Between Poet and (Self-)Critic: Scholarly Interventionism in Rachel Blau DuPlessis’s Drafts

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Academic discourse, and perhaps American university discourse in particular, possesses an extraordinary ability to absorb, digest, and neutralize all of the key, radical or dramatic moments of thought, particularly, a fortiori, of contemporary thought. (Kristeva 303)

Conceived as a lifelong project in the modernist vein, Rachel Blau DuPlessis’s long poem, Drafts, has been her primary poetic-intellectual occupation since the mid-1980s. Frequently associated with the language school poets, DuPlessis is also a noted feminist scholar known for her work on modernist and contemporary women writers and the politics of narrative forms. In Drafts, these roles become blurred as DuPlessis makes full use of the long poem to carry out an ongoing investigation into the possibilities for women’s expression within poetry and other discourses, primarily the romantic lyric, the poetic embodiment of the unconditional self. DuPlessis’s poetic-critical exploration of the lyric in Drafts, however, requires a thoroughly conditional engagement with its forms: while as a feminist poet she negotiates its traditional stances that cast woman as muse, the “silent, beautiful, and distant female object of desire,” as a feminist poet-critic, she examines the sociopolitical implications of this longstanding gender dynamic for women’s poetic production (DuPlessis, “Corpses” 71). In both her poetry and criticism, DuPlessis has

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2 DuPlessis prefers the term “language-oriented,” telling Friedman that “language-oriented” describes “contemporary poets who share a linguistic experimentation with the L=A=N=G=U=A=G=E poets, but who differ from the ‘school’ in their ‘attitude toward referentiality and meaning’” (735). DuPlessis was not affiliated with what are often considered the original Language School movements in San Francisco, New York, and Washington, DC.
expressed a “commitment to a critical rupture of the standpoints and ideologies of the lyric,” with its “intact I’ bounded by yearnings for female figures, climax, epiphany, desire for beauty, consumable narratives, neat lengths” (“On Drafts” 74). Concerning Drafts’ relationship to the “problematic of the lyric” she writes, “[t]hese poems are my response.” (“On Drafts” 74).

In response to, and ultimate separation from, the neat, self-contained form of the lyric, Drafts is, as DuPlessis terms it, “heterogeneric,” an epic encompassing multiple genres with layers “open to a range of voices, tones, verbal textures, social codes, and rhetorics” (74). Starkly contrasting with more guarded lyrical modes, Drafts achieves its heterogeneity in part by referencing DuPlessis’s lived experiences, including her writing practices as both a poet and a literary critic. Although perhaps most immediately remarkable for its difficult theoretical and erudite language, and despite the dispersal of its “I,” Drafts displays a journal-like quality, with the dated and numbered poems resembling, as Burton Hatlen describes them, “a record of life as it is lived” (151). As such, Drafts, in places, gives readers an account of DuPlessis’s writing process, displaying not only her poetic engagement with the lyric but also the literary-critical discourses that she negotiates as a scholar.

Not surprisingly, these two singular modes have much in common, and at every turn, Drafts enacts a critique of the lyric’s exclusionary poetic discourse, what DuPlessis sees as “the perfection of the lyric, the separation of lyric, the selectivity of lyric, the purity of lyric, the solitary language of lyric” (“Haibun” 115). DuPlessis’s exploration of scholarly discourses reveals them to be structured on the self-same principles of individual expression, its closed forms ultimately serving to elide women’s intellectual contributions. Throughout Drafts, and in tandem with her engagement with the lyric, DuPlessis critiques the academic mode, her serial form serving to expand its limiting discursive structures, and her citation emphasizing collaboration. In so doing, she submits a revised literary-critical practice that promotes more inclusive ways of seeking knowledge. In this sense, Drafts may be considered as an extended poetic intervention into the gendered nature of professional scholarship.

