Impotentiality in Anne Boyer's Garments Against Women

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Over the past decade, Anne Boyer has published a series of poems detailing the most intimate, mundane aspects of her life in Kansas. Focusing on gender, production, and work, her poems foreground precarity, sex, reproduction, child-rearing, consumption, exhaustion, writing, and the refusal of writing. Often, they describe her attempts to exist outside a world where all human activity is reduced to economic productivity, a world that Boyer describes as operating on principles of "inescapable shock." While Boyer's poetry provides a detailed phenomenology of doing and being able to do, it also addresses the situation of *not* doing and being *unable* to do. With these issues in mind, this chapter will explore connections between poems in *Garments Against Women* and philosophies such as Giorgio Agamben's theories of potentiality and impotentiality and contemporary feminist approaches to being and doing, such as Adriana Cavarero's work on "inclination" as political category. Reading Boyer's poetry alongside philosophy and political theory, will, I suggest, enhance our understanding of questions of potential, actuality, and feminist critiques grounded in ontology and phenomenology. At the same time, these readings will complicate certain categories with implications for feminist politics, from transparency and uprightness, to their counterparts, vulnerability, inclination, and lack.

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> Every written work can be regarded as the prologue (or rather, the broken cast) of a work never penned, and destined to remain so, because later works, which in turn will be the prologues or the moulds for other absent works, represent only sketches or death masks.
> Giorgio Agamben, "Infancy and History: An Essay on the Destruction of Experience"

Over the past decade, the American writer Anne Boyer has published a series of prose poems detailing the intimate and mundane aspects of her life in Kansas. With a focus on questions of gender, production, and work, these poems foreground precarity, sex, reproduction, child rearing, consumption and creation, exhaustion, writing, and the refusal of writing. Quite often they describe her own attempts to exist outside a world that wants to reduce all human activity to economic productivity, a world that Boyer describes as operating on the principles of "inescapable shock" (Boyer 1). But while her poetry gives a detailed phenomenology of *doing* and *being able to do*, the doing of writing itself causes Boyer deep ambivalence. Most notable is how she addresses the situation of *not doing* and *being unable to do*. In an honest description of incapacity that may be strikingly familiar to many readers, Boyer dedicates a lot of her writing to reflecting on her own impotence as a writer.

There is an obvious irony in the fact that Boyer's frustrations about the writing process take the form of completed and published poems. After careful reading, her poetry reveals not so much a poet struggling to write, as a poet learning to live in the pure potentiality of her own lack. *Garments Against Women*, her 2015 collection, repeatedly articulates the poet's desires to refuse the contemporary organization of the society she finds herself living in. These desires manifest in a catalog of un-deciphered impulses, impulses that Boyer grapples with and partially negates across the collection. "I was perfectly willing to assign to my own refusal some sort of pathology," she writes in "At Least Two Types of People" (23). And in a later poem, "Sewing," she cryptically observes that "even heroic refusals aren't that heroic, although some are more heroic than others" (31).

Boyer's poetry has recently attracted attention for precisely this capacity of refusal. A recent review of *Garments Against Women* in the *Los Angeles Review of Books* has highlighted the paradoxical power of Boyer's impotence. Citing John Keats' "negative capability," the reviewer argues that Boyer, along with fellow young American writers Bhuna Kapil and Juliana Spahr, shows a "willingness not to know in advance," using her capacity for "being in uncertainties" as "an important and renewable resource" (McLane). The scholar Walt Hunter has also paid close atten-

tion to Boyer's vulnerability, arguing that it can be taken as a model for an alternative form of political resistance. Similarly, Lindsey Turner has suggested that Boyer's professed inability to write amounts to a targeted critique of current labor practices.

What has been missing from discussion of Boyer's work so far has been any engagement with wider philosophical discourses of impotentiality. Specifically, *Garments Against Women* may be read as both complementing and complicating the concept of potentiality in the work of the Italian philosopher Giorgio Agamben. Potentiality, which the critic Kevin Attell has called Agamben's "signal concept," has been a pre-occupation of Agamben's work since at least the 1980s (*Agamben* 3). Developing out of the Aristotelian corpus, the concept works with a shifting and often ambivalent definition. Alongside its sister term, "impotentiality," it essentially refers to the seemingly limitless human capability to do, but also *not* to do. On the one hand, this has a political dimension. For Elizabeth Balskus, Agamben's tension between actualizing and not actualizing potential "serves as the foundation for political, creative and moral action" (160). As a political concept, Attell sees it as mutually compatible with the idea of "constituent power" in the work of the Italian autonomist philosopher Antonio Negri ("Potentiality").

