

LANGUAGE, BODY AND TRANS POETICS: AN INTERVIEW WITH JOY LADIN

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Joy Ladin is an American transwoman poet and a professor of English at Stern College, an undergraduate college of Arts and Sciences at the orthodox Jewish institution Yeshiva University, in New York. Not only an exponent in American Literature, the writer is also widely renowned for her fight for transgender rights, and for being the first openly transgender professor in an orthodox Jewish university since 2007.

Coming from a literary tradition in which the lyric speaker voice often corresponds to that of the subject of the statement, Joy Ladin's struggle with poetry is also a struggle within life, once her lifelong relationship with language was built upon a dichotomy between being and hiding, effacing and finding her own voice. That way, a relationship initially molded by oppression gained strength and transparency as the poet gradually became who she is. By reading her poetic works, one can notice traits of a lyric speaker that meets what she calls a *trans poetics*: a voice seeking to express identities that do not conform to socially recognized categories, that is, a word-centered poetics. In this sense, we can understand *Trans poetics* as a poetics that does not fit the binary world of cisnormativity. It is not only a poetics of transgenders, but it speaks through non-conforming voices that comprehend different performances of being.

Aiming at denaturalizing another terminology in Literature Studies, I proposed, in my PhD thesis, the concept of *eu lírica* (POUBEL, 2020). *Eu lírica* is a term in the Portuguese language that refers to a female lyric voice, therefore a female poetic performance, highlighting issues of gender, in the poetic text. In this sense, the *eu lírica* dismisses the *eu lírico*, the standard term in Portuguese for the speaker in a poem. The concept of *eu lírico* assumes the masculine gender as a universal feature in poetic voices. To denaturalize and question that patriarchal

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assumption, my thesis proposes the concept of *eu lírica* from a theoretical debate and in poetic analyses of poetry written by women.

Based on the dialogue between Joy Ladin's idea of *trans poetics* and the concept of *eu lírica* (POUBEL, 2020), the following interview was carried out through e-mails exchanged in May, 2018, and after a few videoconferences with the author to get to know her poetic work better. The questions approach Joy Ladin's writing process in different moments of her life, before and after transitioning, and the necessity to break free from a stiff relationship with language in order to finally *be*. The interview also intended to appreciate her dynamics with words and with the poetic text itself, as well as appreciate the possible ways of reading her poems, the voice that comes from them, and the power of *trans poetics* in the lyric.

Interviewer: Based on your interviews and papers, I could notice that your creative process varies according to the moment in your life. Could you comment on how this process develops?

Joy Ladin: As you note, my writing habits have changed a lot over the decades as I moved in and out of school, raising small children, living as a man and living as myself. But until you pointed it out here I didn't realize that through this all my fundamental approach to poetry hasn't changed. Although I can easily fill notebooks and word processing documents with hundreds of pages of poetic material, that material ends up producing relatively few poems I consider finished, and even fewer I consider worth collecting.

I've always envied poets like Rimbaud and Dickinson, who can make poetry that will live for centuries out of a few moments of inspiration, but I never trust much of what I write that way. Usually, I don't think my spontaneous leaps of imagination, my non sequiturs and decorations, hold up to much scrutiny. They don't mean enough, they aren't connected enough to deep movements and structures, and they aren't inventive or startling enough to be shooting stars or shudders of illumination, as so many of Dickinson's phrases, even in mediocre poems, are. When I was living as a man, I blamed this on the need to always conceal myself: I was a lie trying to write poems that were true, a persona who somehow wanted to evoke depths of feeling. That's hard and often self-defeating. When I began living as myself, poetry poured out of me, but to my disappointment, that work too had to be subjected to the same skeptical, iterative process of revision. When I was preparing my new and selected poems, *The Future is Trying to Tell Us Something*, published last year, I was dismayed at how many unripe and unworthy poems I published in earlier collections; it was a relief to let them fall away.

Lorine Niedecker compares her writing process to working in a condensary. I rarely achieve condensation – I like run-on sentences too much for that! – but I revisit drafts over weeks, months, and years to try to eliminate the empty rhetoric, the blather, the ideas that interest me but are disconnected from feeling, the feelings that are strong but disconnected from larger ideas, the images and phrases that sound good but mean less and less every time I reread them, and

– this is a big reason I eliminate many otherwise “finished” pieces – poems that don’t move beyond my own emotional and intellectual limitations, that express rather than transfigure what I am.

