NEW SCHOLARS FORUM

EN-GENDERING DESIRE IN AIDA SANTOS’S LESBIAN POETRY

Danicar Mariano
danicarmariano@yahoo.com

Abstract
Lesbian feminist literary criticism seeks to deconstruct the essential categories of male and female and their “natural” link to the production of desire, enabling an insightful criticism that formalism and feminism alone cannot fully venture in. Thus, this lesbian feminist literary reading of Aida Santos’s poetry critiques heteropatriarchy in language, desire and gender by questioning the binary assumption operative in them. A binary logic defines women and men by what each are not, highlighting one sex over the other, and presenting them as in need each other. This patriarchal assumption intersects with compulsory heterosexuality to marginalize lesbian existence in the world and in the word. This self-same logic operative in language and discourse naturalizes rape by presenting women actively searching for the desire of men. The poetry of Aida Santos exposes this blunder and presents a version of desire that goes beyond phallocentrism by presenting lesbian existence in the world and in texts.

Keywords
deconstruction, Lacan, lesbian feminist criticism

About the Author
Danicar Mariano has successfully defended her thesis on “Reading Spaces: Heteropatriarchal Critique in Aida Santos’s Lesbian Poetry” to complete her MA in Literary and Cultural Studies at Ateneo de Manila University. She graduated top of her Ateneo Interdisciplinary Studies batch in 2003, and was also a fellow in the 3rd Ateneo National Writers Workshop. She is currently the Media Liaisons officer of the Ang Ladlad Political Party and an avid feminist and LGBT human rights activist. She is also part of the Women in Bliss (WIB) Writer’s Circle which produced the anthology “Unveiling Pieces from Bliss.”

Patriarchy rests in women who believe their oppression is “natural”
More and more, feminists are seeing the importance of exposing gender as something “we do” rather than what “we are” as key to a liberating gender dynamism. This is because the reduction of femininity, including feminine domesticity and silence, into a “natural biological fact” is what slipped this social injustice into the mind of many as an unquestioned discourse for many years. Women are the ones in charge of upholding the traditional roles between men and women for as long as there “is no women’s struggle, there is no conflict between men and women” (Wittig 3). Women, therefore, should believe that it is their fate to “to perform three-quarters of the work of society, (in the public as well
as in the private domain)” as well as believe in the inevitability of being objectified, as well as raped, mutilated, and abused. This fate “supposedly cannot be changed” (Wittig 8). It is therefore crucial that women are kept ignorant of this ‘ideology’ in order to perpetuate the status quo.

One crucial tool which naturalizes gender oppression is found in language. Language perpetuates the convention that the inherent inferiority of femininity is a biological destiny. It is heavily charged and immersed in discourse. Patriarchy’s power rests on this notion remaining subliminal and unquestioned. The ensuing compulsory heterosexuality that comes from the logic of patriarchy, as ‘universal norm,’ moreover, is not only what orders all human relationships but “the very production of concepts and all the processes which escape consciousness as well” (Wittig 8). The apprehension of these underground assumptions is crucial since psychoanalysis tells us that the more we “deny an ideology’s grip on us, the greater we are in its grasp.” The more women say “I can hardly believe it” in reference to their debased condition, the more likely they are to be subjected to it. Hence, the revelation that patriarchy is in fact a social construction and not an inevitable fact is the main pursuit not only of feminist literary criticism, but also of women’s liberation in general.

This is why the paper aims to analyze dangerous assumptions imbedded in language and see how lesbian Filipina poets like Aida Santos are trying to critique and reinvent it as a matter of advocacy and survival. It looks at the highly contested terrain of language and literature to see how gender norms are perpetuated and/or questioned through it. Can texts liberate just as they oppress? This study goes into how Aida Santos’s lesbian poetry attempts to accomplish just that by blurring binary opposition and presenting a radical lesbian subjectivity and desire.

**LACAN AND THE CASTRATING BINARY OPPOSITION**

Before this paper goes into its critique of Aida Santos poems, however, one must first understand the notion of binary opposition. Binary oppositions govern both language as well as gender relations. Man is logical, rational, strong, and political, while consequently, women are illogical, emotional, weak, and domestic. “Men and women are entirely dependent on each other for definition and existence,” a claim that feminists like Cixous, Butler, Wittig and many others are trying to dispute.

This binary definition is perpetuated by Lacan’s revision of Freud’s Oedipus complex. The man is seeking to return to that blissful yet castrating primordial unity...
with the mother, which all children once experienced. This is simulated in heterosexual relationships. Men, however, are simultaneously urged to renounce this union even as they seek it, since a successful “return” would amount to a castrating femininity that would destroy his masculine subjectivity (that is why men with strong maternal complexes act out this compulsion by doing violence to women so that they can, in the hostile separation this assures them, feel more male). Hence, desire in a hetero-patriarchal paradigm would continually need to renounce itself since “the fulfillment of desire would be its radical self-cancellation” (Butler, “Desire” 381). This “desire for an impossible return” is why women are always presented as a void or a mirror, projecting men’s fantasies, desires, and fears.

