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THE LANGUAGE OF PERSONAS:
POETIC MASKS IN CONFESSIONAL AND BLACK ARTS POEMS

by

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A thesis submitted in partial fulfillment of the requirements
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ABSTRACT

This thesis considers Confessional poetry and Black Arts poetry against the backdrop of the political and social culture of the 1950s that influenced the styles of these two major poetic movements. I examine Sylvia Plath's and Nikki Giovanni's distinct poetic personas and the language they employ in relation to each other as representatives of confessional and Black Arts poetry, two poetic styles often thought to be inherently opposed to each other, one personal and one political. I identify connections between these seemingly different poets and movements through close readings of key poems by Plath and Giovanni that situates them within second-wave feminism and the civil rights movements of the 1960s. I argue that both poets devise an alternate persona language that is especially exaggerated to create defiant personas of resistance as a direct response to the constricting political conditions in the United States at mid-century.

TABLE OF CONTENTS

INTRODUCTION 1

THE COLOR OF CONFESSIONALISM 3

“SPITTING CRAZINESS” IN “EGO-TRIPPING” 5

THE MOCKING LANGUAGE IN “THE GREAT PAX WHITIE” 9

VIOLENT LANGUAGE IN “LADY LAZARUS” 14

LANGUAGE OF TRANSFORMATION IN “ARIEL” 21

REFERENCES 29

INTRODUCTION

When Esther Greenwood, the protagonist in Sylvia Plath's autobiographical novel *The Bell Jar,* realizes she can choose to conceal elements of her life from her psychiatrist, she is wielding an authoritative strategy, not simply holding back: "I thought I only need tell him what I wanted to, and that I could control the picture he had of me by hiding this and revealing that, all the while he thought he was so smart" (125). Plath, like her character Esther, was no stranger to the art of conscious concealment. Even as her later poems would come to epitomize confessional poetry, a style of poetic writing characterized by unflinching autobiographical rawness, much of Plath's most famous work is frequently made from personas rather than an unmediated personal "I." The speakers in many of her poems, like "Lady Lazarus," "Ariel" and "Daddy" appear to have split identities. They wield manic and cryptic languages that transform their speakers into alternate, often more powerful versions of their oppressed and silenced selves. Plath does not simply reveal every detail of her life in her poems, as confessionalism implies. Rather, she creates a poetic mask by assuming an alternate persona language that is imposing and defiant; the language transforms the speaker of the poem from a victim of the patriarchy to a resistor of oppression.

This poetic mask-making as a method of resistance has an unexpected and unexamined corollary in the Black Arts Movement (BAM) whose artists and writers expressed creatively the revolutionary political aims of the Black Power movement. In the 1960s, when confessionalism was fast becoming a dominant poetic mode that rebelled against the cultural repressions that confined individuals into restrictive social roles in the 1950s, the Black Arts Movement was also on the rise. BAM, however, had a different mission. Black artists from this movement were

combating racism through creative mediums of expression that redefined and expanded the narrative of the black experience. Although confessional and Black Arts poetry are thought to be intrinsically different from each other, one private and one political, both styles often employed similarly elaborate and grandiose language to create poetic masks of resistance and reinvention. Significantly, the reconstruction of a unified black identity was male centered and often excluded the black female experience. Rochelle Odon refers to this feminine erasure within the movement as a “gendered void” (37). This is not to say there were no female poets following the movement and writing from within it; renowned poets like Audre Lorde, Gwendolyn Brooks, and Nikki Giovanni were active participants of this artistic revolution. Giovanni, like Plath, often expands the personal “I” to construct complex poetic personas while sometimes simply using the political “we” to represent the black community. In both instances, Giovanni uses a masked language to strategically and confidently resist not just sexism, as Plath does, but racist oppression as well.

This thesis will examine Plath’s and Giovanni’s poetic personas and the language they employ in relation to each other as representatives of confessional and Black Arts poetry. The connections between these seemingly different movements will be explored through close readings of key poems by Plath and Giovanni situating them within second-wave feminism and the civil rights movements of the 1960s. I argue that both poets devise an especially exaggerated poetic language to create insubordinate personas as a direct response to the constricting political conditions in the United States at mid-century.

