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The Thoughts of a Lecherous [Wo]man: Desire as
Resistance in Celia Dropkin's Poems

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B-Term 2021

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Introduction.

I do not expect that it is revelatory to suggest that desire figures in all of our lives, constantly, and without respite. Despite this ubiquity, however, defining desire remains an abstract, nebulous pursuit. It is even difficult to ascertain whether individuals engage with the impulse toward desire in similar—or even compatible—ways. An irrevocably personal phenomenon, desire is generated by and exists within the body of the individual (though directed outward toward the ‘other’) and demands our attention. That authors have yet to give up the pursuit of desire altogether in spite of these challenges is indicative of desire’s centrality to human experience; its obfuscation is precisely what makes it so compelling as a subject. As an ambiguous, yet constantly regenerating impulse, alternative and contradictory iterations of desire continue to arise and proliferate. Desire’s incomprehensibility, rendered in seemingly infinite versions, taunts us, and pushes authors and readers alike still closer to the precipice of destruction and absolution as they strive toward understanding and conquering desire.

The difficulty to relate ideas about desire prompts me to explore a particularly compelling approach to communicate desire by Yiddish-modernist poet, Celia Dropkin. In this project, I look toward Celia Dropkin’s poetry for potential answers to the difficulty of coherently voicing desire and examine what happens when one’s desire opposes the power structures that inform their own existence. I first came upon Celia Dropkin’s poetry in my Jewish-American Literature seminar. In a section of the class which we devoted to investigating the particular contributions of the Yiddish language to the texts and sensibilities of Jewish-American writers, we read only a few of Dropkin’s poems. We read these poems among the works of several of Dropkin’s Yiddish-

American contemporaries, including poets Anna Margolin, Kadya Molodowsky, Fradl Shtok, Mani Leib, Moyshe-Leyb Halpern, and Jacob Glatshiteyn. While I am grateful for the richness and complexity of all of these poets' work, in the months that followed my mind returned only to Celia.

For a long time, I did not understand why I felt so compelled to find Celia Dropkin's poetry again. I still do not know if I understand entirely. As far as I remember, I do not remember our class discussion taking a particular focus on her poems, or there being even just one especially stimulating statement made by one of my classmates that stuck in my head. It was a response unlike any other that I had ever had to a piece of literature, and one that was uninfluenced by the provocations of anyone else. What made it more enticing, still, was that the search to satisfy my craving for more of Dropkin's work continued to no avail for some time due to the tragic under-anthologizing of the poems' original Yiddish text into English.

There are several reasons for this shortcoming, not the least of which include a shortage of Yiddish speakers and scholars. The anthologies that do include these Yiddish poets all silo their translations *into anthologies of exclusively Yiddish poetry*. Yiddish poets like Celia Dropkin are excluded from other anthologies to which their works relate stylistically or thematically, including those dedicated to modernist poetry, American-immigrant poetry, or simply American poetry. These omissions limit potential readership and scholarship and elide the very presence of Yiddish poetry from the annals of literary history.

Despite this obstacle preventing me from satisfying my very own desire to read more of Dropkin's poems, one line continued echoing through my head. This line, from

Dropkin's poem, "My Hands," as translated by Ruth Whitman in *An Anthology of Modern Yiddish Poetry* and from which I borrow the title of this project, remains mystifying and magical to me; in the final line of the poem, Dropkin distills the physicality of her fingers, perhaps the most palpably affective part of her body as an abstract, yet poignant image of "thoughts / of a lecherous man" (8-9). Here, Dropkin so deftly articulates the physical structures of her own hands as a thing so unknowable as the consciousness of an entity who is so other, so alien. In reading and studying Dropkin's work, I continue to find that her ability to weave together such contradictory (and at times, paradoxical) ideas is what makes her poetry compelling to me. She weaves narratives that raise fundamental questions about the self by dissolving the divide between ostensibly incompatible or incoherent images. These questions, in turn, illuminate further quandaries on the ramifications of a discrete, coherent, and knowable self that denaturalizes the understanding of knowableness as an ideal of personal identity.

This final line of "My Hands" in particular articulates a tendency toward resistance that exists within Dropkin's writing on desire. By displacing her physicality through the metaphor of the lecherous man, Dropkin not only paradoxically both reveals and withholds the image of her body but transgresses the boundaries of female desire within a patriarchal Jewish-Yiddish culture and literary movement. These tendencies persist throughout Dropkin's available poems. In subverting the images and power structures available to her as a Yiddish writer, Dropkin presents alternative visions of desire that resist its singular procreative reading that is endemic to a Jewish-Yiddish consciousness.

While I contemplated this translation of “My Hands” for some time, it was not until months after the semester had ended that my advisor, Professor Peter Antelyes, located and sent to me a pdf of *The Acrobat*, the only collection in English of Celia Dropkin’s poems as translated by Faith Jones, Jennifer Kronovet, and Samuel Solomon. Though it is an incomplete collection (it does not include all of Celia Dropkin’s published poems) and contains many translation choices I wrestle with and challenge throughout this project, access to this document has been absolutely indispensable to my research. I remain grateful to the translators and their publisher, Tebot Bach, for believing, as I do, in the value of increasing the accessibility to Celia Dropkin’s poems.

I am not a Yiddish speaker, and so I depend on the contributions of translators such as Jones, Kronovet, and Solomon; while this paper does orbit around *The Acrobat*, I consider several of Dropkin’s poems as they appear in available anthologies. Supplemental translations include those found in *The Penguin Book of Modern Yiddish Verse* and *An Anthology of Modern Yiddish Poetry*. I also consider Kathryn Hellerstein’s translations of “Mayne Mame” and “A Love Letter,” which appear in articles, “The Art of Sex in Yiddish Poems: Celia Dropkin and her Contemporaries” and “From ‘Ikh’ to ‘Zikh’: A Journey From ‘I’ to ‘Self’ in Yiddish Poems by Women,” respectively.

There are several sections throughout my chapters where I examine multiple translations of single poems. Considering variable translations generates an essential awareness that particular translations serve particular purposes that may be tied to the distinct political or ideological projects of a translator or anthology. It also makes me more sensitive to changes in poetic affect that inevitably occur during translation from the poems’ original Yiddish. Working with poems is challenging regardless of a language

barrier; as a critic working with poems outside of their original language, I face unique critical challenges in this project. I must reckon with losses that occur through changes in line structure, spirit of voice, and potential references that occur during translation. Yiddish, in particular, is a language that “contains a heavy weight of historical references, cultural assumptions, and religious symbols,” which cause translators to become stuck “choosing between paraphrasable meaning and faithfulness to structure, form, rhythm, [and] diction” (Howe 49). I realize that images which may appear to me, an English speaker, as stern, solemn, or otherwise grave might otherwise read in Yiddish as mocking allusions. By no means do I suggest that the translations I deal in are *mistranslations*. I only wish to remind myself and my reader of the complexities of a Yiddish-Jewish language and its symbols as they exist outside of translation.

Though Dropkin’s poems change between translations—at times to quite disparate ends—variable translations create a matrix by which I distill Dropkin’s meaning. In speaking on the problems of translating Yiddish, Miriam Weinstein asserts that “Language is not just a passive reflection of how we think; it forms and focuses thought” (Weinstein 23). The tendency for translators to so carefully preserve the voicings of desire within Dropkin’s work despite syntactical and formal alteration propels this project. Despite certain linguistic challenges, the consistent register of Dropkin’s voice outside of its original language suggests that there exists some unassailable quality of Dropkin’s poetics. This quality, I contend, orbits around one central characteristic: Dropkin’s adamant, resistant voicings of desire.

Though I analyze these poems in their various English translations, it is crucial to consider the Yiddish tradition from which Celia Dropkin and her poems arise.

Addressing conditions such as her positionality as a woman in the male-dominated Yiddish modernist groups of the early twentieth-century as well as the application of Yiddish more generally to a poetic tradition, elucidates Dropkin's drive toward poetry and the attendant challenges and availability of Yiddish poetry as an applicable mode to express female desire.

Celia Dropkin was born in 1888 in Bobruisk and died in New York in 1956. After writing poetry in Russian from an early age, she transitioned to writing in Yiddish after immigrating to the United States and became involved with various boundary-pushing Yiddish literary groups including *Di Yunge* ("The Young") and *Di Inzikhistn* ("The Introspectivists") (Howe 241). These groups arose out of a drive toward a Yiddish modernism that developed in "compressed parallel to the poetries of Europe and America." However, the Yiddish modernist movement never equaled the popularity of concurrent modernisms and maintained particular ideological distances. As Howe suggests in his Introduction to *The Penguin Book of Modern Verse*, Yiddish modernist poetry took this alternate route due to "the sense of being linked to a special history, the moral stresses and verbal tonalities carried over from the Hebrew and the strong attachment felt by Yiddish writers to the immigrant and working-class publics" which opposed the elitist sensibilities of American and European Modernisms (Howe 19).

Regardless of ideological distance from other modernist movements, the modernist tendencies of *Di Inzikhistn* outline much of what makes Dropkin's poetry possible—as an artist, as a woman, and as a Jew. Defining modernism as "a strongly problematic stance toward human existence, a persuasion that the true home of sensibility is with questions, not answers," proves helpful as we explore how compounding

peculiarities of Yiddish render the language a readily applicable medium for Dropkin's poetics of desire (Howe 33). Forging their movement after this general ethos, the leaders of the Introspectivists, Jacob Glatshteyn, A. Leyeles, and N. Minkov, claim in "The Introspectivist Manifesto of 1919" that "The world exists and we are part of it. But for us, the world exists only as it is mirrored in us, as it touches *us*. The world is a nonexistent category, a lie, if it is not related to us. It becomes an actuality only *in* and *through* us" (Glatshteyn 774). Benjamin Harshav distills this belief of the Introspectivists "as an intellectual insight into one's self, as a personal reflection of an internalized social world, rather than as a mere vehicle for the expression of a *Zeitgeist*. . . The poet's major concern [is] to express the organic relation between outside phenomena and the self, and to do it in an introspective and individual manner" (Harshav, "American Yiddish Poetry" 38). These sentiments create the conditions wherein Dropkin, especially as a woman, so ably explores taboo and repressed desire in her poems: the Introspectivist doctrine creates the possibility to refract culture through the self, in addition to refracting the self through culture.

We must further address the complications within Dropkin's positionality as a *female poet* among these men. Though Dropkin published with the literary groups I identify, her poetry "shock[ed]" readers with her particular "sexual candor that exceeded anything to be found" in the poetry of her male contemporaries (Howe 30). Conservative male critics reacted to this candor by reducing the body of work of female poets like Dropkin into a monolith of "subjectivity, emotionalism, intuition, and tenderness" (Weinstein 117). These derogatory remarks see detriment where there is merit, especially for expressing a concept as complicated as desire. As Miriam Weinstein argues, these

critics were ultimately “blind to the paradox that these very qualities are all essential to the self-definition and self-knowledge of each individual person, female or male” (Weinstein 117).

Simultaneously contradicting these criticisms of the female as an inferior poet in Yiddish is the history of Yiddish poetry itself, which grew out of the relegation of Yiddish as a working language of prayer for women outside of communal devotional practice they were excluded from. Developing their own, private, Yiddish body of prayer, these women, centuries before the modernist movements of the 20th century, “rebelliously...wrote secular poetry out of a tradition of private Yiddish rather than communal Hebrew prayer” (Hellerstein, “From ‘Ikh’ to ‘Zikh’” 115). I bring up the tension between male and female poets as gender will serve as another lens through which my explorations of Dropkin’s poetry refract. Understanding Dropkin’s femaleness within a patriarchal Jewish-Yiddish hegemony will be essential in elucidating Dropkin’s particular vocabularies of desire and resistance throughout this project.

In addition to the effect of femaleness on the development of Yiddish poetry, several other inherent qualities of the Yiddish language also contribute to Dropkin’s particular ability to write so freely on desire. We should note Yiddish’s characteristic fluidity, originally formed as “an amalgam” of central European languages and Hebrew (Weinstein 19). Continuously absorbing words throughout the centuries of Jewish diaspora and assimilation to an American public, the compounding nature of the language permits a changing vocabulary to continuously generate new and otherwise impossible meanings. Yiddish itself suggests an openness to progression and alteration that imbues the poetry of this modernism with an indispensable readiness to adapt its consciousness

to the values of those who speak and write in Yiddish. This quality alone orients Yiddish as a language that is charged with potential toward the goal of illuminating alternative and progressive desires.

Benjamin Harshav, in his chapter, “The Semiotics of Yiddish Communication,” analyzes some peculiarities of speaking, writing, and inhabiting a Yiddish sensibility that further identify Yiddish as an ideal mode for ideological exchange. While its proclivity for amalgamating diffuse languages and sensibilities already renders it an ideal mode of ushering ideological development, Yiddish’s relationship to the more conservative, sacred Hebrew language paradoxically contributes to its applicability to Dropkin’s poetics. Harshav suggests that the process of communicating in Yiddish reflects ideals of “internalized and schematized some essential characteristics of ‘Talmudic’ dialectical argument and questioning (Harshav, “The Semiotics” 145). The sacred, Jewish text of the Talmud, in an extraordinarily brief description, forms a space wherein generations of (at times contradicting) rabbinic commentaries coexist and build upon each other and inform a Jewish consciousness that challenges the inherence of singular, static perspectives (Holtz 26). Though distinctly a religious Hebrew-Jewish form, the ability for often conflicting ideas to exist together and enrich each other influenced the Yiddish sensibility that Dropkin’s poetry comes out of. The proclivity for contradiction and coexistence points toward Dropkin’s strategy of uncovering a pluralized sense of desire, necessarily one which does not exclude or subsume its alternative images.

Secular Yiddish thinkers and writers appropriate this the dialectical mode of compounded and paradoxical ideological exchange by applying its strategy to “low,” conversational applications of Yiddish within spoken and literary mediums (Harshav,

“The Semiotics” 151). Regardless of its understanding as Yiddish as that which is “low,” the conversational mode still conveys ideological exchange and progression; in its lowliness, in fact, Yiddish ideological gains a sense of high intimacy. Yiddish depends on personal, rather than divine stimulation to be referentially and conceptually enriching. This interaction generates ideological exchange that might not be ‘sacred,’ but is no less valuable or viable for Dropkin’s poetics. Yiddish is an exceptional, complicated language. It is rife with multiplicities which render the language capable of serving Dropkin’s mission of resisting and adapting the patriarchal frameworks which I go on to discuss. My hope is that this brief overview of just a few of Yiddish’s characteristics that inform Yiddish literary modernisms begins to ground us as I begin my exploration of Dropkin’s poetry.

As I mentioned before, I am a non-Yiddish speaking critic of Yiddish poems. Therefore, in addition to taking care to learn about the history, peculiarities, and usage of Yiddish in literature, it is also important to defer to experts in Yiddish poetry to center my ensuing analyses. I mention earlier the marked lack of scholarship on Dropkin. However, there are scholars who have taken serious critical approaches to Dropkin’s work. One such scholar, Kathryn Hellerstein, delves into the complicated relationship between Dropkin’s Yiddish sensibilities and her position within conservative, Jewish frameworks. In her chapter, “The Art of Sex in Yiddish Poems,” originally published in *Modern Jewish Literatures*, Hellerstein refracts Dropkin’s work through a conservative Jewish hegemony that constrains Dropkin’s female desire, though in doing so I fear that she over-corrects.

Analyzing in particular Dropkin's "Mayne Mame" [My Mother], Hellerstein argues that the speaker inherits of her mother "not the code of modesty handed down by generations of Jewish women but rather the shpritsn (spurting out) of *tif-farbahaltener bager* (deeply hidden lust) (19)," and further, that this constitutes a "freeing [of] desire from culture" (Hellerstein, "The Art of Sex" 192). In this case as well as in my project, "culture" refers to a morality inflected by the principles of Judaism. Hellerstein's reading focuses on one such principle, "*tsniesdik*," the Jewish modesty law. Constituting this foundational belief are the purity/impurity and repression/transgression dynamics that Dropkin navigates throughout her poems. I will continue to hold this principle and these dynamics as foundational in shaping Dropkin's cultural consciousness and focus my first chapter through Dropkin's engagement with *tsniesdik*.