The notion of a “broken binary union” as the cause of a “desire for an impossible return,” as forwarded by Freud, Plato, and Lacan, thus leads to the notion that women are dependent on men to be whole – and are therefore inevitable subjects of male conquest and the male gaze. This “Other-ing” and exoticism of women is extremely damaging since the desire that is projected onto them, for which they are expected to succumb, is not a desire to recognize their “Otherness” but rather, one that seeks to efface it so that it can continue with its illusion of desire (Butler, “Desire” 383). (Many have also argued, however, that the woman as “mystery” or “enigma” have helped save “woman” from the dangerous labeling and classifying of patriarchy.) “To put this another way, the subject can only know itself through another, but in the process of recognizing itself and constituting its own self-consciousness it must overcome or annihilate the Other, otherwise it places its own existence at risk. Desire, in other words, is tantamount to the consumption of the other” (Butler, “Desire” 384).

Women by assuming a male-identified stance, accomplished by mirroring and assimilating a male mindset in order to appropriate male power and operate in male structures, therefore sacrifice their own unique subjectivity and agency. Here in this discourse, however, is also where the logic of the Hegelian master-slave dialectic lies – “The desire for destruction is thwarted by the sudden realization that the Other, who mirrors the subject, wields the power to destroy him in return” (Butler, “Desire” 379). Hence, the power of women rests in their rejection of being this empty space for which male desires are projected upon. As Virginia Woolf has long realized “Women have served all these centuries as looking glasses possessing the magic and delicious power of reflecting the figure of man at twice its natural size … That is why Napoleon and Mussolini both insist so emphatically on the inferiority of women; for if they were not inferior they would cease to enlarge” (Woolf 21 ).
COMPULSORY HETEROSEXUALITY AND THE “VALUE OF DYKE-CONSTRUCTION”

Compulsory heterosexuality which states that the man/woman dialectic is what must prevail as sure as “the ruler” must come with the ‘ruled’ is a necessary institution of patriarchy in so far as this will ensure that men will always have women to serve them emotionally, psychologically, and sexually. This enforced system is what places men and women in a one to one correspondence with each other in a hierarchical relation.

Herein lies the effective resistance that “queering” the subject offers. “Queer is by definition whatever is at odds with the ‘normal,’ the ‘legitimate,’ the dominant. There is nothing in particular to which it necessarily refers” (italics mine, Butler, “Gender as Performance”). In pronouncing the subject as inassimilable, the subject regains agency as he/she refuses to reduplicate the binary system. Butler believes that the liberation of “woman” from a normative and stable category is also parallel to the questioning of her sexuality as that which must be necessarily directed to the opposite sex.

The lesbian represents a unique form of patriarchal resistance that renounces the idea of this binary-union as the one ideal choice. It questions the assumptions of heterosexuality as “an unconscious which looks too comfortably after the interests of the masters.” Sex (male, female) is seen to cause gender (masculine, feminine) which is seen to cause desire (towards the other gender) in what is seen as a continuum. Butler’s believes that denaturalizing, proliferating and unfixing identities are important in order to reveal the constructed nature of heterosexuality.

Judith Butler takes one step further from Jehlen’s essay and says that gender is not performance but performativity. Performance assumes that there is doer of the act while performativity questions if there is a person beyond the deed. “There is no gender identity behind the expressions of gender; … identity is performatively constituted by the very ‘expressions’ that are said to be its results” (Butler, Gender Trouble 25). In other words, gender is a performance; it’s what you do at particular times, rather than a universal who you are (Wittig xii).

SIGNIFICANCE AND METHODOLOGY: A QUESTION OF LIFE AND DEATH

When Judith Butler said that the discourse of desire “precipitates into a life and death struggle” (Butler, “Desire” 384), she meant it more than figuratively. For women and lesbians immersed in the lure of male-identification and subjected to male-gaze and ideology, not to recreate the world and word is to disappear. To be a lesbian, to have a
desire for another woman in a society ruled by compulsory heterosexuality, is to be a contradiction. Not to voice out this opposition, is to be engulfed by it. “Lying is done by words but it can also be done by silence,” Adrienne Rich says.

This paper will look into lesbian poetry as a critique of unquestioned and compulsory heterosexuality and desire. In doing this, it necessarily looks at language and literature where the antagonisms of the dominant and the disruptive are played out. The analysis supplies a crucial re-visioning and reexamination of not just patriarchal culture, but also of heterosexist feminism, a feminism that assumes that all female sexuality and energy is directed only to men.

Lesbian poetry, more than contenting itself in being an “alternative” or a “minority,” seeks to effect change into how language is used re-examining the parameters which “universal thought” is founded on. The methodology is premised on the feminist view point that: (1) everything about the subject is important for a total understanding and analysis of her life and work; (2) the proper scholarly stance is engaged rather than “objective” (3) the personal (both the subject and the critic’s) research/criticism is not an academic/intellectual game, but a pursuit with social meanings rooted in the “real world” (Rich 92).

The study will also particularize these questions and apply it to the practical end of Philippine Feminist Literary Criticism in the works of Aida Santos. In what way does Aida Santos, as a Lesbian poet, question the heterosexual foundations of desire? How does she present this desire for women in her poetry? How does she relate to a language heavily invested in the discourse of hetero-patriarchy?