THE COLOR OF CONFESSIONALISM

The correspondence between confessionalism and race has recently become an area of critical scrutiny. Kamran Javadizadeh examines this relationship in Claudia Rankine's *Citizen*, a book from 2014 that responds to racist violence in America, and in Robert Lowell's *Life Studies*, the 1959 book that kickstarted confessionalism. Lowell, a teacher of Plath's, was one of the most important American poets at the time of the book's publication, and *Life Studies* signifies a major turn towards intimacy in American poetry as it details an unfettered autobiography of Lowell's battle with mental illness and marital difficulties. Javadizadeh argues that the respectable status of whiteness in a racist society is a key feature of Lowell's work and other confessional poets like Plath: "what underwrites the autobiography of confessional poetry is its construction of whiteness, an identity that assumes its universality even as it anxiously apprehends its sovereignty to be under threat" (477). In the 1950s and 1960s, during the rise of confessionalism and BAM, the sovereignty of the white middle class, as described by Javadizadeh, was being challenged by factors that negatively impacted and weakened white family dynamics from within, such as gender oppression, shifting conceptions on race, and mental disorders. The effects of these afflictions on the individual were the very subjects of confessional poetry. This preoccupation with the self can be seen in Plath's work, which almost always deals with gender oppression or mental illness. Despite being deeply politically conscious, Plath never explored the racial revolution that was unfolding around her. However, she frequently presents her own suffering by identifying with the challenges of oppressed minorities like Jews and black Americans. Like Lowell, Plath's poems are stained with white innocence. While her poetry creates a linguistics mask to resist female oppression, it ironically perpetuates racial oppression

by implying the white experience is a paradigm for all. Plath's poetry also rehearses the toxic language of racism to align speakers with victimhood. As a result, it reproduces harmful stereotypes while trivializing the detrimental impact of racism.

In contrast, BAM poets were using ostentatious language to destroy the elitist white western aesthetic that was embodied in confessionalism and were instead creating art that expressed a distinctly black aesthetic. Amiri Baraka, one of the founders of the BAM movement, wrote that black art "should stagger through our universe correcting, insulting, preaching, spitting craziness–but a craziness taught to us in our most rational moments" (qtd. in Shockley 183). This aesthetic goal is executed in many of Giovanni's poems, particularly those in which the language inexplicably and unapologetically claims the identity of a grand fictional or historical identity, such as when the speaker of "Ego-Tripping" claims she is Jesus. Such a bold and blasphemous statement is a kind of spitting of "craziness" that can be perceived as "insulting" but it is also, simultaneously, "correcting" by expanding the boundaries of black pride. Similarly, the poetry of the confessionals, while more self-oriented and even self-indulgent also used a defiant language or, in Baraka's words, "spitting craziness" to create poetic personas of resistance. Plath's poetry, like Giovanni's, also evokes a "spitting" of "craziness," but the subject of confessionalism deals with taboo matters like death and mental illness that afflict the individual rather than race politics that afflict a whole community. While these styles of poetry might be intrinsically different, the differences thought to separate confessional and Black Arts poetry blur in ways that help us understand how poetry can be simultaneously private and public, personal and political.

"SPITTING CRAZINESS" IN "EGO-TRIPPING"

Black Arts poets, like confessional poets, often present their poems in the first person, employing the lyric "I" and often expanding that "I" to speak for the larger black community. Their incendiary language, declarations of communal empowerment, elaborate rhetorical postures, and audacious and bold declarations mask the conventional poetic "I" and turn it into a kind of persona. Nikki Giovanni's "Ego Tripping (there may be a reason why)," for instance, reclaims the success of her ancestors in early African civilizations. Ironically, although the title of the poem invokes the ego, the poem never actually presents a single, stable "ego" but rather amplifies the confidence of that ego by imbuing it with the endurance and success of a communal African ancestry. In doing so, and in accordance with the principles of the Black Arts Movement, the speaker is able to restore black cultural pride. Here the personal "I" is not reflective of an individualistic experience but is representative and inclusive of an entire community of African Americans. The poem's "I" amplifies black cultural pride, and through satire, criticizes the absurdity of the oppressive society that necessitates this degree of hyperbole.

The most obvious theme in Giovanni's poem is "the ego," which is typically self-indulgent but, in this poem, the ego subsumes a whole ancestry and history. The poem's speaker brags not about a singular self but about an ancestry whose historical success is forgotten or overlooked. She creates an expansive "I" to make a political statement for the black community. This invocation of the ego was imperative to BAM poets because their primary goal was to inspire the youth to demand sociopolitical change; Baraka wrote that the poems were intended to "be change" (qtd. in Shockley 183). One of the changes Giovanni makes in "Ego-Tripping" is to revise the poetic "I," enlarging it to contain a whole communal history. In the very first line, "the

ego" claims its roots in one of the largest countries in sub-Sahara Africa without any previous explanation for the necessity of this statement, simply stating, "I was born in the Congo" (line 1). The first stanza ends with another short and declarative statement, "I am bad" (7). Giovanni is not literally referring to her own morality; rather, she is using this as a statement of empowerment. This is a kind of black vernacular that might translate, in a more literal sense, to "I am strong." These short and blunt statements set against the complexity of the poem reveal a linguistic dominance over the English language. The dominant tone of the poem, established by the declarative statements, sounds almost exasperated as if trying to simplify something so overtly obvious: that black people have contributed immensely to western civilization and should be credited for it.

