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Sexuality, and Power

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Introduction

This bibliography was developed through close readings of 20th and 21st century female poets, writing their bodies, sexuality, and power. The readings include an intersectional selection of women, representing a range of sexuality and race, exploring not just bodies, but also how the women's lives inform those things, including family and societal expectations. I read these works with the intention of examining craft, form, and use of literary device such as metaphor, diction, and imagery to discuss these topics. I used these lenses to focus on what each writer accomplished in exploring femaleness, as well as how the work was in conversation with other female poets of the time about sexuality and power. I used knowledge gained from the readings and specifically addressed how these poets' use of craft could be applied to strengthen my own writing. I kept the themes and craft I observed in mind while working on my own poetry, as I began to piece together a chapbook reflecting my own experiences of sexuality, bodies, and the power struggle that accompanies the expression of the two.

Organized alphabetically, this annotated bibliography is intended to provide a diverse, albeit limited, sample of readings that informed my writing throughout the creation of my chapbook: a collection by Kim Addonizio that represents both older and newer poetry in its span of over twenty years of her work; debut collections from Carolyn Creedon and Andrea Gibson; a chapbook by Warsan Shire, and a collection from performance poet Daphne Gottlieb that features poems that defy typical poetry structures. Two of the most prominent trends that I acknowledge in my annotations are the related to diction choice and tone used by these poets. Each poet chooses her words carefully to explore her own womanness in a specific way. Andrea Gibson, for example, chooses powerful, assertive language that feels, in some instances, combative in the creation of tone in her poems. This collection goes from angry to victorious, with both of these tones balanced well by powerful word choice. Similarly, Kim Addonizio chooses words that have been used to incite violence; however, she implodes the meanings of the words, reclaiming them for womankind.

Several trends that I acknowledge in my annotations are also related to content; the annotated poets often refer to other women, namely, the speaker of the poem’s mother. In the annotations, I explore this generational juxtaposing. For example, Carolyn Creedon references a mother figure in several of her poems. Andrea Gibson’s poetry reveals an angst toward a mother who does not recognize or accept the speaker’s choices regarding her sexuality or outward expression of her body. Similarly, the title of Warsan Shire’s chapbook, Teaching My Mother How to Give Birth, references the connection between mother and daughter. These generational references work as a representation of the changes that have led to modern discussions of sexuality and bodies, and the craft of these poets shows the freedom of women to explore and claim their sexuality through poetry growing brighter each day.

Bibliographic Entries


*Wild Nights: New & Selected Poems* is a poetry collection by Kim Addonizio featuring several new poems, which are followed by chronological selections from her previous books: *The Philosopher’s Club* (1994), *Tell Me* (2000), *What Is This Thing Called Love* (2004), *Lucifer at the Starlite* (2009), and *My Black Angel: Blues Poems and Portraits* (2014). In these collected works, Addonizio focuses on the relationship between female sexuality and the rest of the world, specifically relating to desire and expectations. Her discussion regarding the heaviness and
complications of female desire is just as prominent in her earlier works, which she emphasizes through her
diction and tone in poems such as “What Do Women Want?” and “Fuck,” as it is in her most recent work, in
poems such as “Party.” Because *Wild Nights* is a comprehensive collection of Addonizio’s life’s work thus far,
this collection gives readers a unique look at how Addonizio’s own poetry has both remained focused on its
messages and evolved in the last twenty years.

In her poem “What Do Women Want?” Addonizio’s speaker replies to the question posited in the title
with sharp images, starting with the line, “I want a red dress” (Addonizio 96). The speaker goes on to describe
all the things the speaker wants to do in the dress, including “walk like I’m the only woman on Earth”
(Addonizio 96). Toward the end of the middle section of the poem, Addonizio writes, “I want that red dress
bad” (Addonizio 96). The use of a simple word here, “bad,” was a deliberate choice by Addonizio, a word that
works to emphasize, through its simplicity, her intense desire to be seen, to wear the dress. This dress reclaims
her womanhood from the people – primarily men – who ask the question, “What do women want?” as though
women are mysteries that can never be solved. For the speaker in Addonizio’s poem, the answer is simple. This
sentiment is again relayed in Addonizio’s poem “Fuck,” which is a poem about diction – about choosing to use
the word *fuck* in a poem. This metatextuality allows Addonizio to dig into the definition of the word, which she
describes in the poem as, “vulgar, / indecorous, an obscenity / that crashes down like an anvil” (Addonizio
131). However, women want to say the word *fuck*! It’s not just meant to be obscene, but it can also be beautiful,
something that echoes female desire, which she shows later in the poem as she writes, “and as we fuck I know
it’s holy, / a psalm, a hymn, a hammer” (Addonizio 132).