RADICAL DESIRE AND PERFORMATIVITY IN AIDA SANTOS’S POETRY

In this section, the paper now explores how Aida Santos’s poem, “Spaces,” is better explicated through a lesbian feminist criticism. The paper looks at how this particular poem by Aida Santos troubles hetero-patriarchal language and assumptions by blurring the binary oppositions of space/language, meaning/gaps, submission/revolt, absence/presence.

Spaces

spaces

are not gaps
you say
I have yet
to find a word
to describe
the creeping
emptiness
inside.

In the poem, we see an “Other” addressing a persona, telling him or her that “Spaces are not gaps” (Santos, *Spaces* 20). This causes the persona to conclude that s/he has “yet to find a word/ to describe/ the creeping/ emptiness/ inside.” We do not have any clue whether the persona will ever find what s/he is looking for. We also do not know if the persona is going on the search because s/he is agreeing to or rebelling against the one who is speaking. The poem’s structure –also full of spaces and gaps – makes the words stand out. If one reads it vertically, it gives the impression of staggered speech. “Spaces” again become personified, and as it is enabled to speak so as to describe that the persona has yet to find the creeping emptiness inside.

The poem, literally and figuratively juxtaposing spaces with words, also invokes a crucial paradox – the dramatic situation in the poem – that once you describe emptiness with a word, it will cease to be emptiness.

**LESBIAN CRITICISM: READING “SPACES”**

The poem is representative of the poet’s enduring search for that word beyond patriarchal language. The poet wants to find a word to describe the creeping emptiness inside – but she can’t seem to be able to do so until she settles what is the place of spaces in language, of gaps in meaning, of descriptions in emptiness, of words in silence, of absences in presences – binary oppositions which hetero-patriarchal language functions upon.

The poem asserts that there is something ungraspable about the author of the
En-gendering Desire

poem – a woman and a lesbian – because she has yet to be labeled by language. She has yet to “find a word to describe the creeping emptiness inside.” Even though an Other is saying that “spaces are not gaps,” the poet still wants to find that word to describe the emptiness inside; or, even though an Other is saying that the poet has yet to find a word for the emptiness, the poet is arguing that this emptiness, this space is not a gap – it is not something people usually assume it to be. Either way, it breaks people’s common sense notions regarding space and subjectivity as mere products of binary oppositions.

This kind of deconstruction reveals itself, not as a kind of destruction or erasure, but a process of revealing the open spaces and gaps beneath seemingly solid foundations for argument. These holes and gaps are seen as an opportunity to deepen inquiry. Because of the poem’s structure and the spaces in it, as well as its lack of punctuation, we can literally read the poem in many ways, choosing to pause where we want, choosing to read it vertically or horizontally, thus always forcing us to refer again to the text to ask what it really means, not knowing anything for certain.

Because the text is constantly calling us to stop and pay attention to the pauses, it also asks us to look at the margins, the unarticulated, the unquestioned discourse that the “you” that interpellates our “I” is telling us.

The poem, by saying that “spaces are not gaps,” alludes to space as not a mere absence but as a strategic discourse. The poet can be revolting against the fact that the other knows that “spaces/are not gaps,” that the other knows that spaces can be a breeding ground of hegemony, that spaces can represent the common sense discourses, the “needless-to-say.” This is why the poet concludes that she has to find her own words to describe this creeping emptiness inside so that the other does not speak for her through controlling the discourse of these silences, these “spaces.”

SPACES AS REVOLT

Spaces can both be read as a sign of submission and revolt. Even as it suggests being under the unquestioned discourse of the dominant order wherein the woman simply constructs her subjectivity and consciousness by mirroring another’s discourse towards her, it can also represent a dangerous questioning, a pause with which to retaliate against this dominant discourse. The poem subtly sides with the conception of spaces as leaning towards revolt by saying that the search is not finished nor would it be likely that it would ever be. The poem asserts this by presenting the fundamental paradox of emptiness – that once it is filled with a word, it would cease to be emptiness. Consequently, how can
emptiness be filled when spaces are not gaps, if emptiness is so palpable it is ‘creeping?’ Because the search for the word to describe the creeping emptiness inside would never cease, moreover, the poem enforces that the poet’s subjectivity is inassimilable. She therefore corresponds to Butler’s conception of the queer – she is without essence, at odds with the normal, the legitimate and the dominant, thus refusing to reduplicate the binary system (Butler, “Gender as Performance”).

In the same vein, we could say that the fact that a woman is inconceivable, invisible, or a void in language and discourse represents both her downfall and her strength. On one hand she has been marginalized by it, but on the other, it has enabled her to resist labels, to digress and transgress the written word – possessing the secret to her fluidity and mystery.

Through the poem, Aida Santos, like Butler, is arguing that woman, as with space, is an “unstable and unfixed term” and herein likens their potential to revolt and make “trouble.” “I have yet/ to find/ a word/ to describe/ the creeping/ emptiness inside” – reflects an awareness that even just searching for a new language to describe a lesbian’s non-signified [“empty”] position is to trouble the foundation of hetero-patriarchal language. This is similar to what Adrienne Rich is saying, that to be conscious of oppression is itself a very revolt against oppression. By understanding the need to search for a language and a subjectivity that is beyond binary oppositions and poeticizing about it, one is already contributing to a widening of that discourse.