While these short declarations contribute to the confidence of the message, the poem also employs hyperbole to amplify this assertiveness and ridicule the vices of society. The absurdity of the poem's claims is evidence that this is no conventional lyric speaker:

> I walked into the fertile crescent and built
>
> the sphinx
>
> I designed a pyramid so tough that a star
>
> that only glows every one hundred years falls
>
> into the center giving divine perfect light. (2-6)

These are hyperbolic claims. Both of Giovanni's historical examples, the Pyramids and the Sphinx, are assumed to have been built through communal effort, not by a single individual. The "I" in this poem is not egotistical but communal and satirical. The lines that follow become increasingly absurd but are also analogies for the power of black culture. For example, towards

the middle of the poem the speaker makes a farcical declaration, “I turned myself into myself and was / jesus” (30-31). The lines do not suggest that the speaker changes into a divine being in any real sense; they imply that she is most powerful when embracing her own blackness. Her inclusion of Jesus also seems to nod at the fact that, contrary to common depictions, Jesus was not white. More importantly, she is amplifying African American contributions to history through hyperbole to mock the ignorance of a society that requires such an exaggerated poem to rationalize racial equality.

In addition to its use of hyperbole, the poem is written in free verse, omitting traditional uses of capitalization and employing irregular line breaks that produce a distinctive rhythm and convey a sense of urgency. This was a common stylistic choice for many BAM artists who intended to decolonize their language to embrace a more natural form of speaking that represented their culture. Evie Shockley notes that the typographical innovations in BAM poetry were meant to imitate live speech: that BAM poetry “repudiated standard modes of capitalization, spelling, punctuation, and syntax in favor of typography and orthography meant to represent a written vernacular speech and other sonic forms of black culture” (183). While “Ego Tripping” is only briefly written in the vernacular, the repudiation of standard English is prevalent throughout. For example, the irregular line breaks and short sentences make the poem sound like a song or a mantra, but it also sounds insistent, as though Giovanni has consolidated all of these accomplishments into a list to alter any negative perceptions people might have about black culture. She also doesn’t capitalize nouns like “Nefertiti,” “Noah,” Europe,” and so forth. The few words she does capitalize are “I” and “My,” which again emphasizes the role the

ego plays in reclaiming black pride. Ironically, the “I” in the poem never precedes anything referring to any individual experiences; instead, it reclaims the history of a people.

In “Ego Tripping (there may be a reason why)” Giovanni invents an “I” that represents blackness while declaring itself, in a litany of hyperbolic statements, as essential to world civilization. This BAM poem demands sociopolitical change by acclaiming the essential blackness in the creation of world civilization and addressing the need to emphasize that acclamation with audacity and boldness. Giovanni writes the poem in free verse, rejecting traditional capitalization and line breaks to emphasize its rhetorical loudness. The “I” in this poem is ironically not ego-centered, as the title might indicate; rather, it is representative of a black America whose aesthetic is threatened by white western culture.

THE MOCKING LANGUAGE IN "THE GREAT PAX WHITIE"

Once again calling on history to reveal truths about a culture, in her 1968 poem, "The Great Pax Whitie" Giovanni recites the long and violent history of white people as they fight to dominate non-white people. Following the BAM mission to expand the narrative of the black identity, here Giovanni focuses on white people's violent history, rather than African history to establish an analogy that positions black people within a more moral history. She interrogates the integrity of white domination to draw out its hypocrisy, and in doing so returns a sense of cultural pride to black Americans. The language in this poem is similar to that in "Ego-tripping" with its short sentences, repetitions, and hyperbolic assertions. However, there is a notable absence of the lyric "I" that is a significant characteristic of the mask-making in "Ego-tripping" and in most confessional poems in general. In "The Great Pax Whitie," Giovanni replaces the communal "I" with the political "we" and "they" to create a mocking language that bluntly disassociates the historical violence of whiteness from the black American identity and encourages black Americans to take pride in their culture by resisting and demanding social change.