While I agree with Hellerstein that the "Mayne Mame" speaker's expression of sexuality is distinct from the speaker's mother's *and* oppositional to Jewish law, I find Hellerstein's implication that freeing the self from culture is necessary to access sexual power reductive, as it displaces Yiddish's rich linguistic history in informing Dropkin's literary tradition. Perhaps other modernisms might pursue this type of ideological freedom from culture, but orienting Dropkin's poetics toward liberating desire ignores the high stakes of writing Yiddish poetry. Unlike other world literatures, "Yiddish writers on the move carried their 'world' in their language," concentrating the responsibility of Dropkin's contributions toward the emergent Yiddish tradition (Harshav, "The Semiotics" 144). As a writer whose perspective is so strongly informed by and beholden to the history and references of a Yiddish-Jewish consciousness, Dropkin's poetry is inextricable from the culture that Hellerstein contends.

Later in her study on erotic desire in Dropkin's poetry, Kathryn Hellerstein offers another approach when exploring Kadya Molodowsky's (one of Celia Dropkin's contemporaries) objective to "reconfigure" rather than "erase her inheritance" in her *froyen-lider* [Women-Poems] (Hellerstein, "The Art of Sex" 190, 192). This approach is closer to the heart of Dropkin's strategy, I hesitate to affirm the term "reconfiguration," for the need to reconfigure something (desire in this case) implies that the thing must change itself or be changed to become legible within a static, enduring system. As this project will contend, Dropkin does assert myriad images of desire throughout her works. She continually revises the strategies by which she speaks on desire. However, the permanent coexistence of these images as published poems preserves the notion that to Dropkin, inherited desire is a singular impulse. Dropkin only refracts this impulse through a growing vocabulary of images that are images of and within the "culture" itself. This strategy identifies desire with the system, asserting its inextricability, inevitability, and necessity within Yiddish-Jewish culture.

The power of Celia Dropkin's poems is in her destabilization of the constituent parts of the cultural principles and not her outright rejection of cultural principles in their constant negotiations of the dynamics of desire (i.e. purity and repression). Put simply, rejecting culture supports both its dominance and the conservative view of cultural law as a static category. Rather than assuming an oppositional mindset, then, Dropkin's poems posit that since culture principles are generated by the actions of people and informed by the shifting interpretations of dynamics, cultural principles are vulnerable to constant regeneration. One need not acquiesce to a particular principle for it to inform action; to rebel from something is still to act within it. Instead, poems such as "Mayne Mame"

feature Dropkin's speaker as they internalize and exploit the cultural principles afforded to them in claiming desire for themselves. Any assertion that freedom is synonymous with irreligiosity, while provocative, does not align with Dropkin's aim; since the principles of Judaism generate the power that Dropkin claims, she must generate desire through the language available to her (a Yiddish inflected with Jewish morality principles) to speak on desire and consequently, on herself.

Hellerstein's criticism is useful to this paper insofar as it establishes helpful context and illuminates the complications that arise when we embed desire in Dropkin's Jewish-Yiddish context. Her approach is emblematic of a type of feminist approach with the mission of asserting a liberated female desire. Liberating female desire is a noble pursuit, however when applied here, removes Dropkin's poetry from the frameworks that it depends on and dilutes the type of internal resistance that characterizes her regard of desire.

Dropkin does not reduce desire to a force as simple as a hedonistic drive toward pleasure and away from pain. Her poems rather maintain that desire can be, and often is, a force of destruction. Dropkin's claim on desire is not necessarily a claim on liberated pleasure. Claiming pleasure is an inconsistent compartmentalization of a desire that Dropkin proposes animates the entire self. Desire, in Dropkin's poems, is a vastly more complicated and pluralistic force as Dropkin wrestles with the subversion of pleasure, pain and the socially-enforced moral imperative therein. Dropkin's poetry does not operate within a neat binary wherein the pursuit and consummation of desire brings pleasure and its denial, pain. Dropkin rather steepes many of her desirous poems in "heavy suffering," as she remarks in "Oh, Secretive Life" (6). Dropkin's admission that desirous

thoughts and behaviors sometimes lead to adverse ends but paired with her continued pursuit of desire suggest again an impossibility (or unwillingness) to exist without desire.

Celia Dropkin maintains a connection with her desire in spite of the potential of suffering. She is critical of desire and its elision. Her speakers engage cognitively, as in “The Acrobat” as a performer who dare not show her audience the resistant truth of her psyche, and physically, when the speaker of “And Thirstily I Drink” indulges her desires on the body of her unconscious love object. Dropkin’s constant renegotiations and reinterpretations of desire between poems suggest that her desire is never sated; neither consummation nor liberation are the goals of her poetics. As I continue to frame my approach to Celia Dropkin’s attempt to voice female desire within a conservative Jewish culture, we should also understand her poems through what they do not do: these poems do not tell one how to desire, or even attempt to define desire as one particular thing. Dropkin’s desire is inclusive rather than exclusive, voicing the desire that exists inherently in processes both as quotidian and mundane as spectating and as ritualized and sacred as enacting Jewish modesty principles.

In exploring these ideas, I split my project into three chapters which roughly outline a progression from regarding to enacting desire. Constantly using desire to prod at the repressive boundaries of culture, the progressive structure of this project mirrors Dropkin’s attempts to integrate desire into an embodied, enacted self. The first chapter focuses on how desire operates within and between the insistence of Jewish religious images in Dropkin’s poems, which, as Hellerstein rightly draws out in her study of “Mayne Mame,” distills itself in a meditation on *tsniedik*. I continue to see modesty affect Dropkin’s work as she employs religious symbols and images to begin questioning

and subverting the role of Jewish teachings in her navigation of desire. I proceed to a second chapter on performance and power with a particular focus on Dropkin's deft negotiations between imaging the self as both the subject and object of desire. This chapter focuses on the complexities of existing as an embodied self and delves deeply into the dependence on, yet exploitation of the subject-object binary. Finally, we see Dropkin inhabit her desire in the final chapter, focusing on its action and affect unto others. This chapter focuses on how Dropkin's poems exist in physical and mental space. I particularly distinguish how Dropkin interacts with and embodies desire differently between public and private spaces.

A current of desire runs through Celia Dropkin's work, acting as a thread through which Dropkin weaves eroticism and religion, performance and power, embodiment and transcendence. With the weaving of these three sections, we progressively approach Dropkin's vision of acted and embodied desire. As we have and will continue to explore, Dropkin's poetic manipulations of these complicated and often contradictory dynamics imbue the Jewish woman with a sense of subversive power within a patriarchal social structure. Dropkin accomplishes this feat not by constructing but exploiting the existing frameworks that shape and dictate female desire. Celia Dropkin poetry asks, time and time again, what it means when we give ourselves up to openly desiring. She does not offer one, but many potential, and at times contradictory answers that I will now begin to explore. My hope is that through the subsequent chapters not only will we get closer to understanding Celia and how she navigated her desire but also that we will turn our critical eye inward, questioning our own connections to desire and how we both resist and proliferate the structures therein. Through this paper, we will come to see desire as a

constant process and one that, even when suppressed, continues to be an active participant in our lives. I do not claim that this project will dispel the nebulosity of desire. Instead, what we should take out of this project is individual empowerment to define desire on more than our own terms. I hope to empower us to prod at the bounds we are given and to question the frameworks that we accept. Many more possibilities of desire exist than we know, right under our noses. All it takes to examine them is a little resistance and a determined pen.

Chapter 1.

As I begin to explore how Celia Dropkin denaturalize principles, binaries, and phenomena that cohere around desire in the ensuing chapters, it is essential to note that none of my analyses are meant to subsume any others within this project. Though we progress through images of desire, these images of desire continue to coexist as a body of poetry. I argue that Dropkin presents her poems as a collection of alternatives that inform each other, rather than revisions or exclusions. Along with this clarification around coexistence and constant flux is the additional note that the order by which I draw out particular poems is not consistent with the poems' appearances in *the Acrobat*. Moreover, the translators of *The Acrobat* curate and reorder poems originally published in *In Heysn Vint*, Celia Dropkin's original Yiddish volume of published poetry. In addition, this project borrows from anthologies wherein only a small handful of Dropkin's poems appear, their piecemeal anthologizing again affirming each poem's individual viability. The poems remain affective whether they exist and individually, collectively, or within particular sets and series.

The compounding of coexisting images of desire resists the naturalization of a singular application of desire, which otherwise enables a conservative, repressive consciousness to prevail. Dropkin's efforts in turn introduce a pluralistic consciousness around desire that inherently resists these ends, while still employing images that originate within the culture she challenges. I structure this chapter, like the paper at large, as a progression toward articulating, embodying and eventually, enacting desire. While Dropkin at times uses consummation as a locus of desire, desire *itself* as a singular impulse and *not* identifiable as a process toward eventual consummation. It is nonetheless

useful to use these three stages of articulating, embodying, and enacting the impulse of desire to analyze how Dropkin resists the singularity of repression. As I state above, the first stage in the process of creating a pluralistic consciousness around desire is articulating it. Before Dropkin can articulate desire, however, she must first speak to her acquisition of desire; in her poems, Dropkin sees desire as hereditary, and explores her speaker's inheritance in "Mayne Mame" ["My Mother"].

Dropkin's "My Mother" is an ideal starting point for this discussion as it focuses on both biological and cultural origins of Dropkin's desire. As noted in my introduction, allusions to culture will indicate a distinctly Jewish consciousness which is inflected by spiritual and religious teachings. Exploring inheritance through the intersection between biology and culture, we will begin to see how it is impossible to extricate Dropkin's articulations of desire from these cultural principles. Dropkin symbolizes the inextricability of desire from culture by continuously alluding, both implicitly and explicitly, to the Jewish modesty ideal, *tsniedik*. These constant allusions suggest an alternative from the Hellerstein's "freeing desire from culture" which I discuss in my introduction, instead coming to a conclusion wherein desire depends on culture for a vocabulary to describe it (Hellerstein 192). Once we establish the dependence of desire on a cultural vocabulary through this analysis of "My Mother," we will continue to see Dropkin internalize and manipulate this dependence, pushing and pulling at the limits of both culture and embodied desire to resist the naturalization of repressive order that she is implicated in.

Using this poem as an introduction to understanding how Dropkin sees herself internalizing desire, we will then move on to the next section of this chapter. This latter

section focuses on poems, including “O, Secretive Life,” “Suck,” and “Adam,” which apply destructive articulations of desire to both Jewish and Christian biblical stories and frameworks. Dropkin inflects these poems with issues of consent, which are central to any discussions of desire: Dropkin draws out consent’s attendant dynamics such as shame, purity, accountability, and transgression within these visions of desire. Variably ambivalent iterations of consent complement warring imaginations of desire. Using destructive, violating visions of desire, Dropkin challenges repressive patriarchal frameworks which suggests not only the inextricability of one from the other, but also the viability of desire within these frameworks to expose accepted contradictions and paradoxes. Ultimately, Dropkin explores lapses of consent to interrogate the insufficiency and instability of singular approaches to desire—and its tendency toward exploitation—to articulate the necessity for alternative methods of pursuing desire in an otherwise repressive culture.

To begin my analysis, let’s look at “My Mother” as translated in *The Acrobat*:

My Mother

My mother,
left a twenty-two-year-old
widow with two small kids—
modesty resolved
to become No One’s wife.
Her days and years drew quietly on
like a thin candle burning.
My mother became No One’s wife,
but all of the days and years and nights
of sighs, sighs from her youth
and tenderness, from her longing blood—
I sucked them in deep and soaked them up
into my adolescent heart.
So my mother’s concealed, hot ache
rushed, as from an underground spring,
freely in me. And now her holy,
latent lust, spurts frankly from me.

What we see here is a poem in two parts. The first half of the poem focuses on Dropkin's speaker's regard of her mother's experience internalizing a repressive singular desire that prioritizes patriarchal gender roles. The second, however, analyzes the transformation of this desire once inherited by the speaker. Dropkin's treatment of the biological inheritance of desire particularly leans on culture to maintain coherence. Dropkin emphasizes the culturally Jewish tenet of matrilineal inheritance, through which she cements the existence of desire in the body as culturally generated and proliferated.

Dropkin emphasizes matrilinealism as a preliminary resistance to the patriarchal hegemony by removing the father figure from the poem (in this case through his death). Dropkin displaces him from the poem entirely, solely alluding to the existence of a father figure through the positionality of the mother. She only regards him by the effect of his removal, as she denotes the position of the speaker's mother as being "left a . . . widow" (2-3). He is otherwise not alluded to, either by name or pronoun. Along with displacing the male figure's nurturing of the speaker, Dropkin further displaces his relational and genetic importance in constructing and embodying desire.

Relational displacement of the male is a rudimentary form of Dropkin using desire as resistance to a patriarchal reading of desire. No longer does Dropkin's mother depend on the male as an object upon whom she is forced by modesty principles to direct her desire. His removal does not, however, free her from the repressive structure of the marriage institution. Dropkin asserts that following this loss, the speaker's mother "modesty resolved / to become No One's wife" (4-5). It is essential to note that this line is where Dropkin uses, in the poem's original Yiddish, the term *tsniesdik* which I draw out earlier as symbolic of the culture's hold on Dropkin's poetic consciousness. This

modest resolution has a dual function as the central action of the poem wherein Dropkin's speaker muses about her inherited desire, as it also begins to inform our reading of desire exceeding its place within institutional matrimony, and therefore as a symptom of resistance.

Though the end of the mother's modest resolution adheres to a conservative suppression of desire, Dropkin's assertion that a *resolution* is required indicates that the decision to mute her desire is counter to her instincts (4). Moreover, the mother distorts her role of a wife by occupying it without its necessary counterpart, therefore questioning the role's interaction with desire itself; she directs her resolve unto the empty category of "No One," rather than a discrete spouse. The speaker's mother only ironically engages in the marriage institution, withholding her desire from its 'proper' place within the repressive marriage institution. We must distinguish that being married to "No One" is distinct from being married to someone, which is distinct from being unmarried. Remaining unmarried would be a direct refusal to participate in the category and thus, would constitute a freeing from culture. However, Dropkin ultimately directs the mother's modesty upon nothingness, which creates a paradox out of the mother's perversion of marriage. This paradox creates space to interrogate the role of desire within an otherwise traditional institution.

By maintaining the mother's obligation to the institution and the modesty therein, however, Dropkin enables her speaker to access and discuss her desire in coherent terms. The subversion of the empty marriage ultimately amounts to a preliminary, or conservative resistance to *tsniesdik*. This iteration of desire as resistance is less overt from other resistances that Dropkin's speakers engage in but provides a useful jumping

off point from which these proceeding poems can build. These analyses also create useful context for Dropkin's ensuing observations about her speaker's own relationship with desire that come to light in the second half of the poem.

Following a second allusion to her mother's subversive matrimonial role, Dropkin's speaker reasons with her inheritance of "all the days and years and nights / of sighs, sighs from her youth" which (as subject to matrilineal inheritance) she absorbs from her mother's "longing blood" (9-10, 11). These "sighs" are Dropkin's first explicit articulations of desire within this poem. As "sighs," Dropkin renders the expressions of desire as expulsions that are not directed upon a discrete object, and silent. This usage provides a means of externalizing desire without behaving immodestly. Despite of their interpersonal ineffectiveness, Dropkin asserts that, as a type of breath, desire is an inevitable product of the body. In fact, as "blood," desire is the very property that gives both of their bodies life and is therefore necessary to their continued existence.

Within discussions of inheriting and expressing desire is the conclusion that the only thing that Dropkin speaks to inheriting biologically *is desire*. She elides the presence of all other genetically inherited characteristics, both internal and external, de facto asserting desire's primacy as *the* constituent property controlled by matrilineal inheritance. This elevation of desire at the expense of maintaining coherent cultural ideals is a first, preliminary act of using desire as resistance to a singular, repressive vision of female desire.

To interrogate the inheritance of desire further, let's see how the speaker's inherited desire manifests similarly and differently to her mother's. Distinct from this previous iteration, Dropkin's speaker describes her how her inherited desire acts: "her

holy, / latent lust, spurts frankly from me” (16-17). We should first note that the desire that the speaker inherits, “holy, / latent lust,” is equivalent to its past iteration within her mother as a “concealed, hot ache,” just expressed in different terms (14). Maintaining desire’s latency maintains its modesty. Along with this maintained modesty, too, is the specification that it is “holy,” and thus a product of divinity.

Like her mother, Dropkin’s speaker externalizes expressions of desire, though not through the “sighs” of her mother. Dropkin’s speaker’s desire instead “spurts frankly,” suggesting shameless ejaculation of male orgasm. The inconsistent imagery between the internalization of a “holy, / latent lust” and its visceral, physical display creates a contradiction in which female desire is at once concealed and expressed. The contradiction between these images as well as the gendered inversion of desire’s expression suggests the insufficiency of desire’s available images in articulating a coherent vision of female desire. In continuing to question the lack of available images of female pleasure despite its inextricability from cultural terms, Dropkin defers to recognizable sites of cultural domination to voice desire.