I: In “Girl in a Bottle: An autobiographical Excursion into the Poetics of Transsexuality” (2015), you analyze your poems from the perspective of creation and writes about the relationship of words in a feminine universe. Is your gender identity part of your poetic identity? A poetics of body identity?

JL: It is hard for me to be sure how my personal experience of the relation between language and body – a relation shaped, as I detail in that essay, by the experience of growing up hiding my female gender identity – illuminates less fraught, less idiosyncratic forms of the language-body relation. I believe that my personal experience, like everyone else’s, offers a glimpse of what it means to be human. But my sense of the language-body relationship was forged in trauma and fear and isolation. Like many transgender people, I grew up trying with little success to use the language I had been given to understand my body, my feelings, and how they might relate to those of other people and thus help me locate myself in the gendered world. Not only didn’t that language help me. It actively wounded me, prompting me to distort my sense of myself to fit binary gender categories, and, when that failed, as it always did, to suicidal despair of ever being what others considered human. Some transgender and non-trans people have similarly traumatic experiences of the language-body relation, but I don’t have enough information to tell which aspects of my experience were peculiar to me, which are common among transgender people, and which might be common among people in general, though I know that many non-trans girls and women are also harmed by attempting to understand themselves in terms of the gendered language, with all its patriarchal and misogynist assumptions, their cultures provide them.

In any case, as I said in the essay you mention, because I grew up believing (rightly) that my life depended on hiding my female gender identity, I developed rigid habits to keep myself from using any language I thought might be associated with femininity. Using such language, I feared, might reveal who I really was. If this sounds ridiculous, it was; I began this protective practice as a young child, and my ideas of what kind of language might reveal me were child-like, overbroad, as neurotic as the idea promoted by the rhyme, popular when I was young, that said, “Step on a crack and you’ll break your mother’s back.” To me, avoiding any words or ways of talking I considered feminine seemed like a matter of life and death, and as often happens with life-and-death taboos, the category of things I had to avoid constantly expanded, so that I soon was avoiding not only language explicitly considered feminine by my family and culture, but also words associated, however vaguely, with such language.

For example, while interest in clothing was generally considered feminine in the world I grew up in, I not only refused to learn words for different kinds of

garments, I refused to learn words even for fabrics I often wore (I was in college before I finally let myself understand what “corduroy” meant). Words for color were also taboo – not just the kind of fancy, refined words, such as “desert taupe,” that populated the pages of my mother’s clothing catalogs, but any color words beyond the few we were taught in kindergarten. To speak of color, to care about color, to notice color – all of these seemed like dangerously feminine behaviors that might reveal who I really was.

As though I were determined to personally prove the Whorf-Sapir hypothesis that language shapes our experience of reality, I not only avoided color words, I blinded myself to the variations they named. I couldn’t distinguish shades of reds, blues, greens, yellows, I didn’t let them become part of my perceptions or my memories. I still find it difficult to notice, distinguish and name colors, probably because I inflicted this developmental disability on myself. When I started to live as myself, I engaged in a kind of remedial color therapy, taking up the hobby of beading necklaces as a way of physically engaging myself with color variation as a meaningful part of my experience. I still find it hard to remember the words for different colors or to associate them with sensory experiences, but beading enabled me to connect with color and pattern viscerally, to play with them and create with them in ways that had always felt too dangerous for me. That helped me leave the self-imposed greyness of my male life behind, and live in a richer, more luminous world.

Color, of course, is a trivial example of my traumatized version of the language-body relation. After all, there are many happily gendered women who are color blind. More telling in terms of the intersection of language and body was my avoidance of words for feelings. As I’ve written in my memoir, like many (though certainly not all) trans kids, I grew up largely, though not completely, dissociated from my body. I felt things, particularly when I was a very young child, but the older I grew the harder it became to register and embrace physical sensation and experience, because the maleness of the body through which those feelings came to me seemed to not only contradict but actually erase my sense of female gender identity. I preferred to feel nothing rather than to feel I was the boy others took me to be.

