiced my long-desired version of self-trust, even after I had felt my way through certain walls, I still questioned my decision. I had never felt agency like I did when I chose to leave my marriage. It terrified me. Would I survive? Have enough money? Practical terrors. But leaving also registered in my body another terror: my belief that we are each capable of enacting violence. I experienced a kind of liberation, but I also deeply hurt one of my life's greatest companions. Is that a violence? I am still not sure, but I experienced it as one. That terror taught me how to recognize my own agency in small moments of creation. I don't want that to be true, but it is. I started to feel the whole way through instead of finally feeling.

[Listen to "Monster Girl."](#)

When I was a teenager, I experimented with shaving different parts of my body. At one point I shaved all the hair off my body, including my scalp and my eyebrows. There were moments when my closest friends literally did not recognize me. But I liked the way I looked and felt without hair, like I was new, like some inner, more vulnerable skin had been revealed. This did not make it possible for me to love my body—I've always felt distant from the rhetoric of loving one's body—but it allowed me to recognize myself in a way I hadn't been able to for years. I had no idea how to explain what I was thinking or feeling to my family or friends, but I did begin writing poems around that time, looking for a language that might make it possible to articulate my experience, my sense of self.

The first poem I ever read in public was, it seems to me now, about my struggle to identify with any sense of masculinity. I didn't have that language as a teenager, of course, but the central motifs of the poem were a yearning for "leather-men" and a fear of my cock crumbling to dust. As a kid raised in a very normative white suburb and a very normative nuclear family, it felt like a terrifying and radical act to stand in front of an audience and confess such things. My hands shook so hard I couldn't even read parts of the poem as I'd written it. I improvised from the fragments I remembered. Afterward, someone told me they liked the way I "used silence," which seemed very strange to me. For a long time, I couldn't figure out what that meant, and I wondered if it was a polite way to discourage me from reading in public. I had never been taught to value silence in that way, or to understand how it functions. But eventually I came to understand that manipulating silence—by which I mean both verbal and textual silence—is as central to



KATIE MARYA

poetry or to any form of communication as the words we speak or the marks we make on the page.

THAT PLACE OF OUR FUSION AND ENCOUNTER

The nature of *A Yellow Silence* was always collaborative in its intertextuality but working with Holly and Hilary was my first experience with collaboration in real time. It was awkward. I had to express my ideas clearly and again I couldn't. What I had imagined morphed into something fuller and more compelling when I loosened my grip. Hilary and Holly changed the project for the better. Their ideas and expertise allowed me to focus fully on the sonic element, to manipulate the sounds and silence into a poetic experience, while they created a structure in which this experience would happen. We were literally creating the form and content alongside each other in my living room and driveway, but language was not the center of how we communicated, or rather, it was, but not in that we said things correctly and then understood each other. Words failed and so the structure was created based on what it was not; it became the thing we could not figure out how to say, exactly—so to share the thing we made from lack felt like a terrifying and radical act, too.



HILARY WIESE

While I was getting divorced, I kept waiting for someone to tell me I was insane. Women are continually asked to explain their trauma, to account for it, to prove it. While making *A Yellow Silence*, I questioned the idea that to reveal one's trauma via language clarifies or absolves anything. This goes back to the idea of confession. I wanted to work against the constant interrogation and mistrust of my own impulses. Working alongside Holly and Hilary allowed me silence and quiet and taught me not to rush toward explanation. The more I did this, the more I came to recognize surety, mainly in the small decisions rather than the big ones. The less I relied on language to prove to me my own sanity or to justify

the moves I wanted to make in the audio portion of the project, the saner I felt. I use the word *sane* here because working on this project and getting a divorce were about my sanity—a kind of confrontation of mental illness that had grown out of that childhood sexual trauma and of the limits from which I had operated for so long. Collaborating was, in a sense, an outlet for me to affirm my ability to create something I did not fully understand. To move my quiet, inner artistic ideas into the public on my own terms with the help of artists I trusted. This began to mirror my personal life and I felt better.

On the day of the public premier of *A Yellow Silence* I decided, rather impulsively, to wear a burgundy turtleneck maxi dress that I'd bought recently. It wasn't the first time I'd worn a dress in public, but it was the first time in a few years, the first time since I'd met you. It was something I'd been wanting to do for some time, and something we'd talked about. I worried that you or others might think I was trying to make the event *about me* in some vain way, but I didn't really want to be looked at or talked about. I just wanted to be a person wearing a piece of clothing that I felt good in, that I could see a part of myself in, a part of myself that tends to be contained or rendered illegible. This project queers public space in a way that made it seem possible for me to have that experience without explaining or even discussing it. I felt nervous walking over—the walk from my apartment to the project site is less than a mile, but it was a football game day, and the streets were crowded with Husker fans. Once I saw you and you teared up and hugged me, I knew you understood perfectly.