One such instance occurs in “O, Secretive Life,” which Dropkin structures as a series of questions. We can even regard questioning as the first step toward resistance; before a structure or order can be rejected, altered, or adjusted it must first be interrogated. One might even see desire as a set of questions, constantly refining what one wants and expects out of their desirous actions or thoughts. This structure is already a resistance in itself and distinct from the previous structure of desire that we’ve discussed, which features a self-contained, self-reflective narrative. “O, Secretive Life” questions the existence of an inevitable and singular outcome of desire by asking two rhetorical

questions. Denying answers to her questions, Dropkin necessitates extrapolation to any number of potential answers. Enabling this multiplicity is a strategy toward articulating desire that is indispensable to my analysis. It persists throughout my project as Dropkin continuously pokes holes in the allegedly foregone conclusions of a singular imagination of desire.

O, Secretive Life

What reconstructed my limbs to be so ugly
 and sucks my marrow and sucks my blood
 and bores through my breasts?
 Why do I dream so often of this
 bed, the Inquisition bed,
 where I lie stretched out in heavy suffering.
 Slowly, slowly, you grow and grow
 in me, O, secretive life.

Upon a first reading, it almost appears as if the first question is mistranslated. Despite the verbiage, including “reconstruct,” “suck,” or “bore,” suggesting a second human actor, Dropkin conspicuously attributes the violent actions performed against the speaker to a “What” and not a “Who” (1). Dropkin’s use of the interrogative “What” alludes to the presence of an exceptional force that exceeds the human and approaches the divine.

Alternatively, this “What” may allude to something base and animalistic. The inability to parse this whether this reference refers to a divine or base entity confuse the morality of desire acting upon her, which Dropkin may in turn use to confuse the morality of her speaker articulating her own desire. As a nonhuman entity, Dropkin makes it unclear whether or not this “What” that acts upon her is subject to the same morality principles that confine herself. Even so, Dropkin perverts human desire by accepting a position as the love object of something that is not entirely human.

Regardless of their humanity, the secondary actor still has a visceral effect upon the speaker, altering and contorting the shape of the speaker's body by "reconstructing my limbs to be so ugly" (1). As a retributive action for a presumably imagined transgression, the acting entity leaves the speaker's body physically marked as something "so ugly" and visibly impure. The first moment I draw out in Dropkin's poetry that approaches consummation, we cannot ignore this moment. In addition to being subject to this "reconstruction," this poem features the speaker bitten and sucked, only receiving the destructive actions of the other. Once we progress to analyzing Dropkin's "Adam," however, the directionality of destruction will reverse and persist through many other readings of Dropkin's poetic resistances. While I maintain that consummation is only incidental to imaginations of desire, this is the first of a series of consummations that Dropkin renders as destructive, adverse interactions. Though adverse, Dropkin sees destruction as a valid outcome, and one that is necessary in the pluralizing of the vocabulary of desire.

The "What" figure penetrates the speaker when it "sucks my marrow and sucks my blood / and bores through my breasts" (2-3). Displacing the image of the romantic heart in favor of the erotic breast, Dropkin regards the retributive consummation as something entirely carnal. We can read this visceral description of her physicality as a protective strategy: the anatomy of her body, including her "limbs" "breast" and "marrow" are stained by this violent sex act, but her heart (containing the "longing blood" of her desire), or even her soul, remain untouched and uncorrupted.

However, the following question, beginning with the interrogative "Why," implicates the speaker in the poem's violent act. Dropkin's speaker "dream[s] so often of

this / bed, the Inquisition bed, / where I lie stretched out in heavy suffering,” suggesting that she understands and even directs her desire toward her own punishment (4-6). The “Inquisition bed” image is quite remarkable for the perversion of its cultural connotation. Like the crucifixion imagery that we will soon explore in “Suck,” Dropkin here employs the explicitly Christian allusion to the Inquisition to describe the speaker’s punishment. As the Inquisition alludes to the historical quashing of heresy and forcing of conversion by Spanish Catholics, the punishment occurring in “the Inquisition bed” defines this poetic violence as distinctly religious retribution, and particularly, retribution for some sort of religious deviation. As a cultural Jew in this poem, the use of this Christian imagery renders punishment inevitable regardless of any transgressive desire or sexuality. This allusion therefore asserts the inevitability of punishment regardless of faithfulness to Jewish cultural law, including faithfulness to *tsniesdik*. This inevitable punishment contradictorily allows Dropkin to speak on her desire or her “dreams” of this erotic punishment, as its unavoidability makes any adherence Jewish cultural principles irrelevant (4).

Implicit in her recurring “dream” of this domination is a perverse pleasure that aligns with her ambivalence to cultural tenets. The speaker longs to be dominated by an outside doctrine, expressing dissatisfaction with the laws that govern her. This does not suggest a longing for any conversion process, though. Dreaming of lying “stretched out in heavy suffering” upon this bed, the speaker longs to maintain her disobedience and to receive the erotic punishment since punishment it is the only culturally coherent expression of desire that she may engage with (6). Moreover, Dropkin’s speaker’s willingness to engage with this punishment is clear through her “stretched out” pose,

making herself more vulnerable to the entity that acts upon her and again pushing the reading of expectation or acceptance of punishment.

The structure of this question, like its content, is also compelling as we attempt to parse Dropkin's meaning. Phrased as a question and beginning with the interrogative "Who," it does not end with a question mark. Operating under the assumption that the removal of the question mark in this English translation is purposeful (Dropkin's original Yiddish includes a question mark at the end of this line), the translators challenge a literal reading of the poem. The removal of the question mark proposes a rhetorical reading of the question, insinuating that the speaker knows why she continues to dream of "the Inquisition bed," but censors herself. The speaker's censoring, despite having already spoken on her complicity in the imagined transgression its subsequent punishment, allows her to retain her modesty by refusing to affirm desire for this outcome. Therefore, Dropkin locates a loophole in forming a statement by manipulating the structure and function of questioning, subverting conventional structures to speak on her perverse desires.

Following this series of questions, Dropkin concludes the poem with a mystifying, vague, mysterious sentence: "Slowly, slowly, you grow / in me, O, secretive life," Dropkin conveys a strikingly similar sentiment to that of "I Sing You," which we will explore in the next chapter (You didn't sow a child in me, / you sowed yourself. / Now you grow in me, every day / more defined, larger" (1-4)) (7-8). As she often does, Dropkin maintains certain ambiguity in this line. While this final line informs the repressive, singular procreative reading of consummation by alluding to a gestation that results from her punishment, what grows in her is not the acceptable child. Rather, this

retributive gestation furthers Dropkin's resistant ends, as this "secretive life" which grows in her remains vague. Whether it is the continued recurrence of this perverted dream, the awareness of the loopholes in speaking of desire, or another iteration of an outward facing consummation, Dropkin's speaker withholds her articulations of desire. Once again, she maintains her secret, still retaining some vestige of the modesty that originally allows the speaker to transgress.

Dropkin thus establishes how modesty and repression ideals take hold in physiological inheritance as well as how her speakers internalize and interrogate these desires. We can now look toward the violent eroticism in "Adam" as another mode of resistance. Though we've largely examined religious consciousness and frameworks, we have yet to see a religious Jewish story or image within Dropkin's poetry. In "Adam," Dropkin uses an Old Testament story of the Garden of Eden in order to explore how desire exists within and interacts with Jewish culture:

Adam

Spoiled,
 you had been fussed over
 by many women's hands
 when I came across you,
 young Adam. And before I pressed
 my lips to you
 you pleaded, your face paler
 and more gentle
 than the gentlest lily:
Don't bite, don't bite.
 I saw that teethmarks covered
 your entire body. Trembling,
 I bit into you—you breathed
 over me through thick nostrils
 and edged up to me
 like the hot horizon to a field.

This particular religious allusion is distinct from that which I have discussed in “O, Secretive Life” and that I will explore in “Suck,” as the cultural frameworks it depends on are included in the Hebrew Bible rather than Christian doctrine and history. The Hebrew Bible is a useful setting for such explorations due to its retributive themes and divine lessons which occur in the form of punishment. It may appear curious then, as someone who writes out of a distinctly Yiddish-Jewish culture, that she thus far avoids direct allusion to its doctrine despite inserting its ideals (*tsniesdik*). As a Yiddish writer who writes to an exclusively Yiddish-speaking (and therefore, Jewish) audience, utilizing many distinct Jewish images in her poems would likely not garner the same when her goal is to publish poems of religious resistance; culturally literate readers of the poems would likely be more versed with and able to offer viable contentions to her alternative readings of religious frameworks and legitimizations of female desire.

In this poem, subtle, yet significant displacements of the Adam and Eve story create grounds wherein Dropkin resists the typical direction of sexuality (and sexual violence) to distort the repressive, singular reading of desire. By deferring to this specific religious story, Dropkin illuminates a scenario within her own culture wherein a female actor expresses an alternative, albeit violent and problematic desire in the form of sexual violation.

Dropkin’s use of the Garden of Eden wrestles with female desire through one of its only acknowledged images, which is notably an image of transgression and corruption. Regardless, Dropkin exploits this allegory and creates a working vocabulary with which to articulate female sexuality. Within her use of the Garden of Eden story, Dropkin condenses the constituent images of the garden. She combines the figures of Eve and the

serpent, and Adam and the forbidden fruit. This revision of the Garden of Even story affirms a problematic cultural imagination wherein we identify female desire with original symbol of sin, and maleness with that of indulgence and knowledge. Therefore, female desire may only be accessed through the male, and through a sinful act.

Moreover, combining the Eve figure with the serpent asserts that female perversion is internal rather than coerced, as the snake who in the original myth persuades Eve to indulge in her desire already exists within the speaker herself. Dropkin also associates her body with snakes in her poem, "My Hands," but now rather than small "parts of my body" being serpentine, the fusion between Eve and the serpent absorbs and internalizes sinfulness (1, 5-6). Moreover, condensing the figures of Eve and the serpent also means that the speaker's desirous corruption of "Adam" becomes a characteristic impulse rather than the product of a trick or coercion by an outside actor. Doubly corruptive, the biblical symbol for impurity *and* transgression, the female speaker transgresses bounds of coherent desire within this retelling of the Garden of Even story and embraces the corruption of female sexuality as necessary in articulating a coherent, pluralistic desire.

While we have just explored an instance wherein Dropkin's speaker was punished for her desire in "O, Secretive Life," she writes in "Adam" an imagined encounter wherein she positions the female speaker as an unpunished sexual aggressor. This poem directly questions consent, but contrary to the previous poem we looked at, we receive this narrative from the perpetrator's perspective. Through our continuing discussion of Dropkin's poetics of desire, it will soon not be so jarring to see Dropkin expressing aggressive, violating actions. However, these later iterations of sexual transgression will generally imply consent, or at least marked ambivalence of violence conducted upon the

love object's body (whether the love object be the speaker or the poetic 'other'). In poems like "O, Secretive Life," though the process of consummation is destructive and violent, the speaker implies her consent through her admission to her longing dreams for punishment. She ultimately does not express resistance to being intruded upon or penetrated, especially when she accepts that she has transgressed.

Again, in this poem, as well as in "And Thirstily I Drink" and "I'd Like to See," which we will explore in the third chapter, Dropkin conveys a lapse in consent that features a violated *male love object*. This lapse in consent is unexpected, as literature rarely explicitly delve into issues of male consent. While the two poems I mention above also include questionable moments of male consent, this poem is unique in that it features the only vocal refusal of consent to engage in erotic acts. While the inversion of the conventional direction of violated consent still does present something of a plurality of desire in Dropkin's poems, it is imperative to address its problematic reading,

The moment of violation occurs approximately halfway through the poem when the speaker does not honor the explicit, "plead[ing]" refusal in this poem, "*Don't bite, don't bite*" (7, 10). Without hesitating, she instead "bit[es] into" Adam, exceeding mere aggression and regenerating her desire into something nefarious, exploitative, coercive, and violent. This poem also differs from the previous poem we explored in its lack of accountability for sexual transgression. While other may present desire as an oppositional force, there is a particular malice toward the male recipient of desire in "Adam" that does Dropkin does not make obvious in others. While it would be easy to suggest that this is a revenge poem for the punishments acted upon Dropkin's speaker, I hesitate to affirm that it is that simple, particularly when accounting for the perverse pleasure that Dropkin's

speaker has already taken with her punishment in “O, Secretive Life.” Instead, I suggest that this poem seeks to complicate not only who can dole out punishment for cultural transgressions, but also expand the bounds of which figures Dropkin can write as transgressive, and how.

The alleged transgression of the archetypal “Adam” is complicated. He is “spoiled,” “fussed over / by many women’s hands,” though it never becomes clear whether his spoiling occurs *through the fussing of these women* or originates from some prior interaction that the action of this poem is merely retribution for (1-3). The Ruth Whitman translation in *An Anthology of Modern Yiddish Poetry* contributes to the complication to place the original transgression, placing probable blame on the male object for his own spoiling (an inversion of typical shaming of women of similar ‘spoiling’). Therein, Whitman begins the poem with “You, spoiled,” which removes blame from the female aggressor by passing it off to the male victim (1).

Taking a closer look at how verbiage of the first line changes between translations also leads toward an ambiguous understanding of the women’s action. *The Acrobat* translators regard the actions of the women’s hands as “fussed,” whereas Whitman suggests that they have “fondled” this Adam (Jones, et al. 2, Whitman 2). Not only does the discrepancy between translations confuse the action of the poem, but it also confuses the role of the multiple ‘Eve’ figures. *The Acrobat* translation suggests a “fuss[ing]” perversion on the maternal nurturing quality that is expected in women. Alternatively, the Whitman translation implies the reading that is closer to my reading of the speaker as a sexual violator. Both translations contribute, though, to the reading of pluralistic female desire. Following the divergence of the verbiage in this line, the two translations continue

on to the same end. The rest of the line disembodies the women's hands, somewhat excusing this perversion, or violation by compartmentalizing the female body and divorcing the physical actor from the woman who performs the violence. In addition to compartmentalizing the female body to displace blame from violating female desire, Dropkin renders ambivalent the severe violation of the female actor by inserting "many women" into the poem who have transgressed before the speaker (3).

In addition to the inversion of sexual purity that we see in this chapter, Dropkin subverts the purity ideal within *tsniesdik*, as Adam still remains sexually viable following his spoiling, though his value is diminished. The diminution of his purity creates the conditions to excuse continued violence toward him and indulge further in perverted desire. Moreover, this poem speaks of purity on a binary scale. "Adam" is simply "spoiled," with no further regard given to the extent, severity, or reversibility of his condition (1).

Returning to the effect of translation disparities, differing translations also confuse the notion of how consenting the male object is. The Howe, Wisse, and Shmeruk translation in *The Penguin Book of Modern Yiddish Verse* suggests a markedly ambivalent reading, being the one that had omitted the spoiling aspect and describing the consummation through a mutual action, "we kissed," whereas other translators suggest readings wherein the speaker "pressed / my lips to you," (conspicuously *not translated as 'yours,'* a reductive contrast with how we will see Dropkin describes the female body here as piecemeal and compartmentalized, as in "My Hands") and "lay my mouth on yours," removing male agency in the consummation of the desire (Howe, et al. 5, Jones, et al. 5-6 & Whitman 5). Despite the possible reciprocation of the kiss in this translation,

all available translations maintain that Adam “pleaded” and even “begged” for mercy from the central biting action of the poem, which is a perversion of the kiss. Though Dropkin previously alludes to her “lips” which imply an impending kiss, the resistance from Adam does now allow this action to express the mutuality of a kiss. Rather, she must reconfigure her kiss as a bite.

This poem essentially consists of a vision of female desire without incurring shame—shame that is naturalized through the proliferation of conservative modesty principals. However, the vision Dropkin presents here depends on violence and violation and transferring the shame unto the male rather than disposing with it altogether. This is incredibly problematic when thinking of Dropkin’s goal of illuminating legitimate alternatives for female desire to exist in Jewish culture. This poem suggests that when enacted, there is no place for female desire to go except for manifesting through violence.

Dropkin furthers discussion of desire’s potentially destructive ends in her poem, “Suck,” wherein she continues to associate desire with explicit religious stories and figures. As one of the poems containing the most explicitly religious images in *The Acrobat* collection, Dropkin asserts desire and religion as both identical and ubiquitous:

Suck

You revel, I revel,
in us reveals the God
who ruins everything,
who won’t forbid.