Most physical feelings, of course, especially for children, are not specifically male nor female. But to me, it seemed that feelings that came to me through a male body were male, and if I embraced them as mine, I was embracing my body’s maleness as my own. Of course, because I was dissociated so often, most of my feelings were distant, dim, attenuated, so it wasn’t hard to ignore them, but I consciously embraced dissociation as a way of life that affirmed the truth of my female gender identity, my sense of self that had no body. My body, for the most part, seemed like a cold, hollow place, and I found myself puzzled by the strong feelings I could see in those around me. Pain was particularly puzzling. When I felt physical pain, I dissociated, so even when I broke my wrist during a physical game, it didn’t bother me enough to stop playing. I couldn’t understand why pain seemed to bother others until my gender transition had progressed so far that my body had begun to seem like my own. I remember the very moment I understood

pain: I was undergoing a minor but painful medical procedure, and I found I wasn't willing to dissociate, because unlike when I was living as a male, now the feelings coming through my body confirmed that I was there, alive, myself.

In my family, women did most of the emotional labor, the job of feeling and expressing feeling, including the work of feeling and expressing pain and pleasure, and so to me the language of feeling was feminine. I didn't talk much about feelings, whether physical or emotional, and because feelings came to me through a male body, I avoided recognizing or naming what I felt, imposing the taboo against using feeling words even in the privacy of my own mind.

There were many consequences to this, including the fact that silencing feeling made it hard to form clear, deep memories; most of my childhood is a blank to me, and even when I remember my life as an adult man, I remember it mostly in the third person, as though it happened to someone else, someone whose feelings I perceive at from a distance. As a result, when I wrote poetry as a male – something I did for about forty years – I had few words for feelings, and few memories of feelings, on which to draw. I wrote poems that describe feelings in general, or feelings I imagined were shared, or which present situations without emotional interpretation, like scenes in a movie without music.

When I started to trying to write poetry as myself – as someone who openly identifies as female – one of my first exercises was to write poems using only words found in women's magazines, to see if I could make poetry from "women's language," language written by and to women. I had no idea how or even whether that language might be different from the language I had been using to write poetry all my life. My internal taboos against feminine language were so extreme that I didn't even let myself be conscious of all the language I considered feminine. Because I had kept myself from such language all my life, I was afraid I wouldn't be able to make poetry from it, that "women's language," whatever it was, might not mean or express or sing or dance when used by me. Of all those fears I had about living as myself – there were many, particularly because transgender women are so often subjected to harassment, shunning, and violence – this was one of the deepest: that I couldn't write poetry as a woman, that I might have to choose between being a poet, and being myself. Just as when I was a child, my relation to language I thought of as feminine seemed like a matter of life and death. But now the relation was turned on its head: before, my life depended on avoiding such language; now, I needed to learn to use and create and make truth and beauty through feminine language, or I would never be truly alive.

When I began to clumsily arrange phrases from women's magazines into lines of poetry, I was delighted (and a bit stunned) to find that not only could make *I poetry* through this language, but that the vocabularies I was learning to use were resurrecting entire lost continents of feeling and experience: color, texture, pattern, yes, but also desire, expectation, disappointment, emotions of all shapes and sizes, words for scents, words for relationships, complex idioms of hope and yearning, fulfillment and vulnerability, authenticity and honesty, artifice and performance, and, in a way that perhaps only someone who grew up outside

female socialization could perceive, strength. The more I used these words to make poetry, the more I discovered these feelings in my body, these colors and textures in my world, these depths in my relationships and my soul. This is not because these words were inherently feminine – most of the words and realms of experience they refer to are not specific to either gender – but because when I tried to avoid the language of femininity, I cut myself off from much of the language, and thus much of the glory and the anguish, of being human.

I: Thinking about the poetic procedures used both before and after your transition, do you believe that all readers of your work will find the same lyric speaker in the poems, or do they change according to the readers' standpoint towards the poem?

JL: I love that you are thinking about ways of reading that might fit these poems, and that you are prompting me to distinguish between and look for intersections between a way of reading that looks at the poem as a process of self-creation of the author, and one by a subject who is different from me and the life situation that prompted the poem but who is nonetheless looking to these poems for language that might fit her very different self and life.