“Working Contradictions”: DuPlessis’s Self-criticism

Drafts’ scholarly interventionism hinges on the destabilization of DuPlessis’s authorial stance, with her highly reflexive poetics serving to engage critically with the discursive practices that have mediated the critical interpretation of experimental women’s writing. The importance she ascribes to self-reference can be contextualized by considering her self-criticism, the essays that she has published describing the poem’s composition. Often included among the scholarship on Drafts, these occasionally nonlinear essays enact her resistance to traditional forms of scholarship while serving
Both DuPlessis and critics writing on Drafts focus most extensively on describing the poem’s feminist engagement with the lyric, its emphasis on the deictic, or pointing function of pronouns, its serial form, and its modernist and objectivist influences. Major critical studies of Drafts include Keller, Hatlen, and Lazer. How2 provides roundtable essays on the first volume by Tysh, Rifkin, and Tarlo, and essays on the first volume by How2 Keller, Hatlen, and Lazer. Critical studies of objectivist influences. Major form, and its modernist and function of pronouns, its serial the deictic, or pointing with the lyric, its emphasis on poem writing on Both DuPlessis and critics’ s feminist engagement provides roundtable Drafts focus most include Keller, Hatlen, and Lazer. Drafts focus most include Keller, Hatlen, and Lazer. In response to both the authority of the long poem and the discourses that she explores therein, DuPlessis not only engages in a multilayered reflexive textuality (in Drafts references to her writing practices abound) but also very self-consciously downplays and disperses her “I” in a desire to avoid exclusionary pronouncements. Specifically, DuPlessis tactically adopts a “both/and” poetic stance, a shifting and provisional position resisting definitive authority (Pink Guitar 6). As Lynn Keller points out, DuPlessis “remains conscious of her dependence on male traditions and examples that simply cannot be escaped,” and therefore illustrates an “acceptance of self-destabilizing contradiction and of a precarious both/and stance” in relation to these male modernist modes (241). Hank Lazer attributes what he calls DuPlessis’s “self-questioning” to her language-oriented aim to democratize the reading process, avoiding traditional writer-reader hierarchies that, as she writes in The Pink Guitar, serve to “[posit oneself] as the only, sol(e) authority” (qtd. in Lazer 38). As Lazer points out, “[s]uch a refusal of mastery brings [her] to a doubling of vision” (38). DuPlessis, too, has characterized her self-questioning as fundamental to her “both/and vision,” which she describes as “born of shifts, contraries, negations, contradictions” (Pink Guitar 6). Ultimately, DuPlessis’s self-consciousness stems from her desire to avoid the (re-)inscription of authorship; her poetics therefore remains “the site of [her] wariness,” both inclusive and provisional (“On Drafts” 74).

In Drafts, DuPlessis’s “both/and” authorial stance functions to relentlessly problematize the binary categorizations often required by the academic critical mode that she first encountered as a graduate student in the mid-1960s, that she used to advance her career throughout the following decades, and that she continues to
practice. Adopting the “both/and” stance allows DuPlessis to call attention to the problems of using traditional criticism to interpret experimental women’s writing. Although much more attention has been given to innovative writing in the past 25 years, critics (even those attentive to the male avant-garde) have traditionally neglected the language innovations of the modernist women writers on whom DuPlessis has primarily focused her critical studies and whom she counts as poetic influences. Marianne DeKoven, in “Gertrude’s Granddaughters,” pointed out in 1986 the ways in which the critical attention given at that time to male language school writers mirrors a century-wide neglect of women’s innovative writing. DeKoven observes that:

[a]s long as an experimental writer whose “signature” is female aligns herself with the language poets, for example, as many of them sometimes do, she has a place on the literary map. The price she pays, which is familiar to all of us, is two-fold: the question of gender will be erased, declared a non-issue, and, at the same time, it is less likely than if her signature were male, that she will become one of the stars, even in that tiny firmament. (12)

In this article, DeKoven cites DuPlessis’s “pioneering work in avant-garde feminist critical thought and the study of female modernism,” which, as Linda A. Kinnahan discusses, included situating her own experimental practices among a lineage of modernist women writers (12). Further, modernist women’s experimentalism often resists the dichotomizing impulses of the standard academic mode. Indeed, DuPlessis has referred to her “both/and” stance as a distinctly “non-academic” form of resistance, explaining that:

in order to make a formal presentation, one must have chosen among theses: this is the rhetorical demand. Cannot in formal argument, say both yes and no, if yes and no are given equal value under the same conditions. Either one or the other has to prevail. (Pink Guitar 7)

In Drafts, DuPlessis dissolves these either/or critical binaries through her eternally self-questioning means of engaging discourses. Her serial form resists discursive containment while, along with her use of citation (footnotes and endnotes), it unyieldingly disperses academic authority. Both techniques add integral layers of self-commentary to the poem. As she writes:

Indeed, all the “Drafts” evoke and override binary systems of limit. There are restless urges on both sides of a number of intermingled things: male/female; speech/silence; Jew/non-Jew; dead/living; lyric finish/encyclopedic inclusion; memory/amnesia. (“Manifests” 50)

These “restless urges” allow spaces for inquiry, and Drafts, in its multilayered self-reflexivity, always circles back to an emphasis on DuPlessis’s own writing practices as
poet/critic, intermingled. As DuPlessis writes, “to speak of being a critic and a poet . . . in praxis” (“Reader” 106).