In the first stanza, Dropkin equalizes the human and the divine by repeatedly invoking the same verb, “revel,” to describe the actions of her speaker, the love object (the “you” in the poem), and God (1). This equalization begs the question of whether Dropkin deifies humanity (and their reveling excess of desire) or condemns God’s reveling to a

sinful earthly realm. As God performs the act “in us,” it appears that Dropkin’s speaker brings God down to Earth (2). This strategy sees Dropkin not only removing God from his role of judging religious crimes, but simultaneously writes him in as another transgressor God. In his reveling, God hypocritically lacks the purity or modesty that biblical *tsniedik*, a principle allegedly handed down by this spoiled God, expects of the speaker.

With God’s fall from grace, there is no deity left to dole out punishment, affectively leaving the speaker of the poem to assert a masochistic desire for religious retribution to be committed against herself. Since the creator of religious law neglects to follow or adjudicate his own law, Dropkin leaves the speaker of the poem to demand and institute her own punishment for her indulgence. However, she does not demand for the punishment of the other parties complicit in collective sin. Dropkin thus creates a narrative wherein the speaker holds her moral standing to standards that not even God obeys. In fact, the speaker of the poem is the only reveler who is punished for an action that the love object and God both take part in. She demands her own punishment; a crucifixion not pushed upon her by outside forces:

Nail my hands,
 nail my feet to a cross:
 burn me, be burned,
 take all my ardor

and leave me deeply ashamed:
 suck it from me and throw it away,
 become estranged, alienated
 and go your own way.

The complicity in self-condemnation asserts again that the speaker is not free from culture. However, God’s transgressions, which, if one lives in God’s image, then

sanctions those very transgressions and dilutes the pleasure that is taken in the sinful excess of revelry. So the speaker must then one step beyond demanding her crucifixion by not proceeding to martyr herself, demanding the punisher to “take all my ardor,” and ultimately “go your own way,” rendering her crucifixion unsymbolic, and instead a necessary and functional means to an end of restoring balance through the removal of her desire (8, 12). However, the only other present entities, the love object and God, are also guilty in this crime, which means the only figures available to punish her for her indulgence in desire are also complicit. This creates a vicious, but necessary cycle to sustain the power of her Jewish culture wherein punishing others for their transgression becomes incentivized. The pious punisher then is perceived as a champion of morality, an entity who is closer to the divine (regardless of their other actions).

Now that we’ve seen the process of accessing desire through Jewish principles at work, my hope is that we see more clearly what enables Dropkin to inhabit desire. More specifically, I hope that we can see that it there is no *one thing*, but rather multiple series of displacements whether those be subversions of modest physiology or biblical frameworks, that allow Dropkin to embody her desire and test the boundaries of what it means to desire. Refracting erotic desire through distinct frameworks, she responds to the different angles that these refractions take, creating multiple distinct iterations of female desire, all of which become destructive for the receiving party. This is obviously problematic, as Dropkin is only able to render an image of female desire in action that is ultimately unsustainable and that always leads to either her own or another’s destruction. In the next chapter, we will move on to navigations of Dropkin’s subject position as an agent of desire and examine if her imaginations as a subject or an object of desire allow

for a more legitimate, sustainable imagination for desire if it cannot exist entirely through cultural images.

Chapter 2.

Now that I've established how Dropkin imagines the inheritance of desire, I will further develop how Dropkin sees embodied desire informs her speakers being and interacting with others. This chapter advances the ideas I present in the last chapter, including the positioning of desire as an inherent part of the physical body. As part of the physical body, Dropkin regards desire as a legitimate source of power that can exploit and be exploited. By a legitimate source of power, I mean that which Dropkin justifies by its inherent presence within the human body, as in "My Mother." I will continue to support this formulation within this chapter, as well, particularly when I introduce analysis of "My Hands." Exploitation is another concept that is not new to this project. Two poems that we have just considered, "O, Secretive Life" and "Adam," deal heavily in exploitation as it occurs through religious frameworks. Like in the previous chapter, the exploitations I will analyze here complicate binary frameworks and illuminate Dropkin's use of desire as a form of resistance.

Harkening back to my construction of this project as a progression, this step in the progression concerns the embodiment of desire. I investigate embodiment through subject and object positionality and will use the following analyses to question the conception of subject and object positionality as a binary wherein the subject is powerful and the object, powerless. I begin my analysis with Dropkin's "Di Tsirkus Dame," the multiple translations of which serve as the basis for this chapter. Dropkin questions the phenomenon of subject-object relation through this poem by imagining the binary through the ostensibly simple relationship between performer and spectator. However, Dropkin complicates her poem by expressing the complexity of performance through the

internality of Dropkin's performer. As I take on this internal perspective, I will begin to expose the latent complexity and ambiguity that renders illusory the supposed reality of performance. In turn, Dropkin destabilizes the conception of a naturalized subject-object binary and the hierarchized power therein.

Once we discuss Dropkin's dissolution of the power structures of performer-spectator relations, I will turn to "My Hands," and delve into the myriad, contradictory images that Dropkin uses to construct the physical body. I will investigate how, alternatively to many of Dropkin's other poems, "My Hands" occurs entirely internally and only in regard to the speaker's own body. Dropkin does not image any poetic 'other' outside of the speaker's own body, rendering the self both the subject and object of the text as the speaker inhabits the physicality of her desire. Dropkin consequently destabilizes the notion that the subject-object binary, and even whether the inclusion of a poetic 'other' is necessary to inhabit desire. I proceed to "I Sing You," wherein I continue to discuss how sustained ambiguities of desire through the process of withholding essential information generates power even in a destructive and/or doomed encounter. I will then conclude this chapter by investigating "He and She," which is a unique poem among Dropkin's catalogue in that she writes in the third person. This unfamiliar authorial distance, paired with a mediation on the necessity for symbiosis between variably empowered elements of the same system, again challenges the notion of subject-object relationality along a simple binary.

By illuminating a matrix of embodied power relationships, Dropkin asserts the impossibility of upholding a binarized power structure between empowered and disempowered actors. Dropkin thereby suggests the insufficiency and instability of such a

system. Rather, embodying desire takes myriad forms which integrate aspects of both subject- and objectivity. In progressing toward an integration of desire, Dropkin relays the importance of harnessing instability and flux within one's desirous embodiment, maintaining the viability of familiar power relationships in spite of their denaturalization.

With all of this mapped out, let's begin our analysis of the complications of relationality in "Di Tsirkus Dame," translated here as "The Acrobat":

The Acrobat

I am an acrobat,
and I dance between daggers
erected in the ring
tips up.
My lithe body—barely
touching the blades—
eludes death-by-falling.

They hold their breath
when they watch me dance,
and there is always
someone praying for me.
The tips shine in a fiery
circle—no one knows
how much I'd like to slip.

I'm tired of dancing between you,
cold steel daggers.
I want—my blood warming your bare tips—
to fall.

There is little to take for granted when reading Celia Dropkin's "The Acrobat," even as just the title is concerned. As I've noted, when analyzing Celia Dropkin's poems in English, not only are the translations themselves revealing, but also the discrepancies between translations. While I do not wish to be bogged down by the problems of translation in this chapter, translation discrepancies in this poem and "My Hands" prove

useful for garnering further understandings of Dropkin's poetic resistances. I will still primarily focus on translations done by Faith Jones, Jennifer Kronovet, and Samuel Solomon in *The Acrobat*, but this chapter uses translations by Howard Schwartz in *Voices Within the Ark: The Modern Jewish Poets*, Ruth Whitman in *An Anthology of Modern Yiddish Poetry*, and Grace Schulman in *The Penguin Book of Modern Yiddish Verse*, which I will indicate via footnote.

Looking first at the "The Acrobat," I find that it is helpful to first situate this translation in relation to Dropkin's original Yiddish: titled "Di Tsirkus Dame" in Dropkin's collection, *In Heysn Vint*, let's break down a translation title's constituent parts, referencing the *Yiddish Dictionary Sourcebook*. Looking through this Yiddish-English dictionary which I found in the stacks of Vassar's Thompson Memorial Library, I will confirm that a literal translation of the poem into English is "The Circus Lady" (Galvin 166, 266, 164). Even without understanding Yiddish, it is clear that the translation I focus on elides some information. This elision affects the poem beyond merely condensing the amount of words in the title from three to two; the translators' decision also alters the initial perception of Dropkin's "Tsirkus Dame." Most translators maintain that the poem concerns some iteration of a "Circus Dancer"² or "Circus Lady,"³ placing issues of gender and class at the fore. Jones, Kronovet, and Solomon opt for a vaguer translation of the title, "The Acrobat," focusing the poem entirely on the act of performance while leaving gender and class unclear.

² Both "The Circus Dancer" translated by Grace Schulman in *the Penguin Book of Modern Yiddish Verse*, edited by Irving Howe, Ruth K. Wisse, and Khone Shmeruk, and "A Circus Dancer" translated by Howard Schwartz in *Voices Within the Ark: The Modern Jewish Poets*, ed. Howard Schwartz and Anthony Rudolf uphold this translation.

³ Translated by Ruth Whitman in *An Anthology of Modern Yiddish Poetry*

This is not to say that the translators mean to erase the effect of gender or class on the meaning of Dropkin's work. Rather, decisions to elide explicitly gendered language throughout the poem emphasizes the problem that Dropkin's poems grapple with: the problem of allowing hegemonic understandings of gender relations to dictate power relationships and the direction of desire. It is essential to note, though, that the elisions of gendered language *do not invent* these challenges. As we will see with the study of a supplementary translation, Dropkin's "Tsirkus Dame" remains a challenging figure regardless of her job description.

Translators further affect the gender and power relationship inherent in this title as their translations oscillate between including or excluding the definite article, "Di," present in the original Yiddish. While three out of the four translations that I consider include the definite article (including *The Acrobat* translation), we should note that Howard Schwartz chooses to title the poem "A Circus Dancer." In his translation, the lack of a definite article conveys the performer—and the performer's body—as anonymous, vague, and ultimately expendable. However, this regard of Dropkin's Tsirkus Dame as a discrete entity is hardly compatible with the intense internality that Dropkin's first-person speaker asserts. We might view the discrepancy between the distance of the title and the intimacy of the narrative as a useful irony, but I find that this translation of "Di Tsirkus Dame" is generally incompatible with the other translations that I study throughout this project. It is for this precise reason, though, that I believe including Schwartz's translation is so vital. Perhaps somewhat conspicuously, it is the only translation of Dropkin's work attributed exclusively to a man. I believe it is useful to consider how one male translator (though decades removed from Dropkin's original publication) might

view Dropkin's work; it offers useful perspective on what Dropkin's consciousness becomes when put into the hands of an agent of the hegemony that she resists.

There is a difference between fostering ambivalence around gender and erasing gender as a valid issue; one might argue that rendering the title "The Acrobat" and refusing gender within the body of the text is the same as Schwartz's choice to identify a "Circus Dancer" and further elides the poem's gender issue. However, these poems perform these elisions to different ends, as we will see when I now examine multiple translations of this poem. Juxtaposing this translation with the visceral, intimate one by Jones, Kronovet, and Solomon, here I present Schwartz's translation to force us to reckon with the stakes of translation.⁵

A Circus Dancer

I am a circus dancer
 dancing among daggers
 that circle me
 with their points turned up.
 Barely,
 barely touching the edges
 of the knives,
 my light body avoids death
 from falling.
 With bated breath
 they watch my dancing
 and someone pray to God for me.
 Before my eyes the points glow
 in a fiery circle.
 And no one knows
 how much I would like
 to fall.⁶

⁶ Translated by Howard Schwartz in *Voices Within the Ark: The Modern Jewish Poets*, ed. Howard Schwartz and Anthony Rudolf.

In addition to the anonymity that Schwartz's translation suggests, this translation also conspicuously omits the entire last stanza, which as demonstrated by the three other considered translations,⁷ contains the poem's major turning point:

I'm tired of dancing between you,
cold steel daggers.
I want—my blood warming your bare tips—
to fall.⁸

I begin my analysis of this poem's content with the last stanza because it reveals the intricacies of the performer-audience relationship, therefore serving as a useful starting point for our deconstruction of the subject-object binary. While Schwartz does retain the last line of the stanza and reveals that "no one knows / how much I would like / to fall," his translation ignores a subject position that reasons with and provides context for their desire (15-17). Opposing this abrupt ending is that of "The Acrobat," wherein the performer complicates the claim of desire by internally reflecting that they are "tired of dancing" (15). Both expressions of inner desire disturb the perceived objective reality of bodily action by the spectator. However, Schwartz's translation oversimplifies and flattens the desire to end the performance as a death drive that omits the effect of the other. The fatigue of the performer suggests a commitment to sustain the illusion, to preserve the simplicity of the subject-object binary, but the weariness in doing so. Dropkin renders resistance a final frontier, as the acrobat by continuing her performance, 'resists' an overt display of resistance.

The paradox of this performance is that the spectated performer who is objectified by prying eyes is really in control. Dropkin thus suggests the instability of a

⁷ Ruth Whitman and Grace Schulman also both include this final stanza in their translations.

⁸ Here I return to *The Acrobat translation*.

reading of performance wherein the spectator's presence automatically renders the performer an object. In this poem, there exist two simultaneous iterations of power: the first affirms the ostensibly simple reading of objectified performer at the mercy of the subjectivity of the spectator (and which is sustained entirely by the isolated perspective of the spectator). The other, similarly isolated in the consciousness of the performer, inverts this power relation, asserting the performer as a vastly more complicated and subversive figure. These two visions obviously contradict, but as they remain isolated, nevertheless sustain each other. The sustained illusion that the body of the performer mirrors their internality, juxtaposed with the acknowledgement of the opposite, weaponizes the audience's desire against themselves. Dropkin thus imbues the alleged object of spectating the power to manipulate and pervert dynamics that they would not otherwise have, especially not if they enacted their desire to fall and reject the illusion of their performance.

The audience that the performer objectifies is ultimately unaware that their relationality is being manipulated. However, being unaware of the change in power structures, one might wonder if the power that Dropkin's speaker holds is even viable. This poem therefore offers the additional question of whether both parties must ascribe to a power structure for it to be legible or affective. A traditional answer might be yes, which would nullify Dropkin's resistance. However, a reasonable strategy to subvert the suppression enacted by this traditional power structure is to exclude them from the process of reclaiming of agency. Dropkin does not seek the same type of power that they hold over her performer, and therefore must not necessarily acquiesce to their standards to resist them.

The performer's desire manifests in potential falling or slipping, which symbolizes dropping of the artifice of performance. This is, however, a superficial rendering of the embodied desire to abandon pretense or exist without performing one's self for the sake of those who seek to uphold hegemonic power structures. Dropkin recognizes that her resistance becomes available precisely *because of the* conceit of performance. The desire to fall is more subversive than the proposed fall, as enacting her desire in this role would nullify the hidden power of manipulation, subversion through exploiting the desires of spectating.

Dropkin disconnects the performer's internal desires from their actions. The performer's dance allows the audience to believe that they are indulging their own desires, but the performer indicates internally that "no one knows / how much I'd like to slip (13-14). This withholding becomes the locus of the performer's power, and an invulnerable power it is. This power is unique as it is not subject to the explicit confirmation of another party, though it exists only insofar as the performance continues. This is precisely why the performer can never enact their falling if the larger project of their desire is to maintain power.

Dropkin at once sates and subverts the audience's hunger for the performer's body. This duality claims a voyeur position that resists the objectification usually associated with performing, reterritorializing the act of performing as one that is empowered. Dropkin explores this duality by devoting the entire second stanza to describing the performer as they observe the audience observe their body. The performer stands impossibly between scrutinizing and being scrutinized, between the poles of exhibitionism and voyeurism. This impossible position asserts the inadequacy of

positional binary and suggests the necessity for alternatives, whether that be the recognition of multiplicities or the collapsing of the binary.

“The Acrobat” never explicitly genders either party present in the Acrobat’s performance, neither the acrobat nor the audience. Though the poem focuses on the physicality of a performing and contorting body and the entities who watch her, the only language that even attempts to approximate a human form is brief reference to the speaker’s “lithe body,” and the verbs “dance,” “slip,” and “fall” (5, 2, 14, 18). None of these references denote femaleness or maleness, which is generally consistent among the other three translations (excluding Ruth Whitman’s “The Circus Lady”). As this is the case, it is all the more significant that the translators of *The Acrobat* omit the only explicit pronouncement of the performer’s gender, as it frees the performer from affirming the implications of embodied femaleness. Along with sustained gender ambivalence which the translators emphasize, and which suggest a tendency toward objectification, Dropkin makes two essential distinctions that subvert this position.