Let me feel my way through this question autobiographically. The moment I started writing what I thought of as poetry when I was a young child, I noticed that it was only when I was writing that I felt truly alive. Writing poetry was not only a pleasure and a survival mechanism; it felt ecstatic, in the sense of *ex stasis*, like an escape both from the body that marked me as a male (I felt like I was soaring beyond my body when I wrote) and – though I was not conscious of this till I was in my twenties – from the cramped, self-defeating terms for existence I had imposed on myself, and internalized from the binary gender world around me – a world in which I, me as I knew myself, was an impossibility, something that did not and could not physically exist. When I was writing, I *was* that self, and existing through in a world – a world made of language – that, at least on the level of sound and syntax and denotation, others would accept and even enter into. Language was the common denominator I shared with the human race, a way of being human that seemed to free me from the binary strictures of humanity. The sensuous life of language enabled me to feel and evoke sensations and emotions that were independent of gender, independent of words I used or avoided, that came from long before me and which I could hear sighing and laughing long after I would be gone. It enabled me to feel I was giving something to a human race I believed wanted nothing from a creature like me, in a form that enabled us to touch one another, I imagined, soul to soul, consciousness to consciousness. Language, as I experienced it when writing poetry, felt like it was literally writing me into existence, connecting me to well-springs of life and power from which I otherwise felt cut off, summoning me beyond the sterile, binary-besotted, traumatized and self-tormenting terms in which I lived into a

realm of vitality and richness in which the categories and limitations of gender and physicality seemed irrelevant.

As you can see from this description, I never thought of this language and the life I touched through it as personal, as mine alone. By early adulthood I was aware that what I valued most in my poetry was what was more than, beyond, me. My aspiration as a poet was and still is to create poetic language that does for others what it does for me: open a door to what it means to be truly, fully alive.

Of course, I write many poems that speak from and to my specific experience, my subject position, my fears and concerns, but however alive I feel while writing these poems, they never seem to me to offer enough life to be worth preserving. Adam Zagajewski, in one of my favorites of his poems, imagines Franz Schubert giving a press conference after his death and saying, “A song is a very small Noah’s ark.” I want to write poems that are Noah’s arks carrying bits of life that buoys but is beyond me, that managed to happen through me, but is not limited to me. Those kinds of poems, I imagine, carry something worth sailing across the seas of otherness and floods of particularity that makes what is you yours and what is me mine. This is not to say that I aim to write as a universal lyric self – I don’t believe in that, any more than you do. It is to say that I aim to write poems that start but do not end with the little bit of protoplasm that is me.

The Talmudic sage Hillel famously said, “If I am not for myself, who will be? If I am for myself alone, what am I?” If a poem is not for me – does it embody or express what is true or necessary or meaningful for me – who will it be for? But if it is only for me, if it only speaks to my experience and particularity, what is it? When I lived in hiding as a male, that was my nightmare: that what I created would never mean anything to anyone else, because I was so different from everyone else. The act of writing poetry always, at least briefly, dispels that nightmare, and when I see, as you have helped me see, that my writing does have meaning to others, whatever it may, I can see the nightmare for what it has always been: the dream of a terrified child, from which poetry is always awakening me.

I: By reading your poems I’ve noticed that, in some of them, you evoke the image of a girl when you do feminine performances. It seems to me that in these poems your lyric voice is at the same time manifesting itself as a girl and also trying to discover what feminine performances this girl can do. The use of the noun *girl*, instead of *woman*, could be related to this movement of “learning how to be a woman”?

JL: Thank you for picking up on! You are exactly right about “girl” has meant to me – a word that connotes growing into a person and a life that expresses my female gender identity, a word for *becoming*, unlike the word “woman,” which implies *being*, and, for me, a standard of completeness, wholeness, that I felt then and still feel I can never meet. “Girl” speaks from and to a process that is never, during girlhood, completed, a process that like writing poetry is one of trial and

error, drafts and revisions, strength entangled with vulnerability, delight in the moment without knowing where the moment will lead. It is the closest the gender binary comes to offering a word for a me who is always in transition, always becoming – me as I know myself to be.