**SUBJECTIVITY IN “THE CREEPING EMPTINESS”**

The knowledge of spaces as not being gaps is what makes the persona conclude that she has yet to find the creeping emptiness inside. The poem, however, by presenting the spaces as giving way and being transformed into language and action (“Spaces, you say, I have yet to find, the creeping emptiness inside”) asserts the recognition of spaces as an act of self-revelation as well. As the poet/persona discovers that there is a creeping emptiness inside her, and that this emptiness is not a gap – thus, she begins to search for a new word to describe it. This notion of loss that is also a presence, this indescribable creeping emptiness inside, is what propels her towards a quest for subjectivity. Indeed, if we read the poem in psychoanalytic terms, we see how one comes to writing and language because one feels a loss. The poet is made to find the word for the creeping emptiness inside by the “you,” just as the child is made to come to language by the father or the phallic order. This initiation into the symbolic stage is marked by a separation and a loss, a loss that signals the start of his desire.
Learning how to speak signals the child’s separation from the Mother in the mirror stage. One learns, painfully, that he or she is a different person from the mother. From a child’s experience, everything is lost except words – and for that moment, for the person who has lost everything, whether that is a being or a country or a certainty of discourse, language becomes the country. According to Cixous, “One enters the country of languages” (qtd. in Sellers xxvi). Language therefore is literally marked by the beginning of an insatiable desire to “return.”

The “I” in the poem, only becomes an “I” as she is addressed by a “you.” This tells us that “the speaking subject emerges as part of the linguistic chain of intelligibility by virtue of founding differentiation” (Butler, “Desire” 380). Thus, the “I” and the “you” talking to each other in the poem can only speak to each other in so far as they are separated from each other by a gap that cannot be closed. The poem is conveying the irony that in learning how to communicate, we have forever marked our difference, making it impossible to return to that illusory oneness. Speaking and addressing another presupposes a condition of separation from one another. (Butler, “Desire” 379.) A subject can never recognize himself in an Other but remains in a permanent relation of misrecognition. As much as one tries to achieve “metaphysical oneness” with that very other that is defined precisely through his difference, “it is thwarted from that recovery by a primary separation or loss” (Butler, “Desire” 379).

THE UNENDING SEARCH FOR THE WORD

The search for the word to describe the emptiness inside is unceasing precisely because language itself is marked by loss. This is why Aida Santos’s poetry is marked by the tension of conceiving language as one that produces the need and desire for subjectivity, propelling the poet to go on the quest to find a language to describe this subjectivity (“I have yet to find a word to describe the creeping emptiness inside”), on one hand, and language as precisely the very medium why this subjectivity is always inapprehensible to her, the reason why the self is always displaced (because to name the emptiness is to have it disappear) on the other. Language, therefore, always flounders in every attempt to communicate subjectivity.

Language, as Butler believes, creates the very thing it also displaces. It enables and produces desire (as desire for return, and as desire for the other) but it is also “the vehicle through which desire is displaced,” that flounders in every effort to present and communicate desire (Butler, “Desire” 380).
According to Butler, language and writing always seek to represent what is beyond themselves, “to capture or present a referent,” but are also founded on the push toward their necessary failure. The search is infinite because to the extent that “writing cannot reach beyond itself, it is condemned to figure that beyond again and again within its own terms” (“Desire” 374). We see this in the lament regarding language in Aida Santos’s poem. She grieves, moreover, that there is no other medium to use to communicate but language and silence, spaces and words – binary oppositions set up by a hierarchical heteropatriarchy that she has to negotiate and hold together even as she seeks to escape them.

The binary oppositions she presents and blurs in the poem are Separation/Unity, Loss/Desire, Writing/Silence and Author/Reader. She blurs author/reader delineation by using the first person, and involving the reader in the self-same quest for a private and public language. She blurs the dichotomy of language and silence by proposing that writing itself is the symptom of that very thing which it seeks to cure. Silence, similarly is both a passivity and an activity, it can be both submission and revolt.

ELUDING BINARY OPPOSITIONS

The short poem critiques and blurs binary oppositions in many ways. One, it puts the dominant order in the background (the dominant discourse is merely reduced to a briefly speaking ‘you’ as opposed to the actively searching “I” of the poem) and instead foregrounds a marginal voice, that of the persona, a lesbian poet.

Moreover, one does not really know if the poet is continuing to search for “the word to describe the creeping emptiness inside” because she agrees or disagrees with the “you” she is referring to in the poem. This form of negotiation with the dominant order is necessary and characteristic of marginal and lesbian texts – to function in the within and without of language, just as it traverses the within and without of heterosexist society.

As part of holding the tension, Aida Santos is also not agreeing that silence is the solution to the problem of phallocentric language – a binary discourse. Her decision to poeticize the dilemma presents a negotiation between the binary of using patriarchal language and staying silent – a passivity which many feminists (like Cixous and Lorde) equate to death. That she puts the struggle into a poem represents the continuing fight, despite the emptiness, to find the word for “the void,” to break a silence that has yet to be overcome. She presents language as a way to cope with this emptiness, even though it is often inadequate – the words yet to be found, a closure not given.