First, she maintains a first-person perspective, centering the internality and agency of the performer. She begins the poem by simply self-identifying as the objectified party, offering that “I am an acrobat” (1). In claiming this position for herself, Dropkin’s performer also claims her own subject position, defining herself as a performer while concurrently allowing herself to be defined as such. Dropkin also reduces the spectators to the pronoun “they,” relegating the audience to one indistinct collective rather than affirming their individuality and therefore, their power (8). These two tactics create a performer-audience relation that diverges from one we would expect, wherein the

performer does not rely on the audience to legitimate themselves, thus deconstructing and resisting the nature of the subject-object binary as a coherent power structure.

Dropkin continues her resistance to both fully indulge and resist the desires of the performer's audience by refusing to actively engage with them and refusing them regard their passive interactions with the performer as they "hold their breath / when they watch me dance" (8-9). In the previous chapter, Dropkin's speakers penetrated and were penetrated by the poems' opposing actors which suggested a more faithful or traditional subject-object relationship and sustained a more coherent network of power. However, the performer in the traditional object position is the only entity who meaningfully acts within the poem. As we analyze more of Dropkin's work that progresses through embodiment and onto enacting and integrating desire, we will continue to see Dropkin exploit more intricate power dynamics, exploring modes of resistance beyond interpersonal violence.

Despite this enforced distance, Dropkin does remain vulnerable to the effect of outside forces on her body in "The Acrobat": following the relegation to pronouns, Dropkin proceeds to further identify the performer's audience not as distinct humans, but as "you, cold steel daggers" (16). The penetrating, phallic potential of the daggers breathes some life into the cold and nonliving steel, but Dropkin renders them ultimately inert by placing them out of an actor's possession and identifying potential engagement with them as the product of the performer's "fall" (18). Dropkin thus grants the performer agency over the possibility or risk of her own demise, resisting the domination of the 'other.'

Considering the biblical connotations of the “fall,”⁹ wherein Eve’s indulgence on the tree of knowledge which causes the Fall of man, offers additional insight into the stakes of breaking the illusion of performance. Not only does the performer’s proposed fall expose her own desires, but the performer must reckon with her indulgence implicating the spectator just as Eve’s bite of the forbidden fruit implicates Adam in the pair’s expulsion from the Garden. This reading challenges my previous interpretation of “Suck,” wherein the male transgressor does not answer for a transgression that he actually commits. Dropkin suggests, therefore, a secondary resistance within her vision of performance: mutual accountability. The performer never does enact this secondary resistance, still ultimately preserving the spectator’s understanding of their own innocence.

The translators of *The Acrobat* use both the verbs “slip” and “fall” in their translation, as opposed to solely “fall”¹⁰ or even “stumble”¹¹ which we see in other translations. The discrepancy in *The Acrobat* and the Schulman translations are particularly intriguing, as both translations revise their original assertions, though Dropkin uses the same word twice in the original Yiddish. This alteration implies an ambiguity between agency and accident that is absent in the original. To “slip” or “stumble” appears accidental or mistaken, though we later discover this to not be the case and which contributes to the subversive performance narrative. An additional paradox of this desire also suggests that the indulgence of the performer in their desire would not

⁹ All four translations considered include the word “fall” in either their ultimate or penultimate lines.

¹⁰ Whitman and Schultz translations

¹¹ Schulman translation

only nullify the desire but also betray the goal of harnessing the power of subverting the performance.

While Dropkin's "Acrobat" does not obtain or use the dagger (therefore not claiming any of its phallic, male qualities to claim potential power) she notably depicts their blood (perhaps menstrual) penetrating or violating the phallic daggers rather than depicting the daggers cutting her. Inverting the action of cutting into the action of bleeding gives agency to the bleeder over the perpetrator, again empowering the object of action.

This bleeding reminds us once again of Dropkin's imagination of desire as residing within and being imaginatively accessible through images of the body as an essentially unassailable quality of the physical form, lending the legitimacy and potential power even when unspoken or hidden. This mere fact of the blood, spilled or un-spilled, projects both life and desire. This makes it all the more important to recognize to whom Dropkin grants a body in her poems. As we will continue to explore in "My Hands" and "I Sing You," the way that the speakers' oppressors maintain a coherent vision of their own bodies is through *her body*. The female body must be a legitimate bank of power if her counterpart necessarily derives power from viewing or consuming her body. While this challenge inverts the traditional power structure of the gender binary, the reduction of gendered language in these translations takes Dropkin's poems a step further. This next step exposes gender as something unstable and positional, offering further challenges and questions to using gender as a category denoting power, especially as it relates to desire.

The translators of *The Acrobat* continue to tend toward a similar un-gendering of Dropkin's other work, as well. To demonstrate this, I want to turn to "My Hands," in

which Dropkin distills desire as a functional and structural part of the body. Below I juxtapose *The Acrobat* translation with translation Ruth Whitman's translation, which is featured in *An Anthology of Modern Yiddish Poetry*:

My Hands

My hands, two little bits
Of my body I'm never
ashamed to show. With fingers—
the branches of coral,
fingers—two nests
of white serpents,
fingers—the thoughts
of a nymphomaniac.¹²

My Hands

My hands,
two pieces of my body
that I'm not ashamed to show,
with fingers like the branches
of a coral tree,
with fingers like two nests
of white snakes.
Or—like the thoughts
of a lecherous man.¹³

Though the embodied desires of others repeatedly degrade and consume Dropkin's speakers' own bodies, Dropkin directs this poem entirely inward. Without another human counterpart, Dropkin becomes simultaneously subject and object of the poem. This illuminates a space wherein desire is no longer bound to the confirmation of another actor. Dropkin's embodiment of desire exists entirely as and within her speaker's bodily humanity. Dropkin's further nullifies the necessity for the other by writing, time and time again, speakers who contain an entire living world within their bodies. We observe this often in Dropkin's poems, as she identifies aspects of her speaker's body as comprised of "two nests / of white serpents" in this poem (5-6), or as a "dog" in "I Sing You" (6), "green leaves on the branch" in "He and She" (2), or "juicy red apples" in "I Fall to the Ground" (1). The speaker's identity is simply a part and product of the organic world. In this poem, Dropkin's desire forms multiple structures around which life lives and thrives.

¹² Translated by Faith Jones, Jennifer Kronovet, and Samuel Solomon in *The Acrobat*

¹³ Translated by Ruth Whitman in *The Penguin Book of Modern Yiddish Verse*

In this sense, her body is the site of subject relations, object relations, and in cases where there is even an absence of relations. The body transcends simplistic assignment to either side of the binary, as the breadth of complex interactions take place upon and within her body.

Along with the images themselves, the structure of this poem is important to pay attention to, as examining the structure of “My Hands” will help to remind us of the project of multiplying images of desire. The question I want to briefly interrogate here is how the variable images of Dropkin’s hands interact with each other. Upon a superficial reading, it is unclear whether these images supersede each other, exist simultaneously, or are variably applicable. It appears in *The Acrobat* translation that the final possibility of the images as variable applicable is the most apt: the images do not necessarily exist simultaneously by connecting them by repeated use of ‘and,’ nor do the translators render them mutually exclusive by separating them through repeated insertions of the word “or.” The translators of this edition instead separate the images with a repeated em dashes, suggesting that each iteration of the speaker’s hands do not include *nor* exclude each other, but may be individually conjured. This multiplicity, or the apparitional, fluctuating image of the hands is a further version of resistance, preventing her desire from being dominated or repressed by rendering it unknowable, but visible.

The structure of the Whitman translation differs slightly from *The Acrobat’s* compounding of images. Instead of em dashes separating images of the speaker’s fingers being “like the branches / of a coral tree” and “two nests / of white snakes” (4-5, 6-7). Whitman twice inserts the word “with” (4, 6). This addition proposes a divergent reading from *The Acrobat* wherein the coral and snake images become as one, fused to a singular

image of the hand. I will soon go on to analyze the coral and snake images in more detail, but I will here address the paradox that these two images existing as one creates; the stiffness of the coral and the flexibility of tangled snakes oppose each other, rendering the image of the hands incoherent. An additional difference within this translation is Whitman's treatment of the final image of the hands, inserting "Or—" to separate the preceding images from this final one of "the thoughts / of a lecherous man" (8-9). Inserting "or" here in addition to sustaining the em dash which *The Acrobat* translators include suggests that the final image does supersede the prior two images rather than existing simultaneously, or as a variable application. Whitman excluding the prior two (paradoxical) images emphasizes the final iteration of the speaker's hands within the poem's narrative.

With the tension between these three images in mind, let's deconstruct these first structural images that Dropkin draws out. First, Dropkin defines the speaker's fingers as "the branches of coral" (4). Stiff and dead, the hands' coral is comprised of the calcified bodies of past organisms. The compounding of living things building versions of itself from itself creates a naturally-occurring system of constructing desire that is not parasitic or dependent and constantly builds from itself, which lessens the perceived threat of desire to the power structures she operates within since its image as coral is knowable, nonthreatening, and non-exploitative.

The next image of fingers "two nests / of white serpents" diverges from the dead, additive, benign quality of the hands (5-6). This image perverts the idea of the nest as a structure, as a nest of snakes is not a home for snakes but rather a tangled group of snakes. The misleading use of "nest" again tacitly withholds information from the poem.

Dropkin's misdirection, however, again leads the speaker and the potential other to accept this image (and therefore the structures of desire) with limited questioning. While the image of the coral had been a nonthreatening image of the structures of desire, these embodied snakes, with all of their biblical connotations of coercion, attempt to acknowledge a more active and perverse vision of desire.

Seemingly dissatisfied with the implications of the previous two images on the physicality of desire, Dropkin's final image of desire disappears within the body. Dropkin moves on to the final image of the poem to realize the more insidious parts of desire. Having presented desire as existing as one's surroundings, to embodied interactions, now she enters the motivations and internality of the speaker's active hands. Dropkin asserts this infernality in the original Yiddish through the French term "erotoman,"¹⁴ which, when inserted into Yiddish, does not clearly indicate gender. The translators' opposing choices both draw out different conclusions on the text.

The Acrobat translators elect to translate this term as "the thoughts / of a nymphomaniac" (7-8) while Whitman's translation opts to translate the entity as a "lecherous man" (9). These juxtaposed translations reveal the complications of gendering in the poem. Identifying the speaker's hands as the thoughts of a "nymphomaniac" implies a female gender, though the term does not explicitly say this. The pathology of the female body hides within its definition. This reminds me of my previous discussion on female modesty (*tsniesdik*), wherein female sexuality is something that is necessarily hidden. In this case, it remains hidden even through words that seek to explicitly define and pathologize it.

¹⁴ Referenced with permission from email correspondence with Jennifer Kronovet and Faith Jones

Regardless of gender, both of these images take an important stance: as thoughts rather than structures or actions, Dropkin ultimately identifies the hands as containing unknowable multiplicities, complicating the possibility to reduce them to a simple object positionality. Moreover, adding to this maintenance of power, Dropkin does not direct this poem unto any other party, thus freeing her to explore her physiology without restraint. This image allows Dropkin's speaker to maintain the agency to self-define, which collapses the need for others to affirm her as she seeks to embody her desire.

However, painting the female speaker's hands as "the thoughts / of a lecherous man" retains the implication of vice and transgression, but avoids pathologizing the body itself (8-9). Desire is something that is redeemable rather than necessarily suppressed. Though potentially redeemable, both lechery and nymphomania connote a compulsive relationship with desire. As such, Dropkin recognizes indulgences in desire as unavoidable, which illuminates the imperative for Dropkin to find a place for it within a cultural understanding.

With the ambiguity and withholding present in "My Hands" in mind, I will now proceed to an analysis of "I Sing You," in which Dropkin maintains ambiguiating and withholding particular information. This strategy allows Dropkin's speakers to retain their desires albeit inhabiting an exploited positionality. This strategy elucidates the ability to allow an external subject-object binary to appear maintained and coherent, while asserting an internal, or hidden resistance. Introducing internality as a viable ground of resistance (which we will see much more of in the next chapter and which we see occur in "The Acrobat"), complicates the ostensibly coherent subject-object

positionality by proposing that figure who is resisted is essentially irrelevant. They do not need to be dominated or threatened in order for resistance to be affective.

Dropkin returns in this poem to presenting an interpersonal relation to get toward the heart of her speaker's desire:

I Sing You

You didn't sow a child in me,
you sowed yourself.
Now you grow in me, every day
more defined, larger.

There's no more room in me for me,
and my soul lies like a dog at your feet
becoming weaker and weaker
but, as I die through you, as before,
I sing you my serenades.

Like "The Acrobat," this poem's title deserves consideration. "I Sing You," as a sentence fragment, leaves much to the imagination. The nature of the fragment forces us to fill in Dropkin's blank; without reading the poem, several meanings are already evident. The ambiguity of the title offers two distinct definitional possibilities. The first concerns direction of action. "I Sing You" as a fragment appears to be missing the word [to]. This lack of direction displaces the object of the action, rendering their receipt of the speaker's song an incidental outcome. The omission of this preposition [to] also allows an initial reading of this title to be "I Sing [of] You," which alters the title's meaning completely. Reading the title with this alternative wording would nullify the displacement of the object that I have just presented, elevating the importance of the "You" as the subject of the speaker's song. Though the [of] insertion maintains the placement of "You" as the recipient of the song, this possibility would displace the poem's speaker within her own narrative. This ambiguity already throws our understanding of a binarized subject-object

relationship askew and becomes rife with potential toward resistance: Dropkin resists revealing the content of her poem and resists defining the relationship she will discuss. This withholding strikes me as similar to the secret musings of “The Acrobat,” which we previously explored, though Dropkin’s speaker does not maintain the withholding of her truth through the end of the poem.

The first word of the first stanza of this poem already directs the poem back upon its supposed object. Dropkin writes that “you didn’t sow a child in me, / you sowed yourself,” contradicting the title’s delineation of subject and object (1-2). Already, the “You” usurps the subject position, directing his actions unto the speaker. However, this subject position does not nullify that Dropkin has compromised his role as the poem’s actor. Instead, it introduces a tone of skepticism of his effect on the speaker, even as he “grow[s] in me, every day / more defined, larger” (3-4). Though these actions are powerful and ironically destructive despite their constructive/procreative connotations, they also have another effect upon the poem’s subject-object relationship. The “You” growing within the speaker’s objectified body paradoxically imbues the speaker with the potential to claim a subject position.

Even as he progressively exiles the speaker from her own body, stating that “there’s no more room in me for me,” the speaker responds by reclaiming the ability to act within the second stanza (5). While the actions she performs are those of submission and decay, as she “lies like a dog” and “die[s] through you,” this is still a resistance in she confronts the “You” as complicit, threatening the remnant of unquestioned power (6, 8). The speaker’s claim that she “die[s] through you” is different than Dropkin writing that this “you” killed the speaker. Though the previous stanza suggests his complicity in her

destruction, rejecting his actions renders him a passive actor at best, if not a bystander to her death (8).

In her dying, the speaker finally gives voice to her desire. Her body becomes progressively alienated from her, but her voice remains and enables her final act of resistance to be the embodiment of her desire: “as I die through you, as before / I sing you my serenades” (8-9). Unlike the previous two poems we’ve discussed, which invoke the title immediately within the body of the poem, “I Sing You” is part of the poem’s last line, redirecting the poem back upon the self for one final time (8-9). As another performance, hearkening again back to “The Acrobat,” this line finally reveals her motives/mentality, and makes her counterpart privy to her desires as well as her actions. Dropkin’s speaker notably does not die with whimpers, tears, or screams despite being pushed out of her own body by the desires of another. She instead dies by expressing her “serenades,” or her songs of desire, to he who destroys her. Desire is the last thing the speaker embodies, once more asserting its centrality to the speaker’s embodiment and consciousness. A final complication to the fraught subject-object negotiation of this poem, these serenades remain a possession [“my serenades”] of the speaker although she directs them toward her counterpart. However, this possession is of something transient, a song that disappears after it is sung, though the fact of the song is preserved by the permanent record of a poem. The fluctuation of subject position, along with the paradoxical transience of the song and the body all suggest that beyond the instability of subject-object positionality is also its impermanence.