Giovanni uses racial slurs and biblical allusions to mock the integrity of a Christian religion that professes peace but incites wars that protect white sovereignty. The poem begins with a reference to John 1:1 which reads, "in the beginning was the Word and the Word was with God, and the Word was God." However, in the poem, Giovanni alters this phrase by replacing "God" with "death" to suggest a commonality between the two:

> In the beginning was the word
>
> And the word was

Death

And the word was nigger

And the word was death to all niggers

And the word was death to all life. (lines 1-6)

Giovanni intentionally alters these biblical allusions to suggest that white people have brought death to people who are not white while also professing to be devoted to a benevolent God. Later in the poem the speaker breaks from this mocking tongue to bluntly question Noah; "But why'd you leave the unicorns noah? / Huh? why'd you leave them" (22-23). The image of the unicorn, a symbol of uniqueness and magnificence, represents black people as a whole, while also suggesting that Noah, like the unicorn, is a kind of myth. With this question, the speaker is dating the oppression back to biblical times and questioning the validity of the Bible as fact rather than a set of myths. Noah's depiction in this poem is different from his depiction in "Ego-tripping." In that poem, he is reimagined as the speaker's son, who represents a symbol of power and greatness. In "The Great Pax Whitie," however, he is depicted as the original oppressor which establishes a correlation between religion and racism. This mocking language allows the speaker to temporarily wear the mask of white supremacy to satirically display the degree of its hypocrisy and moral depravity.

In addition to the mocking biblical allusions and racial slurs, Giovanni uses repetition to communicate the prominence and persistence of white violence. The speaker continually repeats the use of the word "and" to suggest a long and continuous history of violence. When the speaker begins to list the numerous events associated with white supremacy the language becomes cryptic, much like the language in Plath's poems. Here the speaker does not refer to these

historical tragedies by their recognized names but with bizarre and figurative descriptions. For example, in a reference to the Holocaust, she writes, “and they barbecued six million / To raise the price of beef” (58-59). This dehumanizing description of the tragedy echoes Plath’s poems in which she attempts to use the agony of persecuted Jews to present her own emotional turmoil. Giovanni, though, is not using such images to describe her inner distress but to mock the hypocrisy of racist terms that normalize and dehumanize the suffering of non-white people. She then references the Korean War: “They crossed the 38th parallel / To control the price of rice” (60-61). In these examples the repetition of the words “they” and “to” establish a cause-and-effect relationship; the violent act is always followed with an excuse or reasoning for such act. The repetition of closely related and yet contradictory excuses reveals the never-ending cycle of America’s desire to control something, while the use of repetition alludes to the likely continuity of white violence that the speaker is excoriating.

This mocking language also consists of juxtapositions that distinguish the pronouns “they” and “we” to establish a relationship of antipathy and rivalry between white and black people, while also posing questions about cultural pride. Ammar Aqueeli notes that Giovanni’s sharp distinction between black and white creates an unspoken analogy that suggests “black people are unique from white Americans because they are good and are not opposed to humankind” (166). For example, in the eighth stanza the speaker lists the ongoing instances of white violence and continually refers to white people as “they”:

> Cause they killed the Carthaginians
>
> in the great appian way
>
> And they killed the Moors

"to civilize a nation"

And they just killed the earth

And blew out the sun

In the name of a god

Whose genesis was white

And war wooed god. (37-45)

Here the use of the term "they" is accusatory and separates the speaker from the violence of America. The speaker also asks a few rhetorical questions throughout the poem that have a similar sound but ask different things. Some questions are directed at white people, while others are directed towards the black community. The question is posed after a long list of examples of white violence; she asks, "aint they got no shame," to suggest their lack of shame is reflected in their history (16). As the poem goes on, and more examples of violence are presented, the speaker answers her own question in different variations of the phrase "nah, they aint got no shame" (19). A similar question is posed for black Americans, except that those questions are left unanswered, suggesting an uncertain future, or, in the words of the speaker's question, "aint we ever gonna see the light" (62). In this example, "we" represents black people, while the nature of the question itself communicates the speaker's frustration with the lack of social change. The poem ends with a direct address to the community: "ahh Black people/ aint we got no pride?" (81-82). This is the only question that is punctuated, which seems to demand a response and action from the community. Giovanni is using white history as ammunition and proof for why black people should separate themselves from the cultural influence of a violent

white America. She seems to be urging black people to have “pride” in their culture and history because it is, unlike white history, not stained by innocent blood.

In this poem, Giovanni assumes the mask of whiteness through a derisive language that openly displays the hypocritical sanctimony of white culture. Giovanni constructs this poetic mask from a language that echoes the violent and racist dialogue of white Americans through altered and ironic biblical allusions that taunt pious Christian morals. She also uses repetition to emphasize the persistence of white supremacy along with the juxtaposition of the pronouns “they” and “we” to establish a relationship of opposition that liberates black Americans from the violence of white American history. In this poem, the speaker intentionally uses the political and inclusive “we” rather than the personal “I” because the poem’s main focus is to reveal the truth of the “they” that represents white people.