Yet Agamben's primary sites of interrogation are the work of art, creativity, and the act of writing. Like Jacques Derrida before him, Agamben attempts to free both the promise and the act of writing from mere function or responsibility (Attell, *Agamben* 3–5). Specifically, as Leland de la Durantaye observed, he is concerned with "returning every work of art to its originary hesitation" (3). By presenting the possibility that the work of art might never come into existence, and by "evoking the oscillation between work and draft, effort and accomplishment," Agamben's sense of impotentiality "invokes a much richer and darker potentiality lying at the heart of the work" (de la Durantaye 3). Considering the concept across Agamben's texts, not only in matters of speech and language, but also in matters of time, history, and messianism, de la Durantaye suggests that the idea culminates in what he calls the "prehistory of potentiality," or the state of "never-having-been" (22). It is in this sense that in his introduction to Agamben's collected essays, *Potentialities*, editor Daniel Heller-Roazen has argued that Agamben's task is to "confront history as a reader, 'to read what was never written'" (1).

While developing this philosophical concept, a study of impotentiality in Anne Boyer's poetry can also extend the idea into feminist discourses of creativity. Surprisingly, given Agamben's debt to Heideggerian phenomenology, there has also been little attention to his possible feminist

phenomenology.[1] Italian philosopher Adriana Cavarero's concept of "vulnerability" reveals a productive line of connection. Cavarero's recent book *Inclinations: A Critique of Rectitude* has drawn attention to what she sees as a tired universalizing bias, one that connects uprightness and upright comportment to moral and political rectitude. As an alternative, Cavarero suggests a feminist geometry of *leaning toward* to emphasize the political and emancipatory importance of vulnerability and inclination. As well as offering a potent critique of contemporary politics, Cavarero's exploration of posture might well be mobilized to think through the concept of potential from a contemporary feminist perspective. Here, some interesting questions arise: what is the relationship between ideas of potential, capability, the potential *not* to do, and recent feminist discourses of vulnerability, such as Cavarero's?[2] What can using a feminist perspective to expand, or even delimit, Agamben's set of concepts offer us? How can we account for modes of action or capability, or will or its lack, in a particularly feminist way?

Agamben's account of the contemporary precarious subject describes a poor contorting soul who, buffeted on the winds of economic change, forms and reforms itself "according to this flexibility that is today the primary quality that the market demands from each person" (*Nudities* 45). Considering the diagnosis of this sexless figure, this article will open up another approach. As I will suggest, Boyer's poetry can draw out some of the feminist aspects in the personal, mental relationship to being and doing that are present, if not fully sketched out, in Agamben's phenomenology. By reading the issue of potential and impotentiality between philosophy and poetry, I hope also to uncover new insights into

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[1] A contemporary philosopher who has taken up a feminist critique of Agamben is Penelope Deutscher, who opens her 2008 article, "The Inversion of Exceptionality: Foucault, Agamben, and 'Reproductive Rights,'" with the question: "Since it has not to date arisen as a question, is it possible to open a debate with Giorgio Agamben concerning the role of women's bodies in the politicization of life?" (55). Deutscher also picks up this theme in a later article, "Sacred Fecundity: Agamben, Sexual Difference, and Reproductive Life," where she identifies a "cluster" of feminist responses to Agamben, some of which "figure Agamben as mute, either puzzlingly or inexcusably so, on matters of gender and sexual difference," and others which have "suggested a number of senses in which a feminist reading may not be appropriate to Agamben's work" (fn. 1, 51).

[2] A range of other critical feminist texts, many preceding Cavarero's, debate the potential of a feminist perspective on vulnerability. For a particularly inclusive appraisal of the many philosophical and sociological approaches to vulnerability as a political tool, see especially Chapter One in Anu Koiven, Katariina Kyrölä, and Ingrid Ryberg's *The Power of Vulnerability: Mobilising affect in feminist, queer and anti-racist media cultures* (1–26). A recent collected volume of articles, *Vulnerability in Resistance* (Butler et al.), pairs the concept of vulnerability with resistance, instead of reading them as opposing political concepts.

the limitations and possibilities of potential, vulnerability, and resistance in contemporary society. Moving further, I hope even to generate new, more specific modes of thinking about problems that have become universally designated under that contemporary label of "precarity," which Judith Butler has probably best epitomized to date as "that politically induced condition in which certain populations suffer from failing social and economic networks of support and become differentially exposed to injury, violence, and death" (25).[3]

"On What We Can Not Do" and "On Potentiality"