We can see another instance of Santos’s struggle in “Memories III.” But before we
can go into it, we must first look at the subsequent poem, “Memories II”:

You took off your pants  
I could only see the shadow of your lean body.  
I felt the table  
and my fingers  
groped through the gun.  
I could have grabbed it  
but I didn’t, I couldn’t  
immobilized by my own disbelief.  
I didn’t touch you  
your body touched me  
no emotions, simply motions:  
I am being punished  
for not cooperating  
with the enemy  
But fucking is not punishment  
we were taught.  
I lay there thinking  
after this, I’ll ask him  
to tell me where my husband  
is detained.

With just the first line “You took off your pants” (Santos, *Spaces* 67) the poet is already introducing that she is referring to contemporary reality by the use of the one gendered cultural artifact: pants. The description of the scene is slow, almost sensual – describing the undressing and the nature of the body as well as the sensations of the table through the fingers until we reach the word – gun. This translates to the fact that, in the start where the man was removing his pants, there was time to grab the gun. There was a moment before she could actually have stopped it, but she hesitated. Instead, she became a passive and detached observer. It was as if she became dissociated with the scene – as she started describing what happened – no emotions, simply motions. She did not feel a thing, and to further prove this dissociation, she goes into an intellectual discourse – a logical reason for why this is happening. “I am being punished.”
Here, one can infer that an act of violence, of rape, is being done to a woman, the persona narrating the poem in the first person. At first, it seems to comply with the patriarchal view of rape: with the woman “asking” for it because she could not and did not do anything to stop it. There is a small justification of why she did not do it—“she was immobilized by her own disbelief,” a commentary on what was mentioned earlier that women “who can hardly believe” the truth of the reality of male violence are the ones most prone to it. It is women’s naivete and kindness that eventually win out, leaving them defenseless against men who have been taught to dominate and assume that they own women. Eventually, the narration, though still objective and stoic, becomes more vivid – the motions start—“she is being punished for cooperating with the enemy” setting the context at a time of “struggle” where a woman is caught in between the wars of two opposing (male) sides. The man who rapes her, we concede, is doing it in part, to harm the other man who is his enemy, turning out to be the woman’s husband. This act is synonymous to soldiers destroying property of the opposite side as war tactic. Under this logic, it is not so much that the dignity of the wife that is being destroyed – what matters more, rather, is that the property of a man is being vandalized. She is punished, but for reasons she does not understand. She does not understand, moreover, how sex with a man, which has been “taught” to her as the fulfillment of her being as a woman, could be a punishment the way that is being done to her now (“fucking is not punishment/we were taught”). In other words, she begins to realize, suddenly, violently, how the ideology that has been taught to her and the truth of the reality are painfully contradictory. In “Memories I,” the persona remembers this experience with her “mind confused/by the fallacy of violence/I am enjoying it, men say.”

A similar line of reasoning is at work, Butler explains, in discourses on rape when the “sex” of a woman is claimed as “that which establishes the responsibility for her own violation.” The victim is often accused of “running around getting raped” (Butler, Feminists Theorize the Political 18).

“Rape as a passive acquisition then becomes precisely the object of an active search.” Rape and violence then, as Butler and Santos maintain, are built in to the very concept of ‘woman’ as patriarchy defines it. The poem does this by suggesting that the woman belongs at home as a property of the man, while being in the streets or in sites of struggle, or in this case, a prison, establishes her as “open season” (Butler, Feminists Theorize the Political 18). She is “enjoying” it, suggesting that it is the desire of her being, as a woman, to be fucked by a man. Butler explains:
“[R]ape” is figured as an act of willful self-expropriation. Since becoming the property of a man is the objective of her “sex,” articulated in and through her sexual desire, and rape is the way in which that appropriation occurs “on the street” [a logic that implies that rape is to marriage as the streets are to the home, that is, that rape is street marriage, a marriage without a home, a marriage for homeless girls, and that marriage is domesticated rape], then “rape” is the logical consequence of this enactment of her sex and sexuality outside domesticity. (Feminists Theorize the Political 18-9)

The fact that the rape, as contextualized in “Memories I,” occur in a prison cell make it all the more justified that the jailers or the authorities rape this incarcerated woman. Here, Butler, will say, is where we can see sex as not just a mere representation but one which enforces “violence and rationalizes it after the fact.” “The very terms by which the violation is explained enact the violation, and concede that the violation was under way before it takes the empirical form of a criminal act….” Sex here works its silent violence in regulating what is and is not designatable (Butler, Feminists Theorize the Political 18-9). By presenting the persona as a “wife” we see her position as generalized – that she is not a deplorable exception – that the persona’s experience is in fact a universal experience in that violence against women is inscribed in the very nature of her sex which is always doomed to be accused of “asking for it” and “enjoying it.”

Santos thus conveys that this experience of violation, which we are made to mimaetically identify with through the poet’s use of the first person, is one which all women are under a threat to. It is not something that happens “out there” but an ever-present and looming reality in a place where women are sexualized and objectified as they are. It is from this context that the persona presents her lamentation against language in “Memory III”:

I’ve lost the images
the ink from my pen dries up
in the wind, I look out the window:
metaphors elude me
I cannot capture them
I cannot write my poetry.
Words are all I have
Flowing through the beta of my brain
Gushing out like a rampaging river
Voiceless in its anger.