When I was growing up, the only recognized language for my sort of transgender experience (that is, being a male-to-female transsexual) was the formula “a woman trapped in a man’s body.” When I was growing up, I tormented myself by trying to locate this trapped woman inside me, the impossible woman – fully formed without body or life – who this formula told me would have to be there if I truly were who I felt myself to be. Of course, I couldn’t find her, and so I was never free of the fear that what I thought was my authentic sense of self was actually hollow, empty – that by the standards of this formula, I was all imprisoning maleness, with nothing trapped inside.

I still had the same childish idea when I began to live as myself in my mid-forties. I kept expecting that, now that I was free from pretending to be a man, a fully formed woman who knew everything about herself, her femininity, her place in the world, would emerge, perhaps replacing the fragile, fledgling female self I was growing, perhaps suffusing it with confidence, strength, and wisdom, but in any case magically vaulting me from *becoming* to *being*. Needless to say, this didn’t happen to me any more than it happens for people who are born and raised female. A girl is not a woman trapped in an immature female body. As Simone de Beauvoir says, though for very different reasons, “One is not born, but rather becomes, a woman.”

In my culture, in my language, there still is no word for the kind of person I was then, an adult with a female gender identity but no experience of living it. The word “girl” means someone who is born female and is expected to inevitably (“naturally,” we say) become a woman; the word “woman” means someone who has grown into female maturity and, in this respect at least, is done becoming. Those two words, and the binary they imply – a binary that posits being and becoming as mutually exclusive states – are profoundly inadequate even to describe non-transgender people. I have never met a woman who has told me she is done growing and becoming, and all the girls I have known are fully themselves even though they are in the midst of becoming. But when I was starting to live as myself, those were the only words I had available. “Woman” named a state of being, complete and perfected, I had not achieved and was reluctantly beginning to realize I would never achieve – which, by binary gender standards, meant either that I was a failure, or, worse, an imposter, a man pretending to be a woman he knows he isn’t. “Girl” named someone destined, like me, to engage in the messy, complicated process of becoming a woman. Because I was a parent of three by then, I knew the wonder and beauty of children becoming, and also the inconsistency and unpredictability, the playfulness and terror, of their unfolding. But I had no one to see me that way when I was in my mid-forties, no one to love and cherish and protect and delight in my becoming. Addressing my unfolding self with the word “girl” in my poems of gender transition was a way

of imagining someone seeing me that way. Poetry gave me the voice of a parent who knew and loved my process of becoming, who saw my growing into myself not as an embarrassing series of failures, of belated immaturity, but as necessary, sacred, and endearing, because this imaginary parent saw me the way parents are supposed to see their children: as miracles, small, vulnerable, and often silly, but who must be enabled to become themselves.

I: How do you understand the lyric voice expressed in poetry? Is it possible for you to imagine a universal speaker, or does each poem have an identity potentially distinct from the one that we comprehend as universal? Would this identity be the discursive entity of the becoming?

JL: Because I knew I was transgender even before I started writing poetry, I never imagined that my poems could express a universal self, not only because I had to hide my true self in and outside my poetry, but because I felt sure that what we would now call my transgender identity made me utterly different from every other human being. Even if my culture had promoted the idea of a universal lyric self in poetry, I would have known that self wouldn't, couldn't, include me.

But as it happened, the American poetic tradition in which I was raised – I started attending writing workshops in early adolescence in the early 1970's, and didn't stop till I had graduated from college a decade later– did not promote the idea of a universal lyric self. I was taught that poems were supposed to be personal, rooted in and true to the life, feelings, and experience of the poet. Even today, young poets are taught that they should "write what you know," and what young poets know, for the most part, is themselves, their families, the places they have lived in, the experiences they have had. We aren't supposed to write as everyone; we are supposed to write as ourselves.

Like other young poets, I was told to avoid literary convention, cultural allusions, high rhetoric, intellectual abstractions – all the trappings that are supposed to make a lyric self seem universal rather than the expression of a particular person in a particular time and place. It was that specificity, I was taught, that would make poems meaningful to others, though no one ever explained how or why. Looking back, I suspect that this poetics grew out of the very White assumption that our lives mattered, that they – we – were so inherently meaningful that others would respond to details of our experiences with the intensity that nineteenth-century readers responded to high-flown phrases about nightingales and mortality.