“Poesis as Furthering”: Scholarly Interventionism in Drafts

At present, DuPlessis may be just as much recognized for her extensive feminist criticism on modernist women writers such as H.D., Woolf, Stein, and Loy as she is for her poetry. Her literary criticism merges textual analysis and sharp cultural critique, focusing on the intersections between discourses and identities. Her innovative essays in The Pink Guitar: Writing as Feminist Practice (1990) enact her feminist project of exploring discourses; experimental prose techniques such as fragment and collage are woven into essays that simultaneously display an impressive historical-theoretical examination of women’s artistic production. Yet Drafts, in continuing these explorations, is as critically rigorous as her other writings. It therefore represents an intervention into both long-held cultural beliefs which downplay poetry’s intellectual function and traditional disciplinary standards defining appropriate modes of scholarly production. As she tells Jeanne Heuving in an interview, “[m]any poets engage in the investigation of sources that could be called scholarship. Many poets work out intellectual and ethical problems that have cultural necessity” (400). In this respect, DuPlessis conceives of Drafts as an oppositional “essayistic enterprise” in relation to the gender politics of writing (Heuving 403). Further, when discussing the relationship between her three major modes of writing, DuPlessis characterizes them as of a piece. She writes:

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\text{Poetry propelled my criticism, criticism propelled poetry, and essays were originally born in a growth spurt between them. Essays then further incited my main critical book, and even my next one on H.D. The three genres I use offer (at least) three different and related subject positions, answerable to different social expectations and writing forums. But they were not separate tracks. Discoveries made in one mode led the way to work on another. (“Reader” 106)}
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DuPlessis’s concern with disciplinary contexts governing the representation of knowledge and the varying “subject positions” that she must occupy are fundamental to Drafts’ scholarly interventionism. On one hand, she is cognizant of the limitations of each mode, but on the other, she locates within them a productive “both/and” interplay promoting ongoing inquiry.

DuPlessis has early on made clear her awareness of the limiting rhetorical modes of scholarly criticism; these limitations, as she depicts them, can be linked with her own experiences in the profession. When discussing her first book of criticism, Writing Beyond the Ending: Narrative Strategies of Twentieth-Century Women Writers (1985), DuPlessis writes that, while coming up for tenure and after having written more nontraditional pieces, she “chose to write this book in standard tones and..."
modes of argument; it would have been professionally unstrategic (to say the least) to make another kind of work” (“Reader” 110). As a feminist literary critic seeking both advancement in the academe and creation of an audience for long-overlooked modernist women writers, of necessity DuPlessis adopts the dominant discourse of standard academic prose. The poem “Writing,” written during the same period, documents her early poetic engagement with these scholarly modes. In this poem, “Curlicues meet curricula; / much roaring on all sides. / It’s judgment.” (71). An everyday reference to curly loops of handwritten script contrasts with the seemingly more dire “judgment” associated with professional advancement in the competitive arena of academe. DuPlessis further shares her work:

Writing (along the lines of research, of work into and along the lines of somethings together

as long as it, as they interest each other, trace into and mark each other) summarizes and accomplishes intermittent yearning and proposals that define the intersecting of strongly acknowledged yet loosely defined materials with an “I” who is the hidden subject and object of each of these verbs. (71)

These lines indicate a tension between what DuPlessis’s summaries and proposals should accomplish in terms of scholarship and the implications for her own open-form poetics. As writing subject or as a professional literary critic adopting the academic yet impersonal “I,” she must use verbs serving to limit (“summarize,” “accomplish,” and “define”), but as a feminist poet attempting to explore the possibilities beyond such endings, she also recognizes how those words function to limit and exclude.

The poem “Writing” illustrates the nature of DuPlessis’s direct poetic engagement with scholarly discourses, which continues in certain poems in Drafts. Yet, Drafts’ open-form seriality adds an integral layer to her critique of the intellectual limitations of academic discourse. A tactical deployment of cultural feminist rhetoric, the serial form of Drafts encourages multiple, even endless, interpretive possibilities that directly contrast with the emphasis on finite knowledge cultivated within professional scholarship. Rejecting the essentialism of a singular feminine aesthetic tied to the body, DuPlessis nevertheless writes that, “this kind of rhetoric can arouse to hope for change of consciousness and ideology, and can move the reader (at least temporarily) into a utopian space.” (“Reader” 105).

Dedicated to uncovering the possibilities for women’s writing within the oppressive psycholinguistic patterns of Western logic, cultural feminism’s influence on Drafts’ inclusive form proves unmistakable, its deployment most apt. For example, Hélène Cixous argues that the multiplicity of female pleasure as expressed through a feminine language (or l’écriture feminine) is a powerful means of subverting patriarchal language from a position of marginality within it. “If woman has always functioned
‘within’ the discourse of man,” Cixous writes, writing her body through l’écriture feminine allows her to “dislocate this ‘within,’ to explode it, turn it around, and seize it; to make it hers … to invent for herself a language to get inside of” (356). Further, l’écriture feminine is an open-ended discourse informed by multiplicity. Cixous asserts that women’s writing “can only keep going, without ever inscribing or discerning contours, daring to make these vertiginous crossings of the other(s) ephemeral and passionate sojourns” (358). In this context, a more closed-text poetic and scholarly discourse can be associated with the phallocentric discourse of “inscribing or discerning contours” that does not recognize, and thus precludes, women’s creative expression. Drafts, in contrast, is invested in the concept of “keeping going,” not “inscribing or discerning contours,” but exploring the larger discursive contexts of women’s writing. As DuPlessis writes about Drafts:

I was seeking the authority of the multiple. Willing to follow the track of making. And to think about the implications of the poesis as furthering. To read the writing. But a cultural project – making something of extent. Casting myself into that sea. No matter what one touches, the ongoingsness of language demands more writing. (“Haibun” 122)

Reclaiming the role of woman as maker, DuPlessis performs through Drafts’ circular serial structure the limitless possibilities of a feminine aesthetic. As Lazer observes, every time DuPlessis’s poetry “threatens to achieve a focus, a fixity, it immediately exceeds itself, contradicts itself; completion or focus is not what must be accomplished” (48).