VIOLENT LANGUAGE IN “LADY LAZARUS”

As in Giovanni’s “Ego Tripping,” the speaker in Sylvia Plath’s “Lady Lazarus” rethinks the purpose and use of the individual “I.” Plath’s speakers seem almost always to be ego-centered, ironic, and often suggesting the autobiographical while pivoting to a fanciful and objective representation. The linguistic registers of Plath's poems are just as elaborate as Giovanni’s, but Plath’s “I” is more psychological and more concerned with the self than Giovanni’s communal “I” and socially conscious “we.” For example, “Lady Lazarus,” a poem from Plath’s famous collection titled *Ariel* (1965), transforms the biblical character of Lazarus of Bethany, a man who is resurrected by Jesus, into a mask and a metaphor for the speaker’s multiple attempts at suicide, acts which Plath tends to romanticize. Although the poem’s raw autobiographical revelations of psychological trauma emblematize confessional poetry, in this poem and other well-known poems like “Ariel” and “Daddy” Plath constructs a persona, a poetic mask that allows the speaker to transform herself into Lady Lazarus, the character who serves as the medium for Plath’s emotional expression.

Plath’s individual experience is conveyed through imagery derived from disturbing national events. In “Daddy,” a famous poem about Plath’s complicated relationship with her father, Plath uses the Holocaust as a metaphor for the relationship they shared. When questioned about the extensive Holocaust imagery in a 1962 interview regarding “Daddy,” Plath explained,

> I believe that one should be able to control and manipulate experiences, even the most terrifying like madness, being tortured, this sort of experience, and one should be able to manipulate these experiences with an informed and intelligent mind. I think the personal experience is very important, but certainly it shouldn’t be a kind of shut-box and mirror

looking, narcissistic experience. I believe it should be relevant, and relevant to the larger things, such as Hiroshima and Dachau. (qtd. in Uroff 105)

Here Plath echoes T.S. Eliot when he argued that the only effective way to convey emotion in a poem is through an object that separates the poet from the poem: “the only way of expressing emotion in the form of art is by finding an ‘objective correlative’; in other words, a set of objects, a situation, a chain of events, which should be the formula of that particular emotion” (3). In “Lady Lazarus,” the very title evokes an external identity that is separate from Plath and that is used to manipulate the emotion experienced by the reader. Eliot’s “The Love Song of J. Alfred Prufrock,” a poem that also references the resurrection of Lazarus, is frequently used as an example of “impersonality” because it is written through the fabricated persona of Prufrock. In that poem delivered by the individual “I,” the persona of Prufrock turns the focus away from the poet’s personal experience to the poetry itself. Similarly, “Lady Lazarus,” while interspersed with personal experiences and the use of the individual “I,” is an example of impersonality because it is told through the mask of Lady Lazarus. The personas of Lady Lazarus and Prufrock make both poems impersonal because they create a clear distinction between the poet and the poem.

In “Lady Lazarus,” the Holocaust not only serves as an objective correlative; it also doubles as a metaphor for the relationship between the oppressed and the oppressor. In the opening lines, “I have done it again / One year in every ten / I manage it,” the subject of the “it” in the poem is unclear (lines 1-3). It isn’t until halfway through the poem when Plath explicitly refers to the “art” of dying that the metaphor comparing the relationship between the Germans and the Jews to Plath’s relationship with death becomes obvious “Dying / is an art, like

everything else. / I do it exceptionally well" (43-45). However, violence and decay early in the poem suggest death as a significant theme. Plath relates her mental torture to the physical and involuntary torture of the Jews. Echoing the use of race in "Ariel," the speaker describes her suffering by pivoting to the suffering of others:

> A sort of walking miracle, my skin
> Bright as a Nazi Lampshade
> My right foot
>
> A paperweight,
> My face a featureless, fine
> Jew linen.
>
> peel off the napkin
> O my enemy.
> Do I terrify? (4-12)

This passage refers to evidence found by British troops when liberating Bergen-Belsen that showed the Germans had experimented with using the skin of Jews to make lampshades (Mohammad 500). In "Lady Lazarus," Plath is replacing her own image with the image of the objects that symbolize the oppression and persecution of Jews to depict the severity of her own emotions. Ghada Abdullah Mohammad notes that these violent images represent Plath's lack of autonomy over her life: "Plath's sense of loss, disintegration, and fragmentation are expressed through the horrifying listing of the parts of her featureless face and shattering body" (500). In

these images, Plath is neither herself nor the image of Lazarus; rather, she imagines herself as a Jewish victim of concentration camps.