I remember seeing you walk up from a distance. I tried not to cry. I wanted to communicate both excitement and awe without drawing some kind of loud attention to your being. [Listen to "Knife."](#)

Though we'd been talking about the project for months, when I finally saw the 30-by-60-foot inflatable structure on the Centennial Mall, which passersby were invited to enter through a vertical slit that was unzipped and then closed behind each person, I found it impossible to think of it as anything other than a womb. Maybe this association was reinforced by the fact that the Centennial Mall literally lies in the shadow of the Nebraska State Capitol building, a 400-foot tall monument to the power of the state, topped by a gilded dome and a 20-foot-tall statue of an indigenous farmer literally sowing his seed across the plains. But once I took a seat in one of the four transparent plastic chairs inside the structure, and put on the headphones hanging there, my perception shifted. There was Schmid's voice repeating for nearly two and a half minutes, "The material conditions of your reality and the conditions of your mind have been shaped by something that can't imagine you." As her voice was transformed with each repetition by various forms of digital distortion, I began to feel almost oppressively contained within the space. And perhaps to leap from the metaphorical association of a womb to a prison is not such a long leap in a society where women have been jailed as punishment for having miscarriages and abortions.



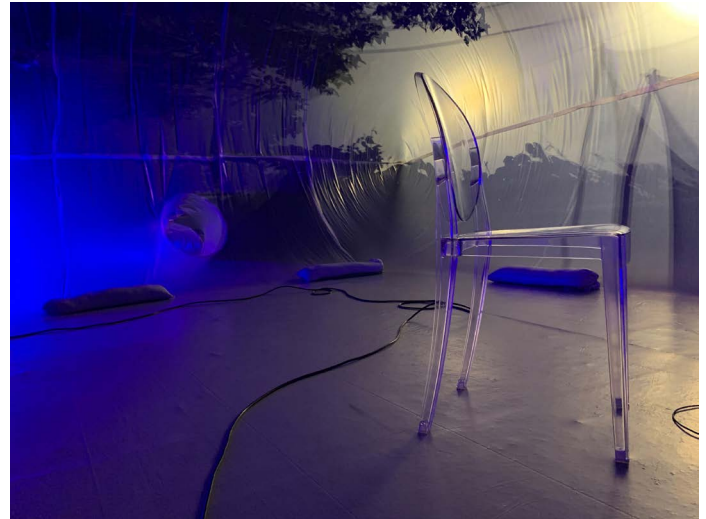
KATIE MARYA

I was aware of my own body in an old and familiar way that day. I was sweaty, dusty—wearing dirty athletic pants and a grimy t-shirt. I did not feel pretty. I have a strange relationship with that word—I was taught that to feel pretty means to feel more confident. What a strange lie. I had a hard time being present after we installed the project and solved all the technical issues. I wanted to go home and shower and put makeup on. I wanted to look “effortless,” but I could not leave because it was windy. The structure, though weighted down with sandbags, moves with the wind. It is always shifting and adjusting. My head went back to my uncomfortable adolescent body, bleached blonde highlights and clothes to make boys like me, all the years of grooming women receive—our specific objectification. That young girl was fifteen years gone, but still I was just learning how to appreciate all the parts of my body without trying to morph them into some magazine brand of white woman. I tried to breathe. I told myself that I belonged, that my body had labored to create something and it deserved love as it was, right there. I did a head-to-toe scan, an anxiety grounding technique. The self-hating dialogue in my head didn’t go away, I wanted to escape, I didn’t want to take any pictures. I oscillated in and out of interactions with the participants and my friends. It did not get easier to like my body that day, but there I was.

It shouldn’t surprise me when you write of wanting to escape your body because we talk about such feelings all the time, but it does. You are a relentlessly *present* person, a person very aware of your own body and those around you. But I also know hypervigilance can be a response to trauma. We are both still unlearning the hatreds we’ve internalized.

At several points while working on this dialogue with you—we are literally sitting and writing together in a coffee shop right now—I have had the sense of a panic attack coming on. This is not terribly unusual for me as a person with generalized anxiety disorder, but it is a specific response to writing about my body, to thinking and talking about my body hair, for example. While we’ve been writing

this essay we’ve been having a parallel conversation about waxing. The idea of approaching a stranger in Nebraska and asking them to touch my back hair in any way repulses me; I begin to dissociate from my body almost immediately. Yet there’s a line in *A Yellow Silence* I don’t think we’ve ever talked about where you say, “Everyone’s back is perfect and should be touched.” That thought seems foreign to my understanding of my own body; it seems impossible, but every time I read or hear it, my body responds. My throat loosens, to use another phrase from *A Yellow Silence*. My heart swells. I tend to distrust writing about the heart as anything but a muscle, but there it is.



LUIS OTHONIEL ROSA

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