The primary means by which DuPlessis performs openness is by enacting the concept of the fold (122). A metaphor for feminine sexuality, the fold is the organizing principle of Drafts. Some poems “fold” over the others coming before them based on DuPlessis’s numerical ordering system, structured around the number 19. More specifically, beginning at the 19th poem, each poem reinterprets and provides commentary on previous poems, which, at that moment, begin to serve as “donor drafts.” For example, “Draft 39: Split” and “Draft 20: Incipit” fold back upon “Draft 1: It.” In addition, “Draft 40: One Lyric” and “Draft 21: Cardinals” connect to “Draft 2: She,” and so on. While in the first example, the word “it” links both the titles and the thematic concern with pronouns found in Drafts 39, 20, and 1, often the linkages between poems in a series are rooted in DuPlessis’s speculative process of composition. “I have made very few rules for this poem, and all have occurred heuristically, in process,” she tells Heuving (404). In essence, DuPlessis conceives of Drafts as horizontally layered and interconnected; importantly, this structure avoids the formal dynamics of more lyrical modes that can serve to position women as objects or muses. As she explains:

I have the sense that with folding and repetition, all parts of the work are involved with all parts, each touches all. There is a topology of mutuality, even mutual pleasure and relatedness. By establishing “donor drafts,”
different poems become “muses” for each other. This avoids any “I/you” muses, with those well-worn gender-ruts, and makes the pronominal interaction more like “she/it” in the poem as a whole. (Heuving 405)

DuPlessis’s fold, which she has also characterized as “repetition and crumpled touching,” therefore not only invokes what Luce Irigaray refers to as jouissance, the orgasmic pleasure through which women can subvert patriarchal oppression, but also resists the hierarchical positioning of others within a dichotomous self/other frame (Blue Studios 242).

The serial form as a means of promoting ongoing scholarly inquiry is made even clearer when one considers its resemblance to midrash, a scholarly mode encouraging ongoing dialog. An ancient Hebrew practice of textual exegesis, midrash was originally used by Jewish scholars to call attention to gaps in biblical passages and to offer commentary on the possible meanings of those passages. Raised in a secular, enlightenment context, DuPlessis reclaims this historically male tradition as a woman poet-critic. Argumentative and detailed in nature, midrashic scholarly commentaries are based on turning and then returning to texts, opening them up to seemingly endless interpretation. Influenced by H.D.’s “midrash-like quality of continuous chains of interpretation,” DuPlessis situates many Drafts specifically as midrash to offer commentary on a particular text or idea and to explore the possibilities of doing so (Blue Studios 229). As she writes, “Drafts have a midrashic element: that means the generative processes of continuous rereading and marking. The poetry works by the endless elaboration of a practice of gloss, including self-gloss. The impulse to analysis and doubled, redoubled commentary” (“Haibun” 126). Most importantly, DuPlessis uses the folding midrashic form to retain in her poetics the important aspects of the reflexive, the provisional, and the open-ended while simultaneously endorsing these concepts as fundamental to a more inclusive scholarly practice.

DuPlessis’s seriality – her poesis of furthering – works with the individual poems in Drafts directly referencing her academic life to critique the gendered nature of the profession. “Draft 29: Intellectual Autobiography” offers an extended account of her engagement with professional structures while illustrating an oppositional feminine playfulness enabling her to pluralize her work. In this poem, DuPlessis opposes her poetry to, as she indicates in her notes, “[g]rant application language cribbed from the usual suspects” (275). More specifically, DuPlessis provides provisionally resistant answers to prompts that attempt to assess the value of her current work – Drafts. Importantly, all of these responses playfully evade the professional queries at hand, doubling and further multiplying their limiting, closed-form discourses. For the request to “Describe your artistic achievement to date,” DuPlessis writes, “Baffled, I prepare for even greater foreignness,” which, as she indicates in her notes, is her own “self-citation” from 1985 when she received “one of the initiatory recognitions”
(275). For the next item, “Outline the traditions/in which you would place/your work,” DuPlessis writes:

Aureate
dismantling sundry.
Then
the reverse.
Any Old How
was the pattern
(Au petit bonheur
in francophone.)
Little words,
    Worming into incipience.
“The a.”
Then, half-contrary
“a the.” (180)

DuPlessis acknowledges that she began Drafts by dismantling the “sundry” forms of Aureate, or inflated lyrical verse. The term “reverse” signifies both her position as a woman attempting to write from the “object” position and her methods of inhabiting discourses for the purposes of critique. Her patterns are not neat and conventional, but “Any Old How” and her “half-contrary” answers illustrate an oppositional feminine aesthetic coyly evading the professional form.