This expression of female desire through diction and tone is something also reflected in her later works,
as well, though the tone is often different from the earlier works. In her poem “Party,” the tone is more
colloquial and scattered, though it still references female desire, exemplified though the lines, “I know we’ve
just met and everything / but I’d really like to fall apart on you now” (Addonizio 32). In her poem, “Florida,”
however, her tone is more dismissive, as the speaker talks about a man she brought home who turns out to not
be as great as she thought. Because a lot of my poetry revolves around desire, I experimented with aspects of
Addonizio’s creation of tone in poetry into my own work, including deliberate diction choices. In my poem “I
Wanted to Brush My Fingers through a Girl’s Hair,” I tried to combine the two tones juxtaposed in Addonizio’s
work to discuss my speaker’s desire to navigate a successful relationship with her first girlfriend. Additionally,
in my poem “Power Cord,” I used a tone similar to that in “Florida,” where I dismiss a guy for being insecure
and attached to his mother. Addonizio demonstrates the incredible power in a specific word choice as a tool to
create and underpin tone.

**Creedon, Carolyn. *Wet.* The Kent State University Press, 2012.**

*Wet* is Carolyn Creedon’s debut poetry collection. It examines the tension between aging femininity and the
sexuality of younger women. A predominant way Creedon chooses to expand on this theme is by placing
women speakers in relationship to a mother or mother figure in various poems. This juxtaposition creates the
tension in Creedon’s work: the speaker is young, and the mother is old. There is often a sense of disdain from
the mother characters, regarding the youth of the speakers in Creedon’s poems. Each of these mothers are
unique characterizations demonstrating different depictions of motherhood, but they all work to support
Creedon’s thematic exploration of frustration between older and younger women in *Wet.* Though *Wet* is
Creedon’s debut collection, she writes into the experiences of an older generation of women poets who found
their bodies and sexuality silenced by society as they grew up, but who are now watching and participating in
literary discourse with younger women poets who are reclaiming their sexual identities.

In “After Thanksgiving,” the tone is set with a palpable tension between young and old, felt at the
beginning of the poem: “My mother asks me to rub my feet / and I sit on the couch / not rubbing her feet”
(Creedon 18). In this poem, the mother is seen as a distant presence in the speaker’s life, brought forward
temporarily to show a tension in the speaker’s life. Later in the collection, a different juxtaposition of mother
and daughter is seen in “Hysteria,” which examines a speaker’s reflection on the time her mother got a
hysterectomy. The mother is able to discuss the hysterectomy with her daughter, but only through vague
language, referring to her ovaries as “her things.” In response, the speaker, as a young girl, goes out and loses
her virginity. She smells “the basket of bloody pads,” and when the mother and mother’s friend discuss the procedure, the speaker breaks a jar of juice in her hand, stating “it run red, like a river it run” (Creedon 58). This poem emphasizes the fertility of a young girl, placed next to an older woman who can no longer have children, with images of blood and the color red.

The ideas of motherhood are also part of the frustration in Creedon’s work, as presented in the poem “Doris,” where the mother is presented more as a concept than a physical being. The epigraph at the beginning of the poem gives context to who Doris is: a wife and mother from Greek mythology, who did not play a much bigger role than that. Her husband, Nereus, only comes back for sex because he wants a male heir, but the speaker writes that Nereus has a second home outside of Doris: “you try comparing with your husband’s mother / if your husband’s mother is the Earth” (Creedon 39). This tension is also seen in “A Marriage Poem,” when a speaker brings her fiancé home to meet her mother, and the mother is outright cruel to the speaker: “Here she is, I say to the man I want to marry, and she says to me, / You finally grew into the bags under your eyes” (Creedon 63). Here, Creedon has explored additional mother figures in her poetry to embody a frustration about sexuality and the tension in positioning the old next to new, ideas and mores embodied in the generational tension between women.