Indeed, the “I” used in Plath’s poem is similar to Giovanni’s “I” because both are being used as a means of escaping an oppressor. In the first half of the poem, Plath portrays herself as the oppressed by conflating her suffering with images of tortured Jews, and, in the second part, Plath is reborn, resurrected by depicting herself as an empowered female Lazarus. The shift between the voice of the oppressed to the oppressor happens physically in the middle of the poem when Plath writes, “Dying / Is an art, like everything else. / I do it exceptionally well” (43-45). After this stanza, Plath’s persona begins to use the pronoun “I” more indulgently and confidently suggesting a shift in the speaker’s persona: “I do it so it feels like hell. / I do it so it feels real. / I guess you could say I’ve a call,” and again later in the poem when she writes, “I am your opus, / I am your valuable” (46-48, 67-68). Each time Plath attempts death, she returns with a new perspective, a more rebellious and resistant approach to her role as a female writer in the patriarchal society of the 1950s and 1960s.

Criticism of male domination is another theme of “Lady Lazarus” that bears itself out in the poem’s use of various masks. The speaker’s creative identity is controlled and disoriented by male authority, and she “explores the abuses that the feminine artist endures at the hands of an unsympathetic culture” (Curley 214). Giovanni’s “Ego Tripping” adopts several female personas, both specific and general; she is the mother of Nefertiti and Noah but also just a “beautiful woman” (15). Similarly, Plath is able to portray herself, through an alternate persona language, not only as a re-gendered Lazarus or a Phoenix rising “out of the ashes,” but also just a woman: “I am a smiling woman. / I am only thirty. / And like the cat I have nines to die” (81, 19-

22). Plath establishes an empowering representation of the speaker's ordinary female identity by relating her femininity to a kind of immortality. She is both killing off subdued and subordinate versions of herself and villainizing male figures. Mohammad notes that the speaker feels stripped of her identity because the male-dominated society confines her to a domestic role: "she is dehumanized, dismembered, and her body is refashioned into different commodities. She is no more the owner of her body and self, she belongs to others" (500). Plath turns to German terms to address those that would try to own her. The use of the German language suggests a reclamation of her power by identifying with the oppressor rather than the oppressed. In the way, that the image of a specifically "White Godiva" in "Ariel" suggests a kind of self-governance and power. She uses the masculine title of "Herr" or "Mister" to associate the images of Nazis and Lucifer with the male figure: "So, so, Herr Doktor / So, Herr Enemy" (65-66). In these lines, the figures that diagnose and scrutinize her identity are both male authorities. In the next lines, she creates the image of a male figure physically burning her flesh and body until there is nothing left:

> Ash, ash—
> You poke and stir.
> Flesh, bone, there is nothing there—
>
> A cake of soap,
> A wedding ring,
> A gold filling. (73-78)

The men represented by “Herr Doktor” and “Her Enemy” have diminished her by the burning away of her flesh and other domestic items such as soap and the wedding ring, remnants also of the victims of the Holocaust (65-66). But the short, sharp language positions itself squarely against her enemies: even as they turn Lady Lazarus to “Ash,” she continues to assert herself in commanding, abrupt, slant-rhyming lines.

Plath uses the mask of “Lady Lazarus” and the regenerative act of dying and returning to life as a means of reclaiming her power. She views her attempted suicide as an extension of her art. As Mohammed explains, each death allows her to start anew: “death is an instrument to kill the poet’s past and to bury her wounds. It is a therapeutic way to rebuild a healthy flourished psyche. She realizes that death is the only means that leads to a new rebirth and novel identity. Her symbolic suicide will provide her with new vision and inspiration that revives her poetic creativity” (501). Plath closes the poem with a vivid image and a warning to men:

> Herr God, Herr Lucifer
> Beware
> Beware.
>
> Out of the ash
> I rise with my red hair
> And I eat men like air. (79-84)

Burdened with being a female in a sexist society that suppressed her identity, Plath had, like many Jews who opted for suicide over torture in concentration camps (López-Muñoz), decided suicide was a solution to her unbearable life. For Plath, her suicide attempts were resurrections

from which she awoke to a more authentic and empowered version of herself in which her identity is unmediated by male authority. In this way, Plath uses the mask of Lady Lazarus as an authoritative strategy to regain control over her personal life; in contrast, the mask in Giovanni's "Ego-tripping" is the ironically communitive "I" that empowers a black aesthetic. While Plath's poetry is borne of painful personal experience, it uses an alternate persona language to create the imposing persona of "Lady Lazarus." The creation of "Lady Lazarus" protects Plath from the patriarchal society that she blames for the deterioration of her mental health. A similar technique is used in Giovanni's "Ego Tripping" in which the farcical declarations and symbols of power serve as affirmations for black pride. These two poets expand the limits of the individual "I" by packing it with grandiose personas and fanciful historical elements; however, Plath's "I" is motivated by a personal liberation interest, while Giovanni's "I" is stimulated by the experiences and needs of black America. These masked personas confidently resist the cultural, political, and personal challenges of their time.