The pain, for this violated persona, is relived multiple times, first, as the instance of the actual violence that has happened to her, second, as she relives it in her mind, and third, as she writes it down using a language that comes from a tradition of phallocentricity that first violated her. The contradictory experience of writing as exorcism and at the same time a re-experiencing of the trauma is presented. This very language that the poet is using is also the self-same language that materialized the definition of her sex as a call to do violence. And yet she clings to language (“words are all I have”) even as she cannot write her poetry. The draining act of recollecting violence has left her with words that are worn out: so that as she looks in the window, metaphors elude her and she recognizes things without really seeing them. Because in literature one reads the words in their materiality – what this does is it empties words of their meaning so that the writer can work on it in its neutral form – the basic images “flowing through the beta of the brain.”

Wittig says that this act of wearing out words from a highly charged dominant discourse into a raw material is crucial for women. “A writer must first reduce language to be as meaningless as possible in order to turn it into a neutral material – that is a raw material. Only then is one able to work the words into a form. A writer must take a word and despoil it of its everyday meaning in order to be able to work with words, on words” (Wittig 73). This is precisely what Santos does when she presents the very existence of her poem as a negation to its meaning. She writes “she cannot write poetry” as she writes a poem, and words “gush out like a rampaging river” though metaphors elude her. In showing the materiality of a language as opposite to its abstract meaning – she presents a way in which the oppressive structures can be subverted. This frees the meaning of language from its traditional form. Language does not have to mean what it signifies, and it will not always serve the dominant discourse from where it comes. “A voiceless anger,” voiced out through words, through poems, presents us with the similar technique that the persona used in “Spaces” to bridge the contradiction of using words to protest against the silencing discourse of male language. By making every word create the effect as if it was being understood or read for the first time, the writer deals a blow with words.

Here we also see the reason for the poet’s self-reflexivity: since poetry is a field which can question the very medium it uses, she can use it to question language as an exercise of dominant power, at the same time giving her an opportunity to turn that power against itself.
The poem also reflects the poet’s belief that “for any woman to write, she has to confront a life that breathes violence with a rhythm so pervasive [it could] immobilize: rape, incest, prostitution, trafficking of women, wife battering, child abuse” (Santos, Spaces ii).

As Aida Santos narrates:

Writing, I once thought, was a form of cleansing, a way of crystallizing emotions and facts, a private act of self-examination that eventually was offered as a gift of sharing in the public arena of publishing and readings. Writing now is a terror of recognition of the madness in our humanity, a confrontation with one’s belief in life itself. (Spaces ii)

The poet often has an ambiguous and traumatic relationship with language in “Spaces” and “Memories II & III.” Expression, which for the poet, seemed to be a way to create closure, to communicate and even to create a community of lesbians, offering them healing from their violent lives, is also very much a double edged sword. When you get down to the discourse of power structures within it, within also lies “a terror of recognition of humanity’s madness” – a language that has often been used or withheld to oppress rather than to liberate.

That is why it is important for Aida Santos to activate the poem in its own way. We see echoed in Aida Santos’s poetry, the idea of performativity in language—it is by uttering the words in the poem itself that one can perform the “search” for “a word to describe/the creeping/emptiness inside” in “Spaces.” It is also words itself that create the materiality of sex that does the violence in Memories II & III. We now go into how Aida Santos relates that performativity to the construction of her subjectivity in a new poem entitled “ISANG TANONG, ISANG SAGOT (paumanhin kay Pablo Neruda)” (Santos, Isang Tanong Isang Sagot).

Isang Tanong, Isang Sagot

Bakit tayo umiibig?
Sapagkat umaalis ang puso sa ating dibdib
At naglalayag ayon sa kanyang tadhana.

Bakit may sakit ang pag-ibig?
Sapagkat may iiwang langit
Na may alaala ng masayang nakalipas.

Bakit isa lamang ang maaaring ibigin?
Sapagkat may nagturo sa atin na ang puso
Ay masikip na silungan.

Bakit maaaring umibig nang higit sa isa?
Sapagkat may espasyong
Nakalaan sa bawat tibok.

Bakit ako lumuluha sa paglalakbay?
Sapagkat may maiiwang bakas sa aplaya
At bakas mo iyon, mahal ko.

Bakit hindi ko maunawaan ang tunay kong nasa?
Sapagkat ang nasa ko’y wala sa utak
Ito’y nasa pagitan ng puso’t hita.

Bakit kailangang sisirin ang pagkamangha?
Sapagkat ito ang nagkukulay ng bahaghari
Matapos ang malakas na bagyo.

Bakit ako ay ako?
Sapagkat ang ako ng iba’y hindi ko
Maisuot, hindi iba ang ako.