Reading Creedon’s collection, I learned how to create this kind of tension by developing antagonistic characters in relationship to the speakers in my poetry, specifically the mother figure while also working not to reduce the characters, by keeping the mother figures diverse. In my poem “Fighting Over Fighting With the Womb,” I applied this by placing a speaker – a young woman who has made the personal choice to get an abortion – next to her mother and grandmothers, all women who’ve had several miscarriages and fertility problems. In the line “grown from a generational history of fighting with the womb,” I worked to set up the tension through the differing experiences, the mother and grandmothers fighting with the womb to give life, while the speaker in the poem has to deal with an opposite problem. This tension arises in the differences between the two generations, with what they want from life, what they prioritize – the young woman in the poem would rather have a career and travel than start a family – and the difficulty that comes from her mother and grandmothers not understanding this as a valid way for a woman to live. Creedon provides excellent models for creating and crafting poetic tension through development of character.


Pole Dancing to Gospel Hymns is spoken-word poet Andrea Gibson’s first collection of poetry. Her work touches on many societal struggles, including the intersectionality of gender, race, and sexual orientation. Her collection contains several overtly political poems, which challenge the stupidity of discriminating against people because of their personal choices, while also calling for change, which echoes Gibson’s activist background. Gibson’s creation and use of tone is important to the effectiveness of her poetry, and she uses various techniques in the creation of different tones to serve different purposes while she calls out various prejudices against “Othered” people. Similarly to Carolyn Creedon, Pole Dancing to Gospel Hymns is Gibson’s first book, but she also writes alongside an older generation of female poets, echoing writers such as Marge Piercy and Adrienne Rich.

A poignant way Gibson calls out these prejudices is by focusing on the absurdity of them. In her poem “Marble,” the speaker implores the mother figure in her life to remember their unbreakable connection – “Look. / I am that little girl you held at three, / that almost woman at seventeen” (Gibson 58). The speaker’s frank manner in this poem, seen in the way the interjection “Look.” physically stands on its own line, allows the reader to hear a tone that expresses how ridiculous it is that her religious mother has cut her off for being a “short-haired dirty-hippie man-hating queer” (Gibson 56). Even Gibson’s use of extensive adjectives to perceive how the mother character might describe her daughter is an extension of the frank tone, meant to show the reader, and point out to the mother character, how ridiculous it is to think of a person that way.

This tone changes drastically, however, in the last two poems in Pole Dancing to Gospel Hymns, “Say Yes” and “I Do.” In these, the speaker in the poems sounds victorious, as she cheers on those who have worked with her to speak out about discrimination, like “the radical anarchist asking a republican to dance, / ‘cause what’s the chance of moving anyone from left to right / if the only moves they see are NBC and CBS” (Gibson 88). “Say Yes” presents this idea of victory on a larger scale, while “I Do” brings it to a specific relationship.
between two women, who have overcome this discrimination through their relationships – “In a world that could have left us hard as metal / we were soft as nostalgia together” (Gibson 93).

I had a lot of trouble applying these uses of tone to my own writing, because, although I feel that all of my poetry becomes political in nature when I touch on the topics under consideration here, on any topic that our politics seeks to govern or restrict, such as sexuality and what women choose to do with their bodies, I’ve never consciously tried to use tone to emphasize the political aspects of my work. However, after reading through Gibson’s work, I decided to give it a try, and wrote “Shave,” which ends with a biting, single-word, stand-alone line that encapsulates a brief poem dedicated to attacking the male expectation, and attraction, for female bodies to be hairless, which violates and takes from the aspect of womanhood that involves growing pubic, underarm, and leg hair.


*Kissing Dead Girls* is a collection by performance poet Daphne Gottlieb that, through hybrid forms of both traditional poetic and prose poetry, explores gender and the mythos surrounding the subject through several plays on font, where some of the words are bolded, indented, italicized, underlined, or placed in parentheticals for different kinds of emphasis. For example, in her poem “speed times the distance,” the narrator describes a character’s troubled walk in the park, while Gottlieb places the character’s thoughts in parenthesis to break up the external and the internal while maintaining a cohesive narration. The pieces in *Kissing Dead Girls* look visibly different than the general public understanding of what a poem should look like, employing structural imagery to an unexpected extreme, which adds to Gottlieb’s exploration of the mythos of gender expectations in a visual way, which is unique in comparison to the other contemporary poets examined, like Kim Addonizio.

Aside from playing with font, Gottlieb also plays with structure. The structure and use of white space in her poems always tie themselves to multiple levels of meaning, playing with metatextuality; for example, in “why can’t the English teach their children how to speak?” Gottlieb tackles the problem with language and how difficult it is to express feelings properly with words, and she portrays this through an awkward dialogue between two speakers. Other examples of this innovative structuring of the physical artifact of her poems include “someone should write me a love poem but i’m stuck doing it myself” and “banking the break,” where she structures the work to look like To-Do or grocery lists. Imploding expected structure this way, Gottlieb comments on routine and how systematic love can feel sometimes.