LANGUAGE OF TRANSFORMATION IN "ARIEL"

Plath's *Ariel*, her second collection of poetry published in 1965, is recognized for the intensity and audaciousness in poems like "Lady Lazarus" that mark a shift from her more restrained writing in her first book *The Colossus* (1960). Her famous second book is titled after the poem "Ariel," a poem with a narrative duality in which the speaker is both literally losing control over her horse and more figuratively undergoing a transformation from a confined to liberated woman. This ambivalent poem appears to perform a union between the speaker and the horse, a merging of characters. The poem is cast in an especially cryptic language similar to the language she devises for other poems in which the speaker takes on the identity of another being, typically a more autonomous alternate to her socially limiting female form. This poem employs what I call Plath's alternate persona language, a manic and abstruse linguistic style arranged in short lines with abrupt line breaks that resist the restrictions of womanhood, specifically relating to gender roles, like domestic duties and motherhood.

The alternate persona language Plath invents relies not just on diction but on arrangement because it is a poetic language. Line breaks juxtapose the bleakness of life within social confines against the liberation she imagines lays beyond her "stringencies" as referred to in the poem (line 21). Opening in total stillness, the poem presents an image of hills in the distance just before the poem bursts into motion suggesting that the beauty of life is not in her present but in the distance: "Stasis in darkness/ Then the substanceless blue/ Pour of tour and distances" (1-3). The first stanza juxtaposes stillness with darkness to suggest a relation between her stagnant unactualized life as a mother and her deteriorating mental stability. In other words, stillness is not a state of peace but rather a type of mental deterioration that results from a lack of

stimulation. The stillness of this stanza is interrupted by abrupt and unpredictable movement just as the horse kicks into motion. Here the lines suddenly break off, creating a burst of linguistic movement. For example, in the next stanza, the abrupt line breaks mimic the sound of broken or shaken vocal cords that are created by physical movement. It sounds as if the speaker were reciting the poem while riding the horse:

> Pivot of heels and knees! --- The furrow
>
> Splits and passes, sister to
> The brown arc
> Of the neck I cannot catch. (6-9)

These short lines create a chaotic rhythm that reproduces a feeling of adrenaline induced by a dangerous horse ride. Plath uses these line breaks to create a highly sensory experience of the journey while also manipulating the language to hint at a double meaning: underneath the physicality of this poem is a sort of manic transformation that seems to both destroy and free the speaker.

This alternate persona language employs enjambment to communicate the relinquishing of the speaker's gendered persona and the merging with the horse who symbolizes a type of freedom. In the second stanza, the speaker notes this merging of identities by suggesting she and the horse become one: "God's lioness. / How one we grow" (4-5). However, before the merging, the speaker first raises the status of the horse by referring to it as a lioness and a servant of God; the speaker is not merging with a regular animal, rather she is merging with this mystified image of the horse. By mystifying the horse, she is able to mystify herself. This, however, is not the

only persona she assumes. In another example, the speaker dehumanizes herself by transforming herself into objects like a flying arrow and dew; “And I / Am the arrow, // The dew that flies” (26-28). The arrow is yet another symbol of flight and freedom and the inanimate identity assumed to represent a breaking of human constraints. While the enjambment gives the poem an urgent feeling that represents a longing for change, there appears to be a death of the self and an assumption of a new, more powerful identity constructed by an alternate persona language that resists, at all costs, the restraints of her real life.

Plath resists social expectations by imbuing her poetic language with explicit and intentionally provocative terms that both test the boundaries of racial appropriation while also ironically identifying with black oppression. As confessionalism is inherently dependent on the whiteness of the poem’s subject for its autobiographical content, Plath asserts her own whiteness, not simply through the nature of the lyric subject which assumes the white experience as universal, as explained by Javadizadeh, but through an explicit racialization of racially neutral objects. For example, in “Ariel,” the speaker refers to the dark color of blackberries by using a shocking racial slur:

> Nigger-eye
> Berries cast dark
> Hooks-
>
> Black sweet blood mouthfuls,
> Shadows. (10-14)

The exact intent or meaning behind this specific term is unclear. Jerome Murphy speculates that Plath uses this racialized diction to communicate a sense of defenselessness: "the speaker's own power or someone else's power over her is expressed in contrast to the powerlessness of figures of Blackness" (175). To suggest a commonality between the struggles of womanhood and blackness, Murphy relates this to John Lennon and Yoko Ono's song "Woman Is the Nigger of the World" (172). Plath's inflammatory choice of words is a characteristic of the poetic mask that Plath constructs. It shows a heightened emotional, nearly manic state that results in a complete rejection of social etiquette. For Plath and her speakers, race is used to depict power dynamics, as she frequently equates her personal despair with the suffering of historically persecuted groups of people like black Americans and Jews. This, however, is in itself an example of what Javadizadeh calls "white innocence" because it neglects to acknowledge the power of her white identity and diminishes the severity of systemic racism (480).