In the next section that reads, “Briefly locate your current project/and state how you plan/to use your time,” DuPlessis focuses on the significance of her cultural-poetic project:

Prix, fixe, pixilated
Strata of culture to dig
out, mote by mote
where the strabismic lens of any shard
stops me dead. (181)

In other words, she begins with a piecemeal interrogation of prefixes and pronouns, what she calls “little words,” small “mote-like” elements of discourse that have a large impact on women’s discursive agency. Next, it is requested that DuPlessis describe her methods (“Your response/may be general or specific, but please limit your comments/to the space provided”). She writes, in provisional compliance:

Leaves torn from old notebooks
and mildewed subscription blanks establishing
on the cut-off margins newspapers the mouth(er)-eaten writer. (183)
The list of her “methods” continues, including “pink scraps, blue and yellow scraps, one of them/a wrapper of Chocolat Meunier/dark bitter, no doubt.” (183). Her poetic methods entail sifting through scraps and fragments, the distinctly unpoetic debris that she works to revalue in her investigation of women’s writing.

DuPlessis’s plural responses to the grant application gesture toward an alternative scholarly model of intellectual compassion and collaboration. In “A Mindless Man-Driven Theory Machine,” first published in 1989, James Sosnoski links the competitive nature of professional scholarship to masculine forms of oppression. He argues that a male model of scholarship, characterized by its individualistic nature, has prevailed in the disciplinary study of English, serving to “stamp out” alternative, or feminine, ways of knowing (35). Best contextualized within a tradition of second-wave feminist criticism in the 1970s and 1980s which was exploring the political significance of discourses, Sosnoski’s essay arguably captures the worst competitive moments in academic culture, including the period in which DuPlessis would have first entered a male-dominated academy as a graduate student and untenured professor. Yet, while vestiges of this culture remain within institutions, it would be inaccurate to assume that his characterization of the profession continues to be representative of widespread critical practice. Nevertheless, Sosnoski’s analysis of the gender ideologies in academic argument helps to inform DuPlessis’s particularly oppositional feminist engagement with the mode in Drafts. The model critic, whom Sosnoski refers to as the “Magister Implicatus,” is the personification “of the ways professional critics are taught to portray themselves in official documents — vitae, grant applications, course descriptions, and so on” (41). The masculine critic, Sosnoski explains, “punishes by making us [would-be scholars] believe we have failed, do not deserve tenure, have not published enough” (41). Not surprisingly, the Magister’s strongest personality trait is his competitiveness. As Sosnoski writes, within this disciplinary system, “the goal of criticism is to ‘accumulate knowledge,’ hence the critic who has accumulated the most knowledge gets the most rewards” (42). Only by “falsifying” another’s argument, he writes, can another critic achieve success in academe.

Significantly, falsification entails the commodification of critical insights into information that is able to be “accumulated” and is thus quantifiable (Sosnoski 42). Sosnoski explains that the institution of criticism requires, in Cixous’s terms, “appropriation,” which is the “acquisition of knowledge understood as an entity (identities, samenesses, that is, information)” (Sosnoski 43). It is, he writes, “an arrogation, confiscation, seizure of concepts. Ideas can be owned and sold at will,” and is in distinct contrast to alternative ways of knowing through insight and intuition (43). “Whereas logical problems have single solutions,” he writes, “intuited problems have plural solutions and appear illogical” (43). Plural solutions, much like the feminine itself, are unrecognizable in this system, appearing in academe as examples of amateurish illogic. In “Intellectual Autobiography,” therefore, DuPlessis pluralizes her answers to the grant application questions. They resist definitive interpretation to comment on the restrictions placed on intellectual activity by the professionalization of criticism.
of knowledge. More specifically, her evasive answers are purposefully illogical assertions of the feminine within a field that, as she is clearly aware, is structured according to masculine models of competition.

“Seeking the Authority of the Multiple”: (Self-)Citation in Drafts

DuPlessis’s open-form seriality promotes ongoing inquiry, and her oppositional feminist responses to professional discourses gesture toward a more inclusive scholarly practice. DuPlessis’s use of citation proves to be an additional means by which she critiques the competitive nature of academic writing while continuing to situate Drafts as a more open model of inquiry. DuPlessis’s citation illustrates how her engagement with the lyric is fundamentally tied to her critique of similarly individualistic academic modes. She uses footnotes in some poems and includes extensive endnotes for each volume to remind readers that Drafts is as much an erudite, multisourced, scholarly project as it is a poetic expression of her solitary making. In “No Moore of the Same,” an extensive essay on Marianne Moore published while DuPlessis was composing the early Drafts, DuPlessis cites the nonlyrical grounding effect achieved by a poem using notes. She writes that, “if added to the kind of short or lyric poem which usually draws its temporal or emotional space in claims of an uncontextual universality, the use of notes will ‘de-lyricize’ it, depoeticize the poem as a pure flight of epiphany or transcendence” (16). Both DuPlessis’s footnotes and endnotes add this important layer of materiality. Specifically, DuPlessis’s footnotes engage with academic discourses by challenging professional expectations of verification and validation. Using them reflexively, she asks readers to consider their ultimate function in signifying a more collaborative relationship with influential sources of knowledge. Much like her footnotes, DuPlessis’s endnotes promote a circular reading practice consistent with her emphasis on ongoing commentary. Yet, the endnotes most strongly signify the influence of Moore, who similarly took great pains to document heterogeneous contributions to her poems. DuPlessis’s endnotes therefore additionally work to situate Drafts within a genealogy of works by modernist women poets, illustrating a feminist gesture of recovery while reaffirming her emphasis on poetic self-reference.