In thinking of the problems of permanence and transience, we will now discuss the cyclical structure of “He and She,” which includes one of the only (if not the only) instances approaching a symbiotic relationship in Dropkin’s poems:

He and She

He is a branch;
 she—the green leaves on the branch.
 From him to her flows
 dark power, thick fertile sap
 she shudders with each touch of wind,
 whispers and laughs,
 turns of silver
 of delighted eyes.
 He is simple, mute.
 Autumn dyes her deep
 colors. The cold wind cruelly
 exiles her from the branch,
 while he remains the same, simple,
 robust, mute.

This poem indulges further in the plant imagery that we will see more of in the “sow[ing]” of “I Sing You.” Dropkin’s employing of the extended metaphor of leaves and branches proves a rich bank from which Dropkin implements a diverging understanding of subject-object positionality than what we have seen thus far. While she meditates on permanence and expendability, this poem recognizes the necessity of both subject and object roles but elevates the object role through its importance to the horticultural system she uses. Though the symbiosis of this relationship appears inconsistent with Dropkin’s larger resistant desire, “He and She” poem shows us a valuable side to a more conventional, sustained subject-object relationality. Dropkin thus reveals the applicability of a more traditional male-female relationship as part of desire’s multiplicity. This traditional vision of male-female relations brings up once more the tension between freeing desire from culture and finding a place for desire within culture.

The first line defines this system in definitive terms: “He is a branch; / she—the green leaves on the branch” (1-2). Dropkin’s substitution of her typical first-person perspective in favor of third-person in this poem is striking and unfamiliar. The authorial distance it asserts allows Dropkin to explore the stakes of embodied desire outside of a body she might identify with. Dropkin emphasizes this male subject position by omitting the verb from the definition of the female leaves. Rather, the translators assert that “he is a branch” while only providing an em dash to connect the female from her role: “she—the green leaves on the branch” (1, 2). Within this line, as well, Dropkin varies capitalization when identifying both figures: “He” receives capitalization that is consistent with naming convention, while “she” does not. However, this is a decision carried out by the translators; Yiddish letters do not distinguish between capital and lowercase letters. This alteration is not to suggest that the translators invent the gendered subject-object positionality that characterizes this poem, but just to note that they actively decide to emphasize it.

However, this poem does not present an uncomplicated subject position. While the translators emphasize his individuality through capitalization and the original includes a verb to describe his embodied role as the “branch,” he does not receive the definite article: he is merely “a” branch. The withholding of the definite article implies, though does not explicitly state, that he is one of many branches on the greater system of this tree. Meanwhile, though pluralized, “she” as “the green leaves,” is also pluralized, but as a collective entity. This serves a dual, contradictory purpose. We may read this choice in one of two ways: collectivizing her identity either displaces her individuality, as likewise one of many, or it suggests a singular consciousness that envelops the entire system of

leaves. The latter reading appears more apt in this context, especially considering Dropkin's attribution of the definite article as "the green leaves." She is pluralized though definite, while he is singular though indefinite, thus rendering the binarization of his subject position and her object position unstable.

Regardless, this poem does objectify the female's role, displacing discrete, embodied humanity that Dropkin's other poems establish in this chapter (1). However, I argue that this poem does not negate these iterations of embodied desire. Instead, my prior discussions on desire enable Dropkin to explore the nuance of this unusual mutually dependent interpretation of desire, which are still valid renderings in their own right.

Let's go further into the relationship Dropkin presents between the branch and the leaves: the male "branch" provides a home for the female leaves, who in turn generates food to sustain the tree and allow growth through photosynthesis. Here I must also note the inversion of a traditional procreative reading of desire. The reproduction that "she" performs, photosynthesis, is an asexual process. Dropkin thus excludes the male from reproduction, similarly to her strategy of removing the male parent from "Mayne Mame." This removal is different, however, in that the male "branch" remains a meaningful and discrete entity (as the 'home' of she") despite his sexual removal. With all of this in mind, Dropkin introduces a new vision of a sustained male-female subject-object relationship that does not depend on eroticism. This poem also introduces a fully autonomous mode of procreation. Both of these outcomes displace the patriarchal male other, resisting their hegemonic power to dictate sexual and maternal processes. However, this poem does not explicitly mention photosynthesis, though we know it must occur. Though essential to the continued life of this tree, Dropkin's narrator displaces it,

and therefore the contributions of “she”, as something inessential within the narrator’s regard of the relationship.

While “He” and “she” mutually depend on each other for continued life, Dropkin’s narrator asserts that “from him to her flows / dark power, / thick fertile sap” (3-4). This suggestion contradicts the aforementioned independence of “she” in procreation, sustaining a traditional reading of domestic womanhood. Though life comes from the female parent, power nonetheless originates within the male. This flow of power also may read as a sexual metaphor for ejaculate. However, the slow, “flow[ing] motion is markedly less sudden and violent from the “spurt[ing]” allusion in “My Mother” (17).

Despite eliding the contributions of “she” in sustaining the tree’s life, the objectified “she” additionally contributes to the system by calling the attentions of “delighted eyes” (7-8). However, this is an ambivalent contribution—at least in how it relates to her. While “he remains the same, simple, / robust, mute” during interactions with outside forces, “she shudders with each touch of wind” (13, 5). “She” is on display, garnering the “delight” of others while performing for these spectators out of her own volition; the wind propels her, not herself. While her attractiveness asserts power over the attentions of others, he also reaps the benefits of the attentions and transient affections of the spectator while remaining unaffected, “simple, mute.”

A final displacement that Dropkin offers in this poem is a complication of the progression narrative that we’ve been tracing. This paper has heretofore progressed fairly linearly, with each reading furthering us from the singularity of hegemonic desire. This poem does not offer the same type of progression. Rather, Dropkin herein implies a cyclical narrative that sustains a static iteration of the male-female subject-object

relationship, though the relationship is a subtle displacement from hegemonic singularity. The last section of the poem discusses the temporal shift toward the future: “the cold wind cruelly exiles her from the branch,” although “he remains the same, simple, / robust, mute” (11-14). Within Dropkin’s suggestion of the cyclical nature of the seasons, is a curious conclusion. Half of the system, “He,” remains unaffected, while “she” is “exiled” against her will, but not by intervention of the male branch. Some other (ungendered) force of “the wind” acts against her, while he remains both unaffected and is rendered *ineffective*. Dropkin thus boldly writes a final claim of resistance: the male subject is not he who is the perpetrator of the repressive hegemony. Instead, the individual is just a symptom of such repression, tacitly benefitting from its injustice and thus remaining “simple, mute.”

By the end of the poem, “she” is still subject to some unfavorable power relation. As we have seen, however, the relationship is not quite as simple as an empowered male and a disempowered female object. As this project contends, the goal of Dropkin’s poetic resistances is *not* liberation from cultural frameworks. Instead, as this poem accomplishes, Dropkin longs to denaturalize and pluralize a singular reading of desire that proliferates throughout the culture that she lives within.

All of these analyses, however, still leave us grappling with the original problem of why Dropkin writes this poem, unlike any others, in the third person. It presumably has something to do with the diverging perspective on desire. Dropkin accepts a fairly traditional, objectified positionality in this poem, which is contrary to the attitudes her first-person speakers take. If we imagine that the first-speaker is a single discrete entity, the attitude Dropkin’s “she” character takes in this poem would defy the strategies that propel the rest of Dropkin’s work.

This chapter has continued to illustrate how Dropkin uses desire as resistance, herein denaturalizing the relational frameworks of embodied desire. With these additions of alternative subject-object positions as part of Dropkin's strategy to subvert hegemonic power structures, the next and final chapter will move onto analyzing how Dropkin presents the actions that result from a particularly embodied desire. However, there still remain caveats to this enacting of desire. Though this chapter will focus on displays of finally overt female desire that do not incur punishment, Dropkin still must tailor her actions of desire to particular public and private locations that her speakers inhabit for desire to be legible and legitimate to her culture. Dropkin's speakers' resistances, taking place within and between two bodies, she also now places in locations which dictate permitted and prohibited expressions for desire. The next chapter, therefore, analyzes the locations of desire, distinguishing various public and private presentations. Moreover, it questions the meaning and degrees of privacy that might exist in certain spaces. These delineations between public and private spaces maintain the strategy we've been studying of denaturalizing binaries, crafting resistances, and illuminating pluralities within desire.

Chapter 3.

Dropkin's poems frequently present malalignment between public and private identity. My last chapter's analysis of "Di Tsirkus Dame" provides an example of this divide, as Celia Dropkin writes her performer mediating their experience through the tension between their inner desires and outward behaviors. Drawing this distinction, Dropkin explores the performer's complicity in their own objectification and the extent to which liberation from repression is the ultimate goal of her poetics. As I explored in my analysis of "The Acrobat," Dropkin's performer desires to overtly defy the suppressive, coercive gaze which forces their contortions. However, Dropkin writes this desire as coexisting with the performer's recognition of suppressive power structures. In fact, Dropkin's repeated maintenance (albeit complication) of the performer's objectification and of suppressive *tsniesdik* (modesty) ideal that I explore in the first chapter are the very structures that continue to usher us toward a clearer understanding of Dropkin's vision of desire.

This final chapter continues along these lines of Dropkin exploiting yet maintains binaries. Keeping the process of imagining and embodying desire—as discussed in the prior two chapters—in mind, now we will explore the final iteration of Dropkin's desirous resistances: enacting desire. As these poems progress through embodied desire and toward physical action, Dropkin locates her poems in variable spaces that speak to the nature of her particular desires. These locations, as I will contend, continue to inhabit and exploit binaries as Dropkin realizes the available avenues for enacted desire within the frameworks that we have discussed until this point. The binary at play here becomes the separation between public and private locations. As I will very soon discuss, while

sometimes physical, these locations also include abstract subconscious imaginations of physical spaces, and abstracted spaces such as the body of an imagined text.

The retreat into private spaces allows Dropkin to displace, though not escape—I will once more note that the objective of Dropkin’s poetics is not to reject social structures but to operate subversively within them—social coercion and speak *publically* through published writings without public censor and censure. Removing her poems from public forums, Dropkin’s speakers need not always adhere to public expectation in their actions. Dropkin’s speakers therefore express and enact their desires without reprimand and punishment, two outcomes we see consistently within the prior two chapters. While moments where Dropkin’s speakers retreat into internal spaces might appear to backtrack, or as submissive to social pressures, I argue that this is not the case. Rather, these moments recognize the irrelevance of externalities and otherness to affirm her desires.

Four of Dropkin’s poems explore a resistant use of public and private spaces. The first poem we will discuss, “And Thirstily I Drink,” contains two sections: the first half explores enacting desire in public, while the second half explores how the same desire manifests in the speaker’s private, domestic space. This poem forms the basis for my analysis due to its overt straddling between these binarized spaces. Though Dropkin does not explicitly state this straddling in the other three poems, it remains at play as Dropkin continually negotiates her actions according to how acceptable they are in a particular space.

I then examine “My Guest,” which Dropkin locates entirely within the private, domestic space that “And Thirstily I Drink” occupies in its second half. This analysis

focuses on the contradictory nature by which Dropkin remains faithful to the extant gender power structure that is rampant in Dropkin's imaginations of public desire *and* questions the extent to which the gender hierarchy retains its potency when entering a female-possessed space. Dropkin does this primarily through exploring the possession of space, challenging the orientation of the presumably male love object as its possessor.

I then take a look at "I'd Like to See," which challenges the imagining of space as necessarily physical. Dropkin, in this poem, presents a conscious speaker confronting her desire for an unconscious love object. This poem, however, takes place entirely within a cognitive projection or fantasy; in this case, the speaker's consciousness becomes the location of her desire within itself. Writing this internal projection, Dropkin deconstructs the assumed need for and meaning of physical space as the grounds to enact desire, as well as the necessity for a discrete, immediate love object to indulge desire.

"I'd Like to See" continues Dropkin's attempts to overcome reliance on space and the poetic other and questions the viability of one's internality as meaningful space and action. Dropkin projects an enacted physical desire, but this projection does not take place within the body of the poem. It remains an explicit exercise of the speaker's imagination, occurring entirely internally. This poem asserts consciousness as a viable private space wherein desire may be felt and enacted. This is subversive because it suggests that meaningful occurrence of desirous action can take place entirely internally and autonomously, even when it concerns the actions of the remote love object. Dropkin uses this poem to explore the viability of the mind as a space for enacting desire, questioning to what extent the physical realm, and mutual physical engagement, are necessary to realize desire. These two poems, resisting a reliance on physical space and

the other to enact desire, extend the cache of pluralistic desire to include autonomous, or perhaps masturbatory desires.

The final analysis of this project consists of my investigations of and reflections on Dropkin's "A Love Letter," which recedes entirely from physical space while continuing to negotiate the public and private binary. Along with the preceding poem, "A Love Letter" deconstructs what a space might be, using both the body of the poem as an enacted location, as well as an imagined and unwritten letter that Dropkin proposes. The final ground of desire is within Dropkin's own mind, and so this final analysis will serve as an ultimate reminder that this entire project has been exploring the imagination of Dropkin herself, and how she herself sees desire existing within and extending from her own internality.

Dropkin's "And Thirstily I Drink," is a useful access point into Dropkin's presentation of the self, as she juxtaposes both public and private consciousness. "And Thirstily I Drink" begins with her speaker actively beholding herself to social rules, with the inciting action of the poem being a public meeting and exchange of flowers between two presumed lovers:

And Thirstily I Drink

I will meet him calmly with flowers
 when he comes toward me in public.
 Calm will shroud my face
 when I give him the flowers.
 But if he rests overnight
 in my home—I crawl to his bed
 quietly as a mouse in the dark,
 and if he's cradled by good dreams
 or choked by a bad dream—
 he's mine, lying there. I pull off
 the covers and kiss his chest,
 and thirstily I drink his blood,

and suddenly everything's easy and good—
 my sick, my lonely love
 thirsts for his blood.

Since this chapter focuses on occupying public and private spaces, we should note that Dropkin begins this poem in a public space. The beginning of this poem establishes a male-dominated power relation in this public segment, relating that all this will occur “when he comes toward me in public” (2). This moment of the poem sees the male love object instigating and enabling the poem’s ensuing actions, reflecting the potency of patriarchal gender relations in a public forum.

Dropkin also begins this poem as a projection, a choice which I will touch on here and focus on more extensively as I analyze “I’d Like to See.” Dropkin’s choice here to alter her verb tenses destabilizes patriarchal power dynamics by establishing the poem as a future-facing projection. This suggests that the power dynamic is not occupied in an immediate sense, but rather in a remote temporal space. However, this destabilization as an act of resistance maintains the power dynamic as a whole, as the speaker’s commitment to maintaining the dynamic in this future temporality suggests its ultimate power, as its affect transcends its immediate presence.

What is moreover conspicuous about Dropkin’s abiding by patriarchal power dynamics is the reflection of the speaker’s public behavior in these lines against the interior resolve that Dropkin’s speaker expresses. The self-regulation and repetition of the command that she “will meet him calmly” and that “calm will shroud my face” conveys a certain dissonance, and even insecurity about this displayed behavior as it corresponds to the speaker’s mentality (1, 3). The “shroud” action is particularly provocative in this segment, as to shroud something is to conceal or cover it. Moreover, it recalls the image

of a burial shroud, expressing Dropkin's resolve to hide the outward expression of her internality is a permanent state, and a state that is equivalent to the death of her expression. Once we move into the private, domestic space, we will soon see that this is not quite the case. What this resolve does suggest, however, is the speaker's acceptance of appearing to ascribe to public expression of the patriarchy. This is not Dropkin's battlefield.

Along with insecurity, Dropkin expresses the utmost importance of her speaker's regulation in these early lines. The concurrent projection of the action in a future space, the "will" for this façade to be enacted, conveys the doubt of the projection's success, a potential failure which suggests that these actions are performed contrary to the speaker's desire. A world-weariness which resembles that of "The Acrobat" in their performance, Dropkin occupies a distinct mentality from that present in the aforementioned poem. Here, rather than express desire to transgress the boundaries of the performance, Dropkin writes the speaker's committed fidelity. It is as if Dropkin's speaker is attempting to convince herself of something that is true—or is trying to justify her own actions to herself without an accompanying internalization. As we will now begin to explore see, the speaker has access to alternative behaviors surrounding her desire. This implies that a lack of discretion in this public forum may result in adverse consequences which are perhaps similar to that which we have seen in "O, Secretive Life" and "Suck," the willful avoidance of which asserts the potential affect and remaining potency of these power structures.