After reading Gottlieb’s collection, I was emboldened to try playing with the structures of my own poems in ore unexpected ways. I often find myself trapped in traditional stanza and line breaks, which works for many of my poems, but there are some that don’t always feel like they’ve reached their full potential for layered meaning, feeling somewhat stuck in traditional space. In my poems “Sunbeams” and “Shedding,” I experimented with white space with the intention of forcing the reader to slow down and drag their eyes across the page in a slower way, attempting techniques similar to Gottlieb’s “janis joplin walks home alone late at night” or “sentenced.” I was then inspired to tackle some prose poems, so, in my poem “Red Hairband,” I tried out the form, and learning from Gottlieb, found it both exciting and challenging to challenge my own craft limits as well as what is possible in creating meaning with language, punctuation, and the structure that poetry like Gottlieb's explores.


In *Teaching My Mother How to Give Birth,* a chapbook written as part of Flipped Eye Publishing’s Mouthmark Series, Shire explores questions of bodies and legacy using an economical approach to language. Shire acknowledges that she is intentionally engaging with older poets with an epigraph from Audre Lorde on the title page: “Mother, loosen by tongue of adorn me with a lighter burden.” Similar to Carolyn Creedon, Shire juxtaposes her speakers and mothers in her poems, but like Audre Lorde and Marge Piercy, she also delves into the connective tissue to be found in sisterhood and relationships with other women, across generations and not. In contrast to the other poets read for this project, Shire is not American – she is a British writer, poet,
editor and teacher born to Somalian parents in Kenya, immigrating to England at a very young age. This contrast demonstrates the universality of women's struggle with claiming their own sexuality.

Throughout the collection, Warsan discusses the relationships between mother and daughter, for example, in her poem, “Your Mother’s First Kiss.” In this poem, she explores how women live within their mothers, and how their mothers’ experiences impact the way their daughters grow up, and how those experiences, that connection, influences the speakers even as adults. Again, this generational juxtaposition serves to create and maintain tension throughout the collected read.

However, while Shire’s work is thematically connected to other poets I read, I was more interested in the structural aspects of how Shire makes poems. One of those that I focused on the most was Shire’s poem, “Conversations about Home (at the Deportation Center).” In terms of content, this disconnect and tension is created immediately even in the title, with the contrast of a conversation about “home” taking place in a deportation center, a site specifically dedicated to the act of exile. To further this disconnect, Shire personifies home in the poem, writing “I think home spat me out… dragged you by the hair” (Shire 24). She then goes in depth about the feeling in your body when you’re being exiled from your home, personifying the dividing lines, “these countries are like uncles who touch you when you’re young and asleep” (Shire 25). This disconnect is best described in the line, “Sometimes it feels like someone else is wearing my body” (Shire 25).

The disconnect in the content of “Conversations about Home (at the Deportation Center) is also shown through the unique structure that Shire chose to place this poem it: a prose poem defies the expected form, which often makes readers feel confused because it’s disconnected from what they expect poetry to be or look like. In this piece, she structures the overall read to create a whole through several connected prose poems that focus on feeling disconnected from the body. This connection of prose poems is similar to a “crown of sonnets,” which is the connecting of several sonnets with a single theme, to create a whole poem. However, since Shire connects prose poems, she adds to the disconnected feeling that “Conversations about Home (at the Deportation Center) aims to convey. This fragmentation serves as structural imagery deepening the wound of that disconnect.

After reading “Conversations about Home (at the Deportation Center),” following Shire’s disruptive approach to craft, I revisited my poem “Six AM.” Using Shire's fragmented prose poem model, I re-envisioned each of the men referenced in my poem into individual prose poems, rather than the traditional stanza structure used in the original draft, so separating the characters in the original poem into distinct prose poems. Challenging the structure this way allowed me to delve further, more deeply, into the differences between each man individually, between the separate sexual encounters, and most importantly, between the speaker’s range of response, emotionally and physically, to the different encounters. Shire’s willingness to challenge traditional structural expectations for free verse poetry freed me, as a poet, to challenge those expectations myself, permitting me to more fully explore the range and possibility of a young female speaker claiming her own body and her own sexuality, and ultimately, her own power.