In "On What We Can Not Do," one of his most recent works on the theme of human possibility and potentiality, Agamben presents the idea of "impotentiality." Following Aristotle, Agamben uses this term to mean something quite distinct from an *absence* of potential. Beyond "not being able to do," impotentiality signifies "being able to *not* do," or being able to *not* exercise one's own potential. It is this "specific ambivalence of all potentiality," for Agamben, that is "always the power to be and not to be, to do and to not do," which "defines, in fact, human potentiality" (*Nudities* 44). To really understand the scope of human potential, by this logic, we need as individuals to come to terms with the fact that our capabilities necessarily include the power *not* to do, or *not* to be. We need to recognize the human privilege that takes us beyond the basic "specific potentialities" of phenomena, such as fire for example, or even the simple "biological vocations" of non-human animals (Agamben, *Nudities* 44). Our failure to recognize these privileges, as well as our prevalent inability to properly exercise this potential to *not* do, are for Agamben indicative of our current predicament as subjects of Western liberal democracy.

It is towards the close of the short essay that Agamben raises the emblematic figure of the contemporary West, the person who contorts himself to match the demands of the market (*Nudities* 45). Agamben's diagnosis of this subject is essentially ethical, political, and ontological and corresponds with what he identifies as the perceived lack of worth, within the West, of anything that seems to lie outside the production of basic economic value. As he suggested in a recent interview with Jordan Skinner at Verso Press, "We no longer conceive of an existence without *effect*," to the extent that "[w]hat is not effective—workable, governable—

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[3] For alternative takes on precarity both as philosophical concept and sociological descriptor see Berlant; Standing; Lorey; Berardi; Lazzarato; Seymour.

is not real." But in this analysis, Agamben also hints towards a phenomenological reading. Addressing our existential awareness, or lack of awareness, of our own capacities to act or to refuse to act, he suggests that a failure to fully recognize impotentiality has contributed to a number of our most pressing contemporary political concerns.

Although Agamben's essay largely focuses on the question of potential as it relates to concerns about flexibility, expendability, and operationality in the present day, the theme of potentiality is a historically recurring trope throughout his work. In 1999 Agamben published *Potentialities*, a series of independent essays united by a common logic. As Heller-Roazen sketched out in his introduction, they seek to "examine the pure existence of language, freed from the form of any presupposition." Through this enterprise, Heller-Roazen explains, they articulate "a 'coming community'," one that will exist "without identity," and be "defined by nothing other than its existence in language as irreducible, absolute potentiality" (23). Across these essays, Agamben substantially addresses the question of human potential using a dual Aristotelian framework. Within Aristotle's framework outline in Book Two of *De Anima*, suggests Agamben, "potential" encompasses both human generic potential, or the potential to "be," as well as the potential to "do," or to act after receiving knowledge (*Potentialities* 179). It is this second sense that Agamben appears to be most concerned with and which he explores in the most well-known essays within the collection. In "On Potentiality," Agamben attempts to think through the Aristotelian conception of potentiality for the present day. As he makes clear, in reviving this concept he is careful to neither rehabilitate an ancient problem for the contemporary age nor, perhaps worse, to historicize Aristotle's enigma of capability (*Potentialities* 177). Agamben's more direct goal, as he tells us, is to "attempt to understand the meaning of the verb "can" [*potere*]," or to answer the question "What do I mean when I say, 'I can, I cannot'?" (*Potentialities* 177). Even in the act of posing this question, what is especially important for Agamben is the issue of global inequality and oppression. As he remarks, there is a "part of humanity that has grown and developed its potency [*potenza*] to the point of imposing its power over the whole planet" (*Potentialities* 177). Elsewhere in the collection, in "Bartleby, or On Contingency," Agamben also succinctly outlines the Aristotelian problem of potentiality in a way that describes how the potential to not do is *also* a kind of potential. "For Aristotle," writes Agamben here, "all potential to be or to do something is always also potential not to be or not to do (*dynamis me einai, me energein*), without which potentiality would always

already have passed into actuality and would be indistinguishable from it" (*Potentialities* 245).

In common with much of Agamben's work, "On Potentiality" uses the question of the poet's capacity to write as a way of animating ideas about potential and its opposite: the tension between *being able to* and *not being able to*, or between the ability to say "I can" and its opposite, "I cannot." He illustrates the question of *how* the poet conceives of their own potential to write in any given situation—the "I can write" that precedes the act in itself—through a story recounted by a 20th–century Russian poet, Anna Akhmatova, in her collection *Requiem*.