The American worship of individuality on which this poetics (or at least the highly simplified version taught to me as an adolescent) is based implied that the individual self was too precious, too luminous, to dissolve in universality – though it is important to note that we weren't taught to define the speakers in our poems demographically, to make clear our positions in racial, economic, and cultural hierarchies. Poetry that did speak universally, as most American poetry did in the nineteenth century, was seen as inauthentic, artificial, rhetorical, and terminally

old-fashioned – pre-modern, anti-modern, not worth reading (I discuss the evolution of American poetry from nineteenth-century universalizing to more individual ideas of the lyric in my essay, “‘You are making me now’: Writing God as a Contemporary American Poet.”).

As a result, I didn’t feel that I had to write against a universal “I,” or to pretend fit into one. I had the opposite problem: finding a way to write in a tradition that demanded I write authentically as an individual, when my whole life was devoted to inauthenticity, to hiding who I truly was.

But there was one common American poetic form which, like my life, was based on making inauthenticity seem authentic: the persona poem, a first-person poem in which it is understood that the speaker is someone or something other than the poet. Even my poems that presented themselves as personally “authentic” were more or less persona poems, attempts to write as though I really were my male persona. But when writing persona poems, I could drop the charade of writing as though I were a real person, and escape into imagining and expressing the feelings and concerns of a fictional speaker. My first book, *Alternatives to History*, has many persona poems in it; my second, *The Book of Anna*, is entirely written in the persona of a fictional poet.

When I began living rather than hiding my female gender identity, I wanted to stop writing as someone I wasn’t. I imagined it would be easy to claim my birthright as a narcissistic American poet and write first-person poems in which the pronoun “I” referred to the real, the actual, me. But turned out to be harder than I thought. For one thing, it took me several years of living as myself before I had enough of a post-transition self to write about. The first-person poems in *Transmigration* and *Coming to Life*, the first collections I published as myself, were written about my experiences as a parent and spouse in the midst of a horrible divorce – experiences rooted in my life as a man.

Another problem was, and still is, that there are few signifiers that denote a self and a life like mine. As I said above, I could and did use words like “girl” to define my first-person speakers, but those words come from and identify me with binary gender categories that cannot fully name my experience. Another strategy, one I have never liked much, was to identify the speaker of my poems in ways that make it clear that I don’t fit binary gender categories, creating an “I” that is defined as much or more by what it isn’t as by what it is. But that’s not how I experience myself either. A third strategy, one I have often used in more recent poems, is to create poetic speakers who, though not universal, are defined in terms of gender or even bodies. Yet another strategy, the one I felt most comfortable with, is to write poems in the second person, in which an undefined speaker who is and isn’t me intimately addresses a “you” who, because in English the second person is gender neutral, can be defined in ways drawn on gendered signifiers but never specify the gender of the “you.”

This problem – the problem of how to create language that signifies and expresses selves who don’t fit recognized categories – is at the heart of what I call “*trans poetics*.” Since no self completely fits human categories, *trans poetic* techniques

are not limited to transgender poets or speakers. The Hebrew prophets engage in *trans poetics* in passages in which God speaks in the first person; *trans poetics* is on delightful display in the ancient Welsh poem that begins, “I am Taliesen. I speak perfect meter”; and we see it in perhaps its most public, extroverted form in Whitman’s “Song of Myself,” in which “I” claims to include every kind of person the speaker names.

In light of your question, I would say that *trans poetics* assumes the absolute particularity of the lyric self – a particularity so extreme there are no words that truly name it. But *trans poetic* lyrics also assume that this indefinable particularity is a universal characteristic, that while no readers can fully identify with the lyric self presented in any given poem, all can identify with the struggle to express unnamable aspects of who and what we are – the struggle that turns the noun- and adjective-centered language of being – language that implies that we can name what we are – into the verb-centered language of becoming.

I: From your discussions about *trans poetics* I understand that a poem is the ideal or natural space for *trans poetics* because a poem does not have a complete meaning in itself; it is potentially an unending *becoming*. In case there is a specific poetics of transgender, what is it all about? Could you tell us about the relation between a poetics that is trans and *trans poetics*?