While DuPlessis’s emphasis on discursive plurality in poems like “Intellectual Autobiography” gestures toward a more open approach to scholarly inquiry, her use of footnotes in “Draft 33: Deixis” undermines competitive academic impulses at the deictic – or referential – level. The poem begins by questioning how linguistic authority becomes established. It fittingly begins with an epigrammatic quotation, which, itself, is footnoted. The quotation “it gives it its authority” contains the first of 24 citations in this poem that is concerned with the ways in which words and symbols function to articulate one’s authorial stance. The line’s footnote reads:

While questioning the authority of “it,” or pronouns in general, DuPlessis’s overdetermined citation draws attention to the ways in which footnotes similarly serve to invoke authority. Throughout the poem, DuPlessis continues her questioning, commenting along the way that it is “[o]dd that to/live in the deictic space/of exchange and positionality/gets so tricky,” which indicates her desire for a poetics avoiding the inscription of authoritarian boundaries (224). A full page of the poem, reproduced in Fig. 1, articulates these concerns and most strongly illustrates the importance she attaches to collaboration.

DuPlessis begins with a statement noting that pronouns and their referents can be enigmatic like a “puzzle” merely in terms of figuring out “What it is is it.” They can also signify “ecstasy” in the form of declaration – “that they are there!” Or, they may illustrate the “perfection” of establishing clean social categories based on position and difference (“Here I/am. There/you are.”). The act of questioning the ethical implications of deixis places DuPlessis among her contemporaries who are similarly concerned with the politics of linguistic signification at the level of the pronominal. As Libbie Rifkin observes, “[h]er collection of citations from Stevens, Hejinian/Breton, Oppen, Creeley, and Lauterbach is remarkable for the pinpoint accuracy of its sampling, for the vast swath of poetic history navigable along the axes of little words.” Importantly, all of the poets cited here – Creeley, Hejinian, Lauterbach, and, especially, Oppen – have been influential figures in the development of DuPlessis’s poetics. She cites them not to invoke their authority, as that is not what she is seeking in this poem, but to collaboratively gesture to the ways in which their poetics have influenced her own working-out of the concept of deixis. As Andrea Abernathy Lunsford and Lisa Ede write, for those engaging in more hierarchical forms of academic writing, knowledge “is often viewed as information to be found or a problem to be solved” (257). In contrast, they identify as an alternative form of knowing the more process-based “dialogic collaboration” that appropriately characterizes the practices that DuPlessis endorses here. Those engaged in dialogic collaboration view the process of working together to achieve goals as being important as the goal itself and thus “value the creative tension inherent in multivocal and multivalent structures.” (257). Lunsford and Ede write that such collaboration is “deeply subversive” in the academy in its feminine unrecognizability within phallocentric discourse: in a multidisciplinary study of collaborative writing, they found that those engaging in “dialogic collaboration” had difficulties articulating a description of their work, adding that “because many of those who tried to describe
puzzle of “What it is is it.”
ecstasy of “that they are there!”
perfection of
“Here I/ am. There/ you are,”
double dutch step “Here/This/There/That” and many swinging more
“these subtle forays
into the gauche infrastructures
of movement”
by the edge of open
depth in instances of discourse
down derry down.

with as much epos and historical destiny as one man can perhaps resolve. Those who do not believe this are too sure that the little words mean nothing among so many other words.” “Poetry for my Son when he can Read” (1946), Prepositions (London: Rapp & Carroll, 1967), p. 18.

8. Lyn Hejinian, My Life (Los Angeles: Sun & Moon Press, 1987), p. 82. Also André Breton in the “Manifesto of Surrealism” (1924) when he remarks that the characters in the “false novels” surrealism aspires to write “will conduct themselves with the same ease with respect to active verbs as does the impersonal pronoun ‘it’ with respect to words such as ‘is raining,’ ‘is,’ ‘must,’” etc. It is the word for shifts of location: you/I as /you.