Plath's persona language not only uses racist language for her own purposes but also to evoke images of death with terms that suggest a physical release of the female body. Referring back to the berries, words like "hooks" and "sweet blood mouthfuls" suggest earthly pleasures and temptations that "hook" or hold the speaker back from freedom (12-13). This temptation could be a desire to adhere to society's expectation of her, or the desire to create. However, in the next stanza something inexplicable yanks her away from this earthly experience, "something else-- // Hauls me through air" (15-16). While the "something" here could symbolize several things, it seems to be something more tempting than anything on Earth. The word "flake" in "Thighs, Hair;/ Flakes from my heels" calls to mind a literal shedding of old or dead skin which is indicative of the transformation that the speaker has been preparing to undergo from the start

of the ride (17-18). In the seventh stanza, the dramatic event that is suggested early in the poem by its eerie tone finally occurs: the speaker contrasts the blackness formally used with a specifically racialized White Godiva to symbolize authoritative power and to reclaim that power. The speaker performs a striptease of sorts in which she releases dead pieces of her body until she is reduced to genderless objects like wheat, arrow, and dew:

> White
>
> Godiva, I unpeel –
>
> Dead hands, dead stringencies.
>
> And now I
>
> Foam to wheat
>
> The child's cry
>
> Melts in the wall. (19-24)

In these lines, motherhood is one of the "stringencies" she is releasing as symbolized by the fading or quieting of the child's cry (21). The use of the modifying word "the" rather than "my" when referring to the child also suggests a severance of relationship or relinquishment of ownership and responsibility that occurs during her transformation. This alternate persona language depicts a speaker transforming from a limited woman to God's lioness, to wheat, to an arrow, to dew, until she finally dissipates into an ethereal substance and becomes "one" with this chaotic ride, indicating freedom from the "stringencies."

This alternative persona language employed by the speaker is a poetic mask that relies on diction that is audacious and provocative to simulate a rebellion against female social confinement. While the poem reimagines a literal horse ride with highly sensory descriptions, "Ariel" also imitates a woman's journey to a place of freedom and liberation. The poem's use of enjambment creates an ecstatic rhythm that speeds up the pace of the poem to represent the ecstasy of rebirth through death, and more specifically, through suicide. This speaker's alternate persona language is distinguished by diction that is both ambiguous and intentionally provocative. By the end of the poem, the speaker has used this poetic mask to, at worst, conceal her passive acceptance of her oppression, and at best, reimagine the moment she truly liberated herself from her confining female body.

CONCLUSION

This thesis examined the construction and function of the language of personas in confessional and Black Arts poetry. Emerging during the era of the civil rights movement and second-wave feminism, both styles of poetry reject various forms of subordination by using a style of language that is full of the same ferocity, complexity, and revolutionary energy that drove both social movements. The alternate persona language identified in the poems is characterized slightly differently in each poem. In Giovanni's "Ego Tripping" this alternate persona language is constructed from farcical declarations and symbols of power I identify as a "spitting of craziness" to echo Baraka, the founder of the BAM. This craziness confidently calls for the restoration of black pride within black communities. Similarly, in "White Pax Whitie" Giovanni assumes a mocking language that echoes the violent language of racism to expose the hypocrisy of a culture that identifies with a religion of benevolence while denigrating non-white people across the world. This language is also present in the poetry of the confessionals. While peppered with personal experiences, Plath uses a similar alternate persona language to transform meek speakers into the imposing personas of "Lady Lazarus" and "God's lioness." The creation of "Lady Lazarus" protects Plath from the patriarchal society that she holds liable for the deterioration of her mental health. Likewise, the transition in "Ariel" allows the speaker to imagine a journey of liberation away from the constricting duties of motherhood. Both poets expand the limits of the individual "I" by packing it with imposing and defiant personas; however, Plath's "I" is motivated by a personal liberation interest while Giovanni's "I" is stimulated by the experiences and needs of black America: in both, the personal and the political collide. In "The White Pax Whitie," Giovanni exchanges the "I" for a "we" that allows the

speaker to separate white American history from black history. These varying linguistic masks create personas that allow the speakers to resist the cultural, political, and personal challenges of their time.

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