However, it is also misleading to suggest that there is no regard to the speaker's own desire in the first half of this poem, especially when considering the action that she

does perform: the giving of the flowers. Besides departing from our expectations of a male figure giving a female figure flowers, this gender reversal does more than challenge perception of the male as romantic or sexual aggressor. Viewing flowers as a symbol of purity and virginity, the voluntary giving of flowers by the female agent symbolizes the giving of virginity and indulges the inner, latent desires of the speaker in the public forum. The giving of the flowers even carries within it the more perverse implication of sexual exhibition; the speaker publically displays relinquishing the symbol of her sexual purity. But still, the body remains frozen and shrouded, and the inert symbol of sexual union performs the expression of the desire while Dropkin maintains the separation between bodily and acted desire within the public space.

Following the giving of the flowers, the poem retreats into speaker's own private, domestic space: "But if he rests overnight / in my home—" suddenly departs from the previous lines in location, as well as verb tense (5-6). Dropkin writes the previous lines entirely in the future tense and asserted remote, yet definite occurrence with repeated assertions of the speaker's "will" (1, 3). However, Dropkin now pivots to employing the conditional mood in this section, suggesting a certain mistrust of her ensuing projections. Dropkin now presents a liminal space between projected and lived realities through the temporal displacement of the conditional mood, drawing the poem further within the self as it draws into the private space. While this empowers Dropkin's speaker and allows her to indulge in a shameless display of desire for the possible consummation of these lovers, she does so entirely in private ["in my home—"] and entirely hypothetically. The first section presents fidelity to power structures, and this statement doubles down, and suggests the uncertain viability of Dropkin's desire. This unusually vulnerable position is

unfamiliar to our navigations of Dropkin's frequently assertive, demanding poetics. Taken with the proceeding section, however, raising this question of desire's viability becomes more symbolic of Dropkin's progress toward enacting desire rather than the superficial suggestion of the inability to express desire. Never before writing poetry that occupies space explicitly belonging *to the speaker*, this line proves a transition into a new territory within Dropkin's poetry wherein the speaker possesses (and dominates) their own space, lending her ultimate (yet still not uncomplicated) power and agency over a counterpart. Rather than read this line as a question of the viability of Dropkin's desire, I read this line as the reluctance to admit to a new form of inhabited power. Dropkin devotes the rest of the poem to navigating this new power relation.

Having created the hypothetical condition "if he rests overnight / in my home—" Dropkin now launches into the immediacy of present tense by continuing the statement with "—I crawl to his bed" (5-6). Writing the progression toward eventual sexual encounter inside the not-yet-realized condition of "if" the love-object remains in her space, Dropkin eventually realizes her desire by separating the projection from the present reality asserted by shifting to present tense following the em dash. The sudden separation Dropkin inserts through the em dash and the change in tense creates a physical and temporal space that is neither within the projected public space of the flower-bearing nor the conditional internal space of the wish for the love-object to remain in her home. Dropkin now cements her ensuing actions in an immediate lived reality which the return present tense asserts, finally coherently fusing inner desires with outward actions within her imagined, conditional projection.

As in all other instances of indulged sexual desire, there is again a caveat (within the very same line). The possessive within this line is inconsistent with that of the rest of the poem. Though performing these actions in the speaker's own "home" the speaker instigates the sexual union by *crawling to the love object's bed*. Dropkin thus creates nested domains within the home, wherein the furniture of the bed symbolizes the ultimate unconditional dominance of maleness over the sexual space *within* the female-dominated domestic space. Sexuality and eroticism both exist *within* domesticity, once again asserting the inability to divorce principals such as *tsniesdik* from erotic desire.

How, then, do we read the act of crawling? It is perhaps simple to relegate it to female submission and maintenance of the gender hierarchy even within the domestic space. However, there is an additional subversive reading of this verb. If we read the act of crawling as sneaking through the liminal space between her home and his bed, we can read it as sneaking past something, past some iteration of the power dynamic. Successfully sneaking past this space, she reclaims dominance within the interaction despite being in "his bed," restoring the ultimate possession of the space (6).

However, Dropkin once again returns to the conditional, again displacing the instigated sexual encounter that she has just written. Dropkin pivots, writing, "if he's cradled in good dreams / or choked by a bad dream—" once again using hypothetical scenarios to displace the role of the speaker in determining her own actions (8-9). While Dropkin ostensibly limits herself with the first use of the conditional mood, she uses it here to create multiple possibilities toward enacting desire. Taking for granted that dreams exist in a binary between "good" and "bad," Dropkin reclaims consummation as the poem's inevitable outcome. This poem's imaginative engagement, particularly in this

segment, is reminiscent of that we read in “O, Secretive Life,” although there the dream state is her own. The speaker “dream[s] so often...of the Inquisition bed”, and longs for her own destruction (5-6). Here, Dropkin flips the conscious and unconscious states of subject and object, as her speaker enacts the destruction of the love object who lays, asleep.

The rest of “And Thirstily I Drink,” however, returns again to the present tense:

he’s mine, lying there. I pull of
 the covers and kiss his chest,
 and thirstily I drink his blood,
 and suddenly everything’s easy and good—
 my sick, my lonely love
 thirsts for his blood.

To escape a constant negotiating of patriarchal power structures, Dropkin concludes the poem by directing her acted desires toward only the love object’s physical body while communicating a marked disregard for his mental state. “He,” as a conscious entity, is a remnant of social decorum (10). In the beginning of the poem, his presence has repeatedly thwarted Dropkin’s speaker’s full expressions of desire. She depends on his unconscious state, then, in the project to fuse her inner desires with her outward actions and never again reveals the love object’s conscious state through the rest of the poem. We will also see more refusal to explore the other’s unconscious state in “I’d Like to See.”

Not only may Dropkin’s speaker only indulge her desire when she is alone with her love-object and within her own space, but also only when he is unconscious and therefore, unaware of her ownership over him. This once again questions consent by a tactic that parallels that which I draw out in my early analysis of “Adam.” However, the violation of consent is different here from that of “Adam,” wherein Dropkin’s “Adam” character consciously protests the violation, repeatedly begging the speaker, “Don’t bite,

don't bite," which she ignores (10). In addition to relegating the violated male to the unconscious realm, Dropkin also writes that her speaker "thirstily...drink[s] his blood," benefiting parasitically from the action rather than only noting the bite to no further (or explicitly noted) end, as in "Adam" (12).

Dropkin ultimately conceives of a vision of the self in this poem that creates and understands itself parasocially. Dropkin's speaker devotes herself entirely to the other, while the other has no conscious affection or concern for her. She is a parasite: once she physically indulges her desires, "suddenly everything's easy and good" (13). The satisfaction of the enacted desire is ultimately its perversity, which the speaker seems to recognize. She calls her love "sick" and "lonely," acknowledging the unrequited, pathological nature of the bond (14). Along with acknowledging pathology, this line compartmentalizes the speaker's "love" as opposed to (or at least different from) her self. *She* does not thirst, only her *love* thirsts. Regardless of the desire's compartmentalization and singular direction, not only *can it* still be fulfilled despite the unconsciousness of the love object, it *may only be* fulfilled upon their unconsciousness. She satisfies herself entirely by consuming the other's body without offering any part of herself (contrary to the initial public gift of virginal flowers).

This poem's multiple theatres of the same desire demonstrate how publically available visions of desire are not the *only* visions of desire. Rather, the same relationship can indulge in desire in myriad ways, and a single desire can take many forms of varying degrees of pleasure to either party, excluding not only those outside of the relation, but also those within it. Other poems have surely seen the receipt and gift of desire occur to adverse and destructive ends, but this poem disregards even the other's conscious

engagement. There seems to be a contradiction here: while Dropkin's aim is to find a tactic through which to unify the inner and outer self, therefore creating a coherent or discrete vision of desire, she depends on the separation of the body and mind of the other, as well as the compartmentalization of her "love" to do it (14). This suggests that within these power structures (which again, Dropkin maintains), a coherent vision of enacted desire only exists within her own consciousness, necessarily unavailable to even her most intimate relations. The following poems, however, will continue to analyze how and to what extent the love object can become privy to this knowledge.

Dropkin reasserts her claim on the domestic physical space in "My Guest." This poem once again challenges the divide between the public and private self but differs from the previous poem as Dropkin locates the actions of the poem definitively within physical space rather than displacing it through projected tenses or solipsistic mediation.

My Guest

Welcome, welcome, my guest.
 Lay down the burden
 of your life, undress, rest
 in my bright home.
 Wash your hands, your feet,
 now sit with me at the table.
 Sate your hunger, your thirst,
 at my breast, at my breast—

Taking place entirely within the domestic space, the first line of this poem, "Welcome, welcome, my guest" already sets a tone of asserting female power (1). Dropkin's speaker opens the poem by inviting the love object in rather than writing the other's entrance as intrusion, a distinct departure from the violating transgressions unto spaces, boundaries, and bodies that we have analyzed in prior readings. Paying attention to Dropkin's regard of the guest, we should notice that she writes the visitor as not just *a* guest, or even *the*

guest, but rather the possessed *my* guest. The speaker takes ownership of the person by taking ownership of her space, underscoring the possession of “my bright home” wherein the ensuing interaction takes place (4). This home is distinct from the orientation of the home in “And Thirstily I Drink,” wherein the guest takes ownership of his immediate space despite being in the speaker’s home—he rests in “his bed” within “my home” (6). Moreover, as a guest, Dropkin furthermore establishes this visit as temporary, displacing the ensuing consummation as something transient and sets the action of this poem up as more innocuous than the parasitic feedings we have seen until this point. We will soon see that the actions of this poem are not distinct in their biting and sucking mechanism. However, Dropkin structures her descriptions of this act quite differently, thus altering its poetic and physical affect.

Dropkin’s speaker introduces these commands first through the mutual, equalizing command to “sit with me at the table,” with the command language inverting the patriarchal power dynamics within the domestic sphere (6). For non-compulsive action to occur, there can be no (or limited) power hierarchy at play. But none of Dropkin’s poems occur on neutral ground. Private space is never necessarily neutral space. As we have discussed, spaces are always possessed and occupied by people with and without power, and people with different types of power that transfer to the space, and vice versa.

Another alteration of syntax, which resembles a strategy explored in poems like “O, Secretive Life,” “The Acrobat,” and “I Sing You” among others is the un-gendering of the poem’s language. Before I get into the effect of this un-gendering, however, I will analyze the strategy by which Dropkin approaches it. With the narrative of the speaker’s

invitation of the love object into her private space, Dropkin lends her speaker the agency to command the love object to “lay down the burden / of your life, undress, rest” (2-3). Despite the speaker’s dominance, she places the onus on the love object to enact her own desire, similarly to the commanding for the speaker’s own punishment in “Suck.”

Dropkin identifying life with burden here is particularly compelling; let us not forget that this project frequently associates desire with life. However, as this poem immediately launches into describing some iteration of consummation, Dropkin does not mean that the guest must disregard their desire. Let us instead think of what has proven burdensome to Dropkin’s explorations of desire. The first chapter discusses the modest *tsniesdik* principal that repressed Dropkin’s female speakers and the second, a subject-object relationship that, too, relied on a gender hierarchy. Though not rejecting desire, Dropkin does reject a facet of desire that has complicated and limited it: gender. The guest never takes on a definite gender within this poem, always being addressed in the second person as “you,” a direct address that transcends the need for explicit gendering. In addition to emphasizing the intimacy between the speaker and their guest, the bypassing of gender denies the objectification of the guest as merely a “he” or “she” who is reduced to their biology to understand how they might fit into the poem’s desirous action.

Like the visit, though, this un-gendered state is transient. Dropkin’s love object “lay[s] down” their burden, implying its careful preservation rather than its destruction. Gender’s momentary disregard, however, allows the speaker and their guest to explore their impending consummation without the public pressure of ascribing to gender hierarchies, freeing their relation to potentially take alternative, non-normative forms.

Dropkin further renders gender obsolete and creates alternatives for the active outcomes of desirous thoughts and engagements within her speaker's domestic space by the maternal consummation that occurs. This union is explicitly not sexual, but maternal. However, Dropkin depends on maternal imagery to write on sexuality, suggesting an inextricable relationship between the two: "Sate your hunger, your thirst, / at my breast, at my breast—" (7-8). Including the image of the breast, however, retains the action's eroticism and also exploits the body as irrevocably a ground of desire, even when it is not enacting sexual desire: the breast as a sexual object is also the breast as a nurturing object. While the physicality of the love-object's body disappears beyond Dropkin's order for the cleansing of their "hands" and "feet," she does not carry this un-gendering over to herself. Dropkin, in fact, retains her femaleness within this concluding line. She expresses a shameless display of the female body, assuming a nurturing, maternal position. She embraces this quality but uses the poem to resist the collapse of female identity that exists only relationally, as a mother. Though she performs this maternal act, she does not identify as a mother. I justify this reading of this breast-feeding as erotic because of the positionality of the love object as the "guest" who Dropkin distinctly does not define as a kin relation.

The stark, unhidden, repeated image of the breast also leads toward a reckoning with the fact that when Dropkin retreats within spaces that are her own, she allows a sense of self no longer displaced by allegory or contorting into visions of natural images or archetypes, but expressing herself in un-borrowed, distinctly human terms. The breast here exists as a stark unhidden, and repeated image.

In addition to ending the poem on a curiously maternal image, Dropkin also utilizes unexpected punctuation in its final line. Rather than resolve the consummation of feeding with a period, the poem ends on an em dash. Though we have explored the presence of this punctuation in its many occurrences, this is the first instance wherein it appears at the end of a poem. Like many of its other uses, this em dash is again inserted by the translators of *The Acrobat* and not Dropkin herself. Dropkin, in the poem's original Yiddish, does however use an ellipsis to end the poem. Though these punctuation choices are similar in that they diverge from an expected resolution, they function to different ends. The original ellipsis suggests a trailing off, perhaps even the release that resembles orgasm, a perverse suggestion against the maternal tone of the desire's consummation being a breast feeding.

The translators' insertion of the ellipses instead asserts irresolution, as we have seen the em dash represent disjunction, disturbance, and distraction. Regardless, the irresolution of this ending suggests that there is more to this action of desire that Dropkin does not make the reader privy to. The nature of writing and publishing a poem contains the agency for the speaker to omit details. This is a resistant use of space, as although the speaker appears to be inviting us into a particularly intimate moment, she may withhold at any point. She sets a boundary here, preventing the reader from garnering any more intimate details and preserving the value of secrecy and intimacy by asserting a privacy within the public space of the poem.

The next poem, "I'd Like to See" lacks an acknowledged physical location. Though this poem discusses the desire for action to take place within physical space, it does not assume a position of inevitable occurrence within physical space. The enacted

desire of the poem is rather the imagination of action, questioning the necessity of physical space and physical engagement to present a potent vision of desirous action.

I'd Like to See

I haven't seen you
 sleeping yet.
 I'd like to see
 how you sleep—
 when you slacken your grip
 on yourself, on me.
 I'd like to see you
 helpless, weak, mute.
 I'd like to see your
 eyes shut, breath stilled.
 I'd like to see you
 dead.

Already the first line of this poem, “I haven't seen you / sleeping yet” sets us in a different space than the rest of the poems we have analyzed (1-2). It depicts an action that not only does not occur in a public nor private physical space but has not and will not occur within the bounds of the poem. Instead, the poem is written as a declaration of desire, as the speaker asserts a series of progressive physical states that they'd “like to see” the love object assume (33). Dropkin therefore expands the vocabulary of what it means to enact desire. It need not be an immediate interaction, rather Dropkin legitimizes visualization, projection, and vocalization as their own meaningful, or potent actions. This would not be the case if her speaker merely voiced desire for her love object to perform the actions within the poem. Rather, the speaker expresses that their pleasure comes from their own potential sensory experience of the love object's actions, the seeing. Inhabiting the hypothetical realm persists throughout the poem. The speaker's projection into a conditional mood brings us back to my focus on “And Thirstily I Drink,” which includes the conditional mood to enable the speaker to meditate on the

potential of realized desirous action. “I’d Like to See” differs from the orientation of the previous poem, however, as Dropkin writes the entire poem within the hypothetical, never projecting it into an immediate temporal or physical present.

The vagueness of “see[ing]” as the locus of desire in “I’d Like to See” is a benefit rather than a detriment. To think of seeing as a meaningful action, we should consider it against the importance of bearing witness and the onus that we often place on the bystander. By orienting the speaker as being satisfied from passively receiving (however purposely, as opposed to the often-reluctant witness and bystander), this poem posits a desire that evades transgression by avoiding the instigation or physical engagement that has led Dropkin’s speaker into trouble in previous readings. This poem also asks where the satisfaction of desire comes from, and what it aims toward. Here, desire does not move toward consummation and is out of the speaker’s own control. The speaker puts the onus on the love object to submit to the desires of the speaker but does not force the engagement. By removing consummation as the anticipated end of desire, Dropkin presents another alternative of fulfillment.