13. “What is the ‘reality’ to which I or you refers? Only a ‘reality of discourse’ that is something quite singular. . . . There is no point in defining these terms and demonstratives in general through deixis . . . if we do not add that deixis is contemporaneous with the instance of discourse that bears the indication of the person: from this reference the demonstrative derives its unique and particular character . . . .” Benveniste vol. 1, 252–253, cited in Agamben, 23–24. Agamben goes on to say that “pronouns . . . are presented as ‘empty signs,’ which become ‘full’ as soon as the speaker assumes them in an instance of discourse.” (Agamben, 24)

Figure 1. A full page of the poem “Draft 33: Deixis” illustrating Rachel Blau DuPlessis’s footnotesh. it to us were women, and because this mode of collaboration seemed so much the “other” — we think of this mode as predominantly feminine” (258).

While DuPlessis’s footnotes in “Draft 33” emphasize a shared poetic practice, they simultaneously work to promote collaboration by undermining the notion of individual authorship associated with professional academic advancement. As Stephen Nimis writes, citing sources is a slavish yet fundamental requirement of many academic disciplines: “to be a professional means to master an esoteric body of
systematic knowledge” and “a thorough acquaintance with and acknowledgment of ‘the scholarship’ effected by documentation in footnotes, is an indispensable assurance that the rules of the game have been followed and that the new opinion is not simply the result of amateurish intuition” (106). The little footnote therefore carries substantial academic weight, and DuPlessis’s overdetermined citation, coupled with her diffused and fragmented poetic analysis, reconfigures that authority. It subversively reclaims her poetics as the work of an amateur, distinctly unprofessional and always provisional. In other words, rather than serving as “formulaic gestures toward verification (confirmatio) or falsification (refutatio),” DuPlessis’s footnotes gesture to an open-ended discourse of inquiry, refusing the closure associated with singular authoritarian discourses, such as the academic (Sosnoski 36). DuPlessis’s footnotes in “Draft 33,” therefore, are not about establishing her own authority, but, rather, most concerned with questioning the very process by which discursive authority comes to be established. Such a task cannot be accomplished on one’s own.

Recalling the example of DuPlessis’s footnote-riddled page above, it is useful to consider the following observation by Nimis: “The excessive or eccentric use of footnotes is often the butt of jokes which ridicule the pretentiousness or compulsiveness of various types of scholarly inquiry” (105). On a visual level, DuPlessis’s excessive footnotes in “Draft 33” function in exactly the same way, undermining individual authorship through parody while simultaneously continuing to pay homage to her sources. Framing the high modernist poetic tendency toward quotation and citation within an early Christian context, Elizabeth Gregory points out that the kind of parodic citation informing modernist poetry “equalizes where the other works hierarchize, achieving its effects through distanciation – an effect physically represented in the use of the quotation marks themselves, which set quoted words apart from others on the page” (8). As she explains:

Importing words from elsewhere and stressing their foreignness creates a mood of awe in the religious context. In the parodic context the same methods are employed to create instead a critical distance: either the specific sayings or gestures of an individual or, more generally, a kind of discourse associated with a person or group of people is cited, marked as alien, and held up to ridicule. (8)

Although DuPlessis plays on the disruptive potential of footnotes instead of using quotation marks in her parodic citation, the visual effects of her page remain striking. Importantly, however, DuPlessis’s visual form of parodic citation does not parody, or invalidate, her sources but, instead, works to emphasize their contributions by parodying the concept of individual authorship. In other words, her parody is another “both/and” self-reflexive gesture that reaffirms her own status as a currently practicing academic and, in so doing, promotes a reconsideration of the possibilities for original artistic production. As Linda Hutcheon has pointed out, parody has long been denigrated by late nineteenth- and twentieth-century literary critics (beginning
with F.R. Leavis) who saw it as “parasitic and derivative” (3). “What is clear from these sorts of attacks,” she writes, “is the continuing strength of a Romantic aesthetic that values genius, originality, and individuality” (4). DuPlessis therefore uses footnotes in excess to illustrate the untenability of the myth of solitary authorship, to subvert “traditional phallogocentric, subject-centered discourse” so prominent in both lyrical and academic modes (Lunsford and Ede 259). As Lunsford and Ede remark, “we hardly need to demonstrate that the humanities in general and English in particular valorize and reward single authorship and disregard collaboratively produced texts” (259) (a point that may be further emphasized by examining the number and order of author(s) and date-position styles associated within scientific and other nonhumanities disciplines of writing).

DuPlessis’s poem makes full use of the page space to illustrate the possibilities for readerly excess that footnotes, as digressions from the main text, may represent. Her endnotes function in much the same way, promoting active reading while adding an additional layer of commentary. Much like Moore, DuPlessis includes voluminous, detailed endnotes in each volume of Drafts primarily to “pluralize” her poems, to draw attention away from the singular authority of the speaker. As DuPlessis writes, “notes to poems, in general, add another kind of discursive layer to the reading experience, and at least bifurcate or pluralize the speaking subject” (“No Moore” 15). She writes that in Moore’s case (much like her own), “the plural authority of the notes explicitly proposes a shared authorial authority” and “undercuts the sole or superior authority of writer as specialist in verbal practice” (16).