In this poem, we can see many sensibilities that coincide with Judith Butler’s ideas in “Desire.” Aida Santos questions the male, western idea of the “desire for the impossible return” when she says, in the first line, that the heart journeys according to its own course and not through a predestined psychological or metaphysical line. Desire, in this case, corresponds with its definition as that of an eternal process of deferral, an endless quest that cannot be completed, a proverbial itch that cannot be scratched. The second stanza, however, alludes to the ‘primordial loss or separation’ that Lacan and Freud refer to when the subject is first taken out of the mirror stage. Santos asks: “Why does love hurt?” – and answers that it is because of a remembered happiness or a union. Lacan and Freud also
agree that a present pain is painful precisely because it conjures a primordial sense of loss and separation that can be traced back to the break in the mirror stage. We feel the loss all the more because we can imagine or recall this experience of a primary unity or happiness (as we felt one with the world and the mother.) Aida Santos troubles the theory however by claiming that women can also feel this primordial desire and that the experience of loss is not just limited to men who feel “castrated” from the mother—an experience that Freud’s Electra Complex, admittedly, could never fully supply or grasp. Women, therefore, can also long for a primary care-giver, which is the mother—troubling the heterosexual premise of this psychoanalytic assumption.

Aida Santos also exposes the singularity of desire as constructed in the third stanza. “Bakit isa lamang ang maaaring ibigin?/Sapagkat may nagturo sa atin na ang puso/Ay masikip na silungan” (Santos, Isang Tanong, Isang Sagot 25). This is an echo of Helene Cixous’ stand that men and women could both benefit from a difference-cultivating “bisexuality” that releases men from the impossible high horse ideal of a glorious monosexuality:

By insisting on the primacy of the phallus and implementing it, phallocentric ideology has produced more than one victim. As a woman, I could be obsessed by the scepter’s great shadow, and they told me: adore it, that thing you don’t wield. But at the same time, man has been given the grotesque and unenviable fate of being reduced to a single idol with clay balls. And terrified of homosexuality, as Freud and his followers remark. Why does man fear being a woman? Why this refusal of femininity? The question that stumps Freud. The “bare rock” of castration. (Cixous 38)

By arguing that this singular desire has to be enforced, the text renounces the narrowing of desire into a hetero-monosexuality. It rejects “creating a monarchy of body or desire” (38). As Cixous says, “Let masculine sexuality gravitate around the penis, engendering this centralized body (political anatomy) under party dictatorship. Woman does not perform on herself this regionalization that profits the couple-head sex, that only inscribed itself within frontiers” (38).

That is why by the fourth stanza, Santos argues that it is possible to have multiple desires, to love more than one—“Sapagkat may espasyong/Nakalaan sa bawat tibok.” Each heartbeat, each irregularity has a fluidity that enables the plurality of desire. The woman, because of her capacity to depropriate herself without self-interest is, is an “endless body” – “a cosmos where eros never stops travelling, [a]vast astral space” (Cixous 38). This
vastness that characterizes woman’s eros also characterizes her subjectivity and writing, the reason why the lines are spaced apart from each other in the poem.

[Woman’s] libido is cosmic, just as her unconscious is world-wide: her writing can go on and on without ever inscribing or distinguishing contours … she goes and goes on infinitely. She alone dares and wants to know from which she, the one excluded, has never ceased to hear what-comes-before-language reverberating. She lets the other tongue of a thousand tongues speak –the tongue, sound without barrier or death. (Cixous 38)

As the poet continues on her journey however, on the fifth stanza, she is reminded of loss once again when she discovers the tracks of the beloved that came before her, now lost to her, even as she tries in vain to reach her hearing. Again, this echoes the Cixourian view that the discovery of writing comes from mourning and a reparation of mourning:

In the beginning the gesture of writing is linked to the experience of disappearance to the feeling of having lost the key to the world, of having been thrown outside. Of having suddenly acquired the precious sense of the rare, of the mortal … Everything is lost except words. This is a child’s experience: words are our doors to all other worlds. At a certain moment for the person who has lost everything, whether that is … a being or country, language becomes the country. One enters the country of languages. (Cixous 44)

After lamenting a loss she cannot recover, the poet then asks in the sixth stanza: “Bakit hindi ko maunawaan ang tunay kong nasa?” Desire fails not because satisfaction is impossible but because “there is always someone else in the way, someone whose place cannot be fully appropriated” (Butler, “Desire” 383). Desire is ruled by absence. Language, moreover, is structured by this failure: “if language were to reach the object it desires, it would undo itself as language” (Butler, “Desire” 380). Discourse and thought cannot solve the problem of desire – the poet answers – because “desire is not found in the mind.” (“Ang nasa ko’y wala sa utak/ Ito’y nasa pagitan ng puso’t hita.”) The question therefore begs itself and is unanswerable in so far as it is this selfsame discourse and language that had made the unrepressed reality of emotional and sexual desire impossible to know in the first place. This is because discourse and language are what had executed this repression in the first place.
To the extent to that we seek to recollect ourselves in the aims of such desires ... are we not blocked from that recovery precisely because the discourses through which our desires are formed are never fully ours to own? ... It may be that precisely by virtue of the historicity and sociality of those desire-producing discourses that we are, in words, never fully recoverable to ourselves. (Butler, “Desire” 385)