> It was in the 1930s, and for months and months she joined the line outside the prison of Leningrad, trying to hear news of her son, who had been arrested on political grounds. There were dozens of other women in line with her. One day, one of these women recognized her and, turning to her, addressed her with the following simple question: "Can you speak of this?" Akhmatova was silent for a moment and then, without knowing how or why, found an answer to the question: "Yes," she said, "I can." (*Potentialities* 177)

For Agamben, Akhmatova's framing of this particular moment illustrates a central enigma of the conditions of possibility which we as humans signify through the utterance "I can." It is not, as he makes clear, that Akhmatova suggests that only she as a poet possesses the specific capacities of language and metaphor to keep the memory of such atrocities alive. It is rather that the poet, like any human being and regardless of their specific capabilities or capacities, must at some point or another confront the harsh possibility that one "can." That potential utterance, "I can," is one that Agamben marks out as "perhaps the hardest and bitterest experience possible: the experience of potentiality" (*Potentialities* 178).

But beyond the Akhmatova example, the question of writing, and the possibilities of *not writing*, play an important role in Agamben's philosophy. Like many contemporary thinkers, Agamben takes Herman Melville's reluctant scribe, Bartleby, as the essential embodiment of the refusal of productivity, not only in the realm of writing, but also in work in general. Agamben's essay, "Bartleby, or On Contingency," situates Bartleby as belonging to a "literary constellation" that includes Franz Kafka's courtroom clerks, Robert Walser's Simon Tanner, and Nikolai Gogol's Akaky Akakievich (*Potentialities* 243). But more important for Agamben is a "philosophical constellation" of thinkers who consider the pure potentiality of the word as something that might be actualized or made into an absolute creation. Considering prior philosophical discus-

sions developed by, among others, Aristotle, Maimonides, and Sufi Ibn Arabi, Agamben hopes to reveal something about *literary* potential in Bartleby, whom he sees as "the last, exhausted figure" in this lineage (*Potentialities* 247). "As a scribe who has stopped writing," says Agamben, "Bartleby is the extreme figure of the Nothing from which all creation derives" (*Potentialities* 253). Agamben especially emphasizes the "formula" of potentiality as it is exemplified in Bartleby's *refusal* to write (*Potentialities* 255). In other words, he pinpoints how potentiality departs from other modalities of possible intention, such as will or agency. Epitomized in the Bartlebyian response, "I prefer not to," Agamben says, is precisely the conundrum of will versus potential. "It is not," Agamben reminds us, "that he does not want to copy or that he does not want to leave the office; he simply would prefer not to" (ibid.). With the help of Gottfried Wilhelm Leibniz, Agamben categorizes this problem as "contingency," or that which "coincides with the domain of human freedom in its opposition to necessity…" (*Potentialities* 261). Again and again, Agamben will return to this formulation of the license to not do; one that has no relationship to need or desire, particularly in his formulation of the question of inoperativity, an especially prevalent theme in his collection of essays, *The Use of Bodies* (2015).

It is at this point that we might consider the work of a contemporary writer such as Boyer, a poet who has consistently addressed the problem of being both capable and incapable of writing fiction, memoir, and poetry. *Garments Against Women* is motivated by autobiographical examples of both writing and failing to write. Throughout, Boyer explores a variety of modes of writing, including: transcriptions and treatises, "inadmissible information," books, subtitles, biographies, spam, literature, blogs, fiction, the novel, internet language, poetry, poetic syntax, science fiction, information, reading lists, checks, "directions written by the pattern maker," sewing books, Wikipedia, account books, translation, sequels, books of political philosophy, memoirs, prose poems, fragments, critical theory, accounts, songs, historical re-enactments, essays, roundtable responses, conference papers, recipes, constitutions, wills, and medical reports. The act of writing, even when it is also cryptically presented through the homology of sewing, becomes the stuff and substance of the collection. But at the same time, Boyer struggles to decipher what is "not writing." The two words "Not Writing," in fact, become a refrain through the collection. Two poems in particular, "Not Writing," and "What is 'Not Writing,'" with their intense focus on writing as production and possibility, capture some of the most potent questions about the poet's task under the present conditions of advanced capitalism.

"Not Writing" and "What Is 'Not Writing'"

In the poem "Not Writing" and the accompanying "What Is 'Not Writing,'" Boyer explores the state of "not writing" ironically (though unavoidably) through writing itself. She wonders about the kinds of writing that she claims she is not currently undertaking. "When I am not writing," she begins in the first poem, "I am not writing a novel called *1994* about a young woman in an office park in a provincial town who has a job cutting and pasting