JL: This is a very interesting question, one for which I am not sure that there is yet an answer. There is no stable definition of “transgender” even as a gender or demographic category; “trans” is a self-identification that basically means “I am something more complicated than male or female,” and signals that one has to get to know the individual to understand their personal relation to gender and identity. Since I can’t define “transgender” or “trans,” because they are really just markers that point toward complex acts of self-identification, I think “a poetics that is trans” might mean an approach to language, naming, syntax, that reflects the poet’s own process of self-identification beyond binary gender categories. (I’m not sure, by the way, that anyone else would embrace this definition.)

An example of this kind of “poetics that is trans” in my own work is the syntax in the poem “Losing Your Breasts.” In that poem, most of the lines are syntactical fragments that do not have fixed positions within complete sentences, and so their meaning shifts as the syntax of the poem unfolds, just as my sense of self and identity kept shifting, day by day and sometimes moment by moment, as I wobbled between living as a man and venturing out as a woman – or, as the poem puts it, as I put on and removed my breasts. By contrast, *trans poetics* (again, this is a personal definition, not an official one) means what I said above: not poetics that reflects a personal act of self-identification, but the more general act of expressing, defining, or making visible selves that don’t fit within established social categories, and so cannot be denoted by readily available terms, metonymies, or other signifiers. Dickinson is a major exponent of *trans poetics* in this sense

(though I would never claim that she was transgender) because she often writes first-person poems that attempt to signify selves that don't make sense in terms of established categories (I discuss this view of *trans poetics* in Dickinson's work and in American poetry more generally, in "Split It Open and Count the Seeds").

I: Lusophone literary critical texts exclusively use the masculine form "eu lírico" to designate all and every lyric voice, irrespective of the gender performance enacted in the poem by the speaker. In my PhD thesis, I subvert this so-called universality, so that I propose that poetry analysis can be done through the concept of the *eu lírica* – in feminine – in the case of feminine poetry. To me, the *eu lírica* speaks from a feminine standpoint, but as a feminine that does not intend to be universal. What are your opinions about this issue of a lyric identity?

JL: As you can see, I not only agree with you, I come from a tradition in which, in an untheorized way, the non-universality of the lyric "I" is taken for granted as a norm. (Indeed, the difference between the phrase "the speaker of the poem," as we generally say in the US, and "the lyric I" or *eu lírico* as you describe it, is that the former identifies the "I" of the poem as the particular person who happened to be speaking, rather than as a general category.) But what is lost in my tradition's assumption of the particularity of the "I" of the poem is what you are working to establish: a way of recognizing the diverse ways in which lyric speakers can perform, enact, speak to and from unifying (though not universal) categories of gender.

As we discussed, though your work focuses on speakers who identify as feminine or female, it opens space for recognition of non-binary lyric speakers as well, such as those who, like the speaker of Dickinson's "I am afraid to own a body," who are not defined in terms of gender. (While some of these speakers, though not Dickinson's, might fit the "universal" lyric speaker mold, because such "universalized" speakers are a minority among lyric poems, we see that their universality is anything but universal; it too is a particular performance of humanity.) You also open space for speakers defined by *trans poetic* techniques which, as I noted above, confound binary gender categories, so that we read the speakers as trans in the broadest sense, gendered in a way that is more complicated than male or female.

But your work most directly helps us recognize and talk about the specific and diverse ways in which lyric speakers identified with one binary gender or another perform their genders. When you remind us read speakers marked as male as universal, you invite us to recognize the diversity of maleness and masculinity presented in those poems – a diversity which itself undermines the Platonic assumption of the male as a stable, ideal category of being on which so much of patriarchal ideology depends. Above all, of course, your concept of the *eu lírica* summons us to give overdue attention to speakers identified as a female. You draw attention to the way these speakers are not merely exceptions to some

male universal, but members of a distinctive category that is robust, vigorous and varied. Rather than homogenizing speakers into some abstract idea of femininity or femaleness (the critique often offered of what in the US is called “second wave feminism”), you call for us to notice, as part of poetic analysis, the ways in which lyric performances of the female are both highly individuated and also, at the same time, akin to one another. This work, it seems to me, transforms the category of the feminine from one defined by exclusion and constraint into a space of inexhaustible possibility – that is, a form of complete humanity. Thank you so much for that work, and for including me in it.

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