In her essay on Moore, DuPlessis sheds light on her own citation practices. DuPlessis ultimately argues that Moore’s citation challenged the cultural perception of poetry as a high genre reserved for high (male) modernists, noting that “[Moore] produced a form of writing; it is called ‘poetry’ for reason of convenience and feminine kindness to the existing category system” (“No Moore” 7). DuPlessis writes that by including pop cultural as well as high classical sources, “Moore makes her notes propose the annihilation of the felt textual authority of the ‘poem’ as a summa of culture” (15). While Moore references “culturally respectable” works such as Ovid, Sir Thomas Moore, Ruskin, La Fontaine, and Ben Jonson, she will only do so along with sources that are not considered literary, such as articles from Time and leaflets from Bell Telephone (16). Moore’s use of high cultural sources therefore are “of a magpie-esque plurality and do not ever foreground or valorize high cultural products or written words above the memory of spoken words from a multiplicity of others – a Reverend giving a Bible class, a young lady, a boy child are all equally cited” (16–17).

In their heterogeneous inclusiveness, Moore’s notes have strongly influenced DuPlessis’s practices in Drafts. Yet, while Moore’s notes work against poetic and other forms of high cultural authority, DuPlessis’s notes reflexively challenge the specific academic authority of discourses that she encounters as a contemporary academic. Like Moore’s, her all-embracing notes not only work against the self-containment expected of the lyric mode but also emphasize her material writing...
practices. In her notes, DuPlessis will frequently juxtapose scholarly sources with remarks from friends and colleagues and other everyday items such as bumper stickers and pop songs. They add a fundamental layer of materiality to Drafts’ focus on her process of composition. The notes for “Draft 23: Findings” are representative:

Draft 23: Findings. I was reminded of ways of organizing time in Eviator Zerubavel, The Seven-day Circle: The History and Meaning of the Week. Lee in section three is Lee Hickman, the much-mourned editor of Temblor [an early Language poetry journal]. Evocation of the “Angel or the Power” is from H.D., Sagseesse. “Oh baby” is a line from the Big Bopper’s song “Chantilly Lace.” “Wet Rails and the oil of crushed leaves” is SEPTA’s explanation for late trains in autumn. The cricket paraphernalia at the Nelson Atkins Art Museum in Kansas City, Missouri. . . . (273 . .)

Although endnotes are traditionally used to provide definitive verification, she writes in the note to “Draft 32: Regna” that her reference to “little I” is “from somewhere I can’t now remember” (276). While DuPlessis playfully undermines the disciplinary empiricism expected of notes, she does not hesitate to self-effacingly admit when she might be wrong. As she writes in the notes to “Draft 33: Deixis,” “Professor Muffy Siegel helped when I was well into this draft with some discussions of deixis in linguistics; she is not responsible for any errors in presentation here” (276). Describing the feminine intellectual, Sosnoski writes that, “[s]he acknowledges that she is in error. For her, paradoxically, being in error is not wrong. Error, in this case, is heuristic” (34). When error becomes heuristic, competition is more or less rendered irrelevant. Not only do DuPlessis’s notes fully underscore the collaborative nature of her project but also all of Drafts, structured as it is around the concept of provisionality, could be said to embrace error. Such an emphasis on the process of discovery, as Sosnoski points out, “is the precondition upon which an intellectual comes to know” (31).

DuPlessis’s use of citation in Drafts serves to pluralize her text, therefore situating the poems as an alternative form of self-reflexive poetic scholarship, one that not only appears scholarly (acknowledging via footnotes a heterogeneous collection of texts and contributions) but also delves into the very nature of its own poetic form, devices, or status as “poetry.” Importantly, through her more collaborative forms of citation, DuPlessis performs an intervention into standard forms of scholarship that rely on a framework of individualistic competition. Moreover, her use of citation, while directly engaging academic apparatus, functions to distance Drafts from conventional poetry as well as to situate the work as a vital form of poetic inquiry into the gendered nature of the lyric and other poetic discourses. Ultimately, DuPlessis resists the traditionally isolating practices of the lyric poet by making clear her compositional process and lived writing practices. Her self-referentiality, no matter the extent to which it may overdetermine her poetics and its interpretation,
is a well-theorized choice in its cognizance of the literary-critical machine. It is a fully fleshed-out rhetorical model, allowing her to avoid the positioning of her poetics as fodder for critics working under the professional model. Drafts is not a puzzle with a singular solution, but it allows for, encourages, and embodies the possibilities of multiple interpretations. As she writes, all at once, its poems “are essay, they are midrash, layering, reconsidering, creating a texture of multiple and matted glosses, including self-glosses, citing and changing citations, tracking, in time, the intricate meaning of accidents (of thought, of autobiography, of historical moment, of memory, of fatedness, of the merest flicker)” (“Manifests” 50). DuPlessis’s inclusiveness, her “both/and” stance, reflects her choice not only as a poet but also as a poet/critic endlessly weighing her discursive options.

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