That is why Santos asserts the importance of immersing oneself in wonder in the seventh stanza, in so far as wonder is the act of stepping back and seeing things as if they have just been discovered, removing the misleading and blasé lenses of the dominant order. (“Bakit kailangang sisirin ang pagkamangha?/Sapagkat ito ang nagkukulay ng bahaghari/ Matapos ang malakas na bagyo.”) Desire, moreover, is always self-conscious. To reflect on desire is to increase it, in so far as it increases the distance from the other being desired. In other words, “wonder” is a solution to the problem of negating or consuming the other through desire. It involves disciplining oneself from pleasure and desiring the other from a distance to increase desire and to increase the fascination of an other as truly an Other, not as mere reflection of oneself (like in the paralyzing, subsuming male gaze). Wonder and awe is what colors diversity, what nurtures difference in the full vibrating range of colors, after a violent (stormy) tradition of desire as consumption and narcissistic reflection. Santos uses the image of a rainbow for this—an image constantly employed by Lesbian, Gay, Bisexual, Transgender (LGBT) communities to represent their ideal of sexual diversity. A rainbow also mirrors a monolithic, dominant sun through a fluid mist to refract the full array of colors it contains – saying that mirroring the other [through desire] does not mean destroying him/her by reflecting his/her duplicability and non-singularity. It can also be a kind of mirroring that invokes wonder in the Other person, giving insights about himself/herself that would otherwise not be discovered.

Finally, in the last stanza Santos asks, “Bakit ako ay ako?” This is a commentary that desire is a major component of subjectivity and indeed what prompts the subject to ask who he or she really is. The answer, as the previous stanza shows however, is not singular (i.e. one is a man if he desires only women, and one is a woman only if she desires a man) but multiple and fluid.

Although the line “Sapagkat ang ako ng iba’y hindi ko/ Maisuot, hindi iba ang ako” may seem essentialist at first glance, it coincides with Butler’s idea of performativity in that identity is put on or worn. One can only wear what one decides to wear, considering the constraints and choices of others, whether to go along or against them.
To describe gender as “doing” and a corporeal style might lead you to think of it as an activity that resembles choosing an outfit from an already existing wardrobe of clothes … To start with, we will clearly have to do a way with freedom of choice: since you are living within a law or within a given culture, there is no sense that the choice is entirely “free.” (Salih 50)

Under this analogy, if we were to choose to ignore the expectation and constraints offered by peers by “putting on” a gender that would upset them for one reason or another, this will involve altering the clothes one originally has in order to signal unconventionality. This may involve tearing them or adding sequins, or wearing them reversed, but it is still limited to what is already offered in stores or in the closet. The choice is curtailed. This may make it seem that what one is doing is not “choosing” or “subverting” gender at all (Salih 50). As Sara Salih argued:

You cannot go out and get a whole new gender wardrobe for yourself, since, as Butler puts it, “There is only taking up of the tools where they lie, where the very ‘taking up’ is enabled by the tools lying there.” So you have to make do with the tools … or the clothes you already have, radically modifying them in ways which will reveal the unnatural nature of gender. (Salih 67)

The last stanza of “ISANG TANONG, ISANG SAGOT” also entails the concept of performativity as parody and drag, an imitation for which there is really no original which displaces heterocentric assumptions by revealing that heterosexual identities are as constructed and “unoriginal” as the imitations of them. In other words, heterosexuality is, in itself, also a kind of drag (Butler, “Imitation and Gender Insubordination” 306).

The last lines also argue that all people put on performances—what displaces or subverts notions of gender is not whether one performs or not, but how one performs. “Identity is intrinsically political and construction and deconstruction (note that they are not antithetical) are the necessary—and in fact the only—scenes of agency. Subversion must take place within the existing discourse since that is all there is” (68). More than succumbing to enslavement, recognizing and being self-aware that one operates in a certain discourse allows one to move about it and to exercise agency, just as Aida Santos does by using the decisions of others to enable her to choose what identity not to wear.
CONCLUSION

In the study, we saw how Aida Santos negotiates the dilemma of using hetero-patriarchal language versus debilitating silence by her recourse to a self-reflexive poetry that questions the dominant order and creates room for lesbian discourse as in “Spaces” and “Memories III.” We also saw how the idea of performativity operates in the language of the poems and her construction of subjectivity. This exposition of performativity functions in two ways – by showing how language is performative, Aida Santos shows us how we can turn language around, to empty it from dominant ideology, and convey the contradictions of male discourse from female experience (as in Memories II). As Aida Santos’s poetry shows, this experience can be traumatic and wounding, as language itself performs the multiple-violence – one, in creating societal notions of “sex” and “gender” that is damaging and repressive; and two, by allowing one to relive those experiences in writing. The relation of a lesbian poet and hetero-patriarchal language is therefore, one of ambiguity, but not without promise of agency and transformation.

We also read Aida Santos’s vision of desire as liberated from coerced singularity in “ISANG TANONG, ISANG SAGOT.” Desire, as we found in the poem, may also reflect a primary loss or separation but not necessarily one that is heterocentric or signaling a “desire for an impossible return.” She also believes that there is a possibility for desire that does not consume but rather highlights diversity. Through her poetry, we see a clear illustration of why “desire is never fully recoverable to ourselves because of discourse and language.”

“What do women want?” is one of Freud’s major questions which he never got to answer in his lifetime. Through Judith Butler, Aida Santos, and other feminist theorists, at least we’re several steps closer to answering this, first, by knowing how this desire functions, and second, by understanding the reasons why we can’t understand what we desire.
En-gendering Desire

WORKS CITED