Desire exists here for desire’s sake, without any notion toward consummation, as a state of lack without resolution, or with a resolution that occurs outside of the poem’s bounds. “I’d like to see / how you sleep—” (3-4). This validates introspection as a legitimate manifestation of the self whom desire animates. The freedom of private, realization becomes adequate as a mode of expression, which Dropkin has previously introduced in poems like “The Acrobat,” which occurs in a public theatre while Dropkin’s speaker meditates on her inner desires without mirroring them in her actions. They exist as a hidden state of opposition and secrecy in which “no one knows / how

much I'd like to slip" (13-14) This expression of the self, unlike "The Acrobat," speaks itself fully and implicates the other by addressing them directly, utilizing once more the "you" pronoun rather than defaulting to the distant third person pronouns again.

The actions of the speaker are passive, removing the immediacy of the action through the removal of the bystander as well as the removal of the internal projection. As well as these passive actions of desire, what the speaker desires is also a state of passivity: they'd like to see the love object "sleeping" "helpless, weak, mute" and even "dead" (2, 8, 12). Dropkin's speaker's desires progress in perversion from wanting the other to occupy different unconscious states including sleep, to injury or disease, and finally, death.

So many of Dropkin's versions of desire are aggressive and violating. While those are subversive in and of themselves, this vision of desire resists the increasing assumption that desire must be aggressive, dominant, and obvious to be coherent as such. Desire is ever-changing within this poem. Though we have seen visions of desire vary *between* poems, Dropkin renders this imagined action of desire so unstable as to see it constantly forming and reforming itself as Dropkin's speaker repeatedly invokes it.

This desire is able to constantly reform due to its removal from the constricting power structures of the public sphere. Dropkin does not, however, divorce this poem's vision of desire from these power structures. Here we see the tension between liberation and resistance narratives. Part of this vision of desire is that the sleeper might "slacken your grip / on yourself, on me," which does not suggest that the subconscious is removed from public power structures (5-6). Though all the conscious speaker can do is state their desire, the non-acting recipient of the desires "grip[s]" them, suggesting that the love

object retains a distinct hold of power over the speaker despite their unconsciousness. Slackening a grip is not the same as relinquishing a grip. The power structures still have a hold over the narrator, informing not only the sleeper's behavior, but also the witness's. This is a particularly interesting moment in the poem. Unlike the act to "lay down the burden / of your life" in "My Guest," this poem suggests that it is adequate to retreat into the private space of the home to remove the power structures that exist in public spaces (2-3).

The poem resembles "My Guest" in its second person regard and gender erasure and "And Thirstily I Drink" in its malevolent vision of desire. However, "I'd Like to See" departs from the previous poems that we've looked at, because although it still regards physical interaction, the action of the poem is entirely internalized. Additionally, the poem isolates the speaker's desire from the love object, creating an internal space wherein the one who "see[s]" and the one who is seen have different experiences. Moreover, neither party directly engages with the other. The speaker only bears a distant (and hypothetical) witness, while the love object inertly receives the gaze. While this act of witnessing can and does occur in addition to another performed activity (the Acrobat *sees and performs*), these instances displace the act of witnessing as something less potent than the other simultaneous act. Here, the seeing is entire act, conveying the validity of witness as action as well as suggesting that through the innocuousness of sight, desire can be enacted within the public space, undetected.

To conclude this project, I'd like to take us to Celia Dropkin's "A Love Letter." A poem that again imagines desirous action, this poem again relegates itself to abstract consciousness while communicating the tendency toward creating a symbol of desire: a

love letter. This poem grapples with the space of desire occurring as an object rather than a physical or temporal structure, whether that structure be the caverns of the mind, the four walls of a room or home, or the body of the poem itself.

A Love Letter
For U.N. Gnessin

I would like to write a love letter
to someone, a letter of love:
The seedling called “love” is rooted
deep in my heart.

The seedling is barbed and wild
and sown with an autumn wind.
No, my love is not a seedling:
it’s a newborn, naked and blind.

With blood and with life, the seedling
fights and fusses and cries:
its mouth searches pathetically
for a breast that is distant or dry.

Love is a hungry newborn: it cries itself blue in the face.
Who has sown and birthed it?
Who gnaws and shreds my heart?

I would like to write a love letter
To someone, a letter of love.

The action of this poem still implicitly occupies a physical space, though more removed than any of the others we have examined. Like the last poem, wherein the realization of the projected witnessing would occur in some domestic space like those we’ve seen in the former two poems, the communicated act in this poem, enacting the desire that “I would like to write a love letter” also must occur in some space (1). However, this manifestation of desire is unlike the ones preceding it, as while the writing of the letter creates its own private space of the body of the letter. The poem itself is a viable ground to act and figure out desire, like the song Dropkin’s speaker sings in “I Sing You,”

wherein the details of the song are not revealed, but we know that the singing occurs.

This poem is similar in that we never learn the content of the letter; however, a letter is a more permanent record than the necessarily momentary, transient song that we explored.

The act of writing the letter, regardless of its location, is an autonomous action wherein desire does not necessitate the engagement of the love object (who is also the subject of the letter). In addition to the already subversive transgression of allowing a private object to exist in a public space, Dropkin's speaker also transgresses boundaries of public and private knowledge by recording intimate details within the letter *and* discussing the potential letter in a published poem.

This poem both is shamelessly revealing, and carefully withholding. Dropkin never divulges the sentiments or the relationship that their speaker longs to depict, apart from the letter's dedication to U.N. Gnessin, with whom Celia Dropkin had a "passionate friendship" prior to her marriage to Shmayer Dropkin (Harshav, *Sing, Stranger* 670). Gnessin is recognized as responsible for Dropkin's writing poetry. However, Dropkin displaces this dedication by speaking only to "someone" rather than to him, defending the intimacy around her desire by creating a false sense of anonymity around its subject (2).

Analyzing this poem serves as somewhat of a retrospective of the journey that we have taken through this project. As the last poem I analyze, if we look at its body as a culmination of Dropkin's work through this progressive analysis we see many allusions and connections to Dropkin's other poems, in turn illuminating the importance of our journey as Dropkin as configured and honed her own poetics of desire.

Though the poem uses a similar grammatical construction to "I'd Like to See" in its first line, "I would like to write a love letter, to someone, a letter of love," this poem

does not contract its verb, claiming the excess not only of repetition, but also the excess of expanding its syntax. As Dropkin continues to talk of love as a thing that grows, this repetition, and the expanded verb, mirrors the growing of the desire to write of the growing “love” in the proposed letter. Dropkin also repeats the pair of these lines as a refrain at the end of the poem.

“A Love Letter” is also similar to “And Thirstily I Drink,” in that the first stanza opens up a set of conditions for the writing of the love letter to occur. However, the poem does not take the form of Dropkin creating conditions that will make this love letter viable. She instead cycles her poem through potential images of this “love” that she longs to write about. Dropkin’s refusal to create the conditions of realizing the love letter resists the tendency of desire toward consummation, allowing the proposal of action to be the action within itself.

The cycling through images that I bring is up very similar to the structure of “My Hands,” though with a distinct difference. In chapter two, I explore the possible relationships of multiple juxtaposed metaphors as either variably applicable, superseding each other, or compounding upon each other. Dropkin introduces a plurality of images to depict her hands, subverting modesty principals by shrouding the physiology of her hands through images of the natural world and of eroticism. However, Dropkin in this poem does not compound her ideas of love but posits possibilities, rejecting those which don’t align with her experience.

Dropkin’s speaker originally describes her love as “the seedling called ‘love’ is rooted / deep in my heart,” (3-4). This is a passive construction of love, which will continue to shape the poem. Dropkin does not actively pursue or claim this love. Instead,

it has taken hold of her. Dropkin's reluctant participation with this love might provide a potential reason for her unacted desire to follow through on her proposal to write this letter—the love is something that has claimed her, but she does not seem to stake her own claim on her agency to participate as of yet. Presumably dissatisfied with this imagination of love for its removal of agency (it is “sown with an autumn wind,” another passive construction), this metaphor returns us to “He and She” as the female leaves are removed from the male branch by an autumn wind: “Autumn dyes her deep / colors. The cold wind cruelly / exiles her from the branch” (10-12). Moreover, the agricultural allusion of love's sowing action also brings us back toward my analysis of “I Sing You,” where Dropkin's speaker reflects that her lover, “didn't sow a child in me. / you sowed yourself” (1-2).

The inadequacies of the seedling imagery lead to Dropkin rejecting this image, deferring to the notion that “No, my love is not a seedling: / it's a newborn, naked and blind” (7-8). While it appears that this image adds Dropkin's agency back into her imaginations around love, it later becomes clear that this is not the case. Dropkin displaces this agency once asks the hypothetical questions, “Who has sown and birthed it? / Who gnaws and shreds my heart?” (14-15). With this question, Dropkin denies possession or maternal, nurturing obligation for this newborn “love.” Rounding out this metaphor are two hypothetical questions, similar to those in “O, Secretive Life” which we looked at in the first chapter wherein the speaker asks several questions to an unknown force who destroys and dominates her (to her own perverse pleasure). Questions function differently in this poem, however. The questions Dropkin's speaker asks here are attempts to distance herself from any responsibility to this vulnerable yet

demanding “love.”. The speaker here endeavors to extricate herself from the “love” that possesses her, which would enable her to write of her desire, and to multiply the metaphors that are presently available (and inadequate to) denote this love.

As I will soon contend, I see love and desire existing as different forces within this poem. The previous two lines assert this position yet implicate the speaker in caring for this newborn despite their lack of kinship: “its mouth searches pathetically / for a breast that is distant or dry” (11-12). The lack of responsibility for birthing or nurturing the newborn is irrelevant, the inability to place the newborn to one particular nurturer reasserts the nature of love that is evident within the passive construction of the seedling metaphor: despite Dropkin’s attempts to remove or distance herself from the claim of love, the search of the newborn or the sowing of the seeds renders her reluctance obsolete.

This is clearer in the final stanza of the poem, where Dropkin returns to the inciting desire of the poem. Though Dropkin constantly revises her images of *love*, she maintains her action of *desire* as existing as the state wherein “I would like to write a love letter / to someone, a letter of love” (16-17). The poem ends where it begins, though it is a conglomeration, a compounding of all of the images of desire. Like the illumination of plurality in “And Thirstily I Drink,” this poem asserts the changeability of desire through its constantly shifting metaphor, again resisting singular or static readings of desire.

While the images that Dropkin assigns to her speaker’s “love” vary between available translations, regard of the love letter itself diverge. The original Yiddish of this poem repeats the same phrase within the refrain that begins and ends the poem. *The*

Acrobat translators alter it to “A love letter, a letter of love,” but Kathryn Hellerstein’s translation preserves this repetition “I would want to write someone / love letter, a love letter”¹⁵ (1-2). If we think back, once more, to my analysis of “I Sing You,” we see how changes in prepositions alter a sentence fragment. To write “a love letter” is distinct than writing “a letter of love.” A love letter emphasizes the discrete subject of the letter, while a letter of love displaces them—a letter about love itself that does not necessarily adhere to one particular person or thing. It rather expands the potential to encompass issues within the “love” that Dropkin attempts to articulate, such as its codependency, its reluctant hold, or its coercion. This alteration constitutes an uncharacteristic departure from the hyper-fixation on this desire that Dropkin’s original repetition sustains. *The Acrobat* translation does, however, reflect the metamorphosis of “love” that characterizes the rest of the poem. In altering the phrase to emphasize metamorphosis, this translation draws out the proliferation of pluralism that we explore throughout this project, albeit incompletely. Hellerstein’s translation, on the other hand, aligns more closely to the syntax of Dropkin’s Yiddish original (and her project at large), as Hellerstein highlights the tension between pluralism and fixity. Hellerstein draws out the tension that has served as the basis of this project by juxtaposing the singularity that the writing of the letter proposes, with the ever-changing images of the speaker’s “love” itself.

Imagining the interactions between desire and the bodies and spaces that it inhabits is incredibly useful in articulating the central issues of Dropkin’s poetics. In our navigations of desire, which I identify as an impulse rooted deeply within the body, we must always remember the implications of one’s surroundings on imagining and

¹⁵ Translated by Kathryn Hellerstein in “The Art of Sex in Yiddish Poems: Celia Dropkin and her Contemporaries” pp. 205

influencing its ever-changing expressions. The layers of inhabited and acted-upon spaces have particular implications on behaviors. As these poems contend, these spaces may be temporal, physical, abstract, fluid, or fixed. These dynamics inform our every move. They compound upon each other, ushering the desirer toward decisions that affect both the immediate present and remote or hypothetical futures. However, Dropkin's poetics ensure that these decisions and ensuing behaviors are all but naturalized. Dropkin's poetics ultimately denaturalize the automation of enacted reality, forcing us to confront not only ourselves but the environments that we exist in and sustain. As these sentiments suggest, awareness is the ultimate resistance.

Afterword.

As this project comes to its end, we should reflect on how far we've come in understanding Celia Dropkin's explorations of desire. Though I staked out this project assuming that I would soon conquer an understanding of desire, I now realize how naïve that end is. In fact, undertaking this project of examining Celia Dropkin's poetry has led me beyond seeing "conquering" as a form of "understanding." Throughout my various stages of research and writing, the idea of even forging a single understanding of desire grew slippery (and I think, impossible) as Celia Dropkin moves through as many iterations of desire as poems she writes. While the desires within these individual poems often resemble each other, they never imagine nor advocate for the primacy of any single manifestation, nor expect that any one image will or should become dominant. Dropkin's poetry realizes that an agenda distilling a vision of desire as ideal or correct only play into the suppression that she contends. As soon as something may be defined and understood, it is vulnerable to domination.

Dropkin challenges the affixed, singular, and hierarchical vision of desire that pervades the conservative Yiddish-Jewish culture that she writes out of. Beyond the context from which Dropkin's works emerge, my ultimate hope in writing this project is that we come away from this project equipped to consider desire beyond the boundaries of the page. Moreover, I hope we discard our personal projects of conquering desire (and other challenging concepts) in order to interact with it meaningfully.

As this project contends, desire need not be accessed in a manner that adheres to conventional frameworks of power, of which the impulse to 'conquer' is a symptom, whether that be adhering to given power structures or pursuing a legible version of

liberation from oppositions of power. Dropkin's desires instead stay in tension with the forces acting against them as her poems articulate, embody, and enact alternatives within the suppressive frameworks that generate the desire itself. By no means are articulation, embodiment, and enacting desire the only three categories that cohere around desire.

These categories are simply those which resonated with me as I lived and experienced my own life during the course of this project. Interacting with this project should teach us is the inherent interconnectedness of seemingly disparate impulses and frameworks—and the capacity of the self to influence our own surroundings. We may accept the presence of cultural boundaries while also creating a space for our own individual identities to exist within our limits. We may also cohere concepts around our inherent subject positionalities, but only as long as at the same time as we allow ourselves to be dually influenced by these categories in our simultaneous object positionalities. Never before this project have I been able to reckon with an existence as dynamic as this; one that enriches and is enriched by its surroundings in such a profound way.

In addition to challenging my individual worldview, though—or precisely because—undertaking this project was often arduous, Dropkin's poems have transformed my critical ability and my idea of what criticism is. I will undoubtedly never read a poem, or any work of literature for that matter, the same way again. Dropkin does exactly what a poet should do when she writes on desire. She makes our synapses fire, she connects disparate images, and she forces us to connect with deep, unexamined or latent parts of ourselves. Essentially, she makes us question ourselves. This project has expanded my critical vocabulary and the strategy behind my criticism. It has allowed me to see beyond

my previously limited, absolutist mentality wherein I anticipated the neat applicability of preconceived categories to complicated, multivalent concepts.

Even beyond thinking of desire, the categories that exploring Dropkin's poems draw out are essential to our experiences as humans. We must reckon with ourselves as discrete entities, imagining how we perform within the structures that constrain us. We must also question our submission to the frameworks of power that dominate us.

Exploring Dropkin's poems allows us to consider how many of our limits are invented, sustained, and proliferated by ourselves. At the very least, we should become aware of the artifice or the instability of these frameworks. I have the distinct feeling, through undertaking this project, that simply prodding at the edges of our self-imposed confinement may yield more rewarding results than we may have originally expected. I hope the mentality offered by Celia Dropkin stays with us all as we navigate our world, our lives, and our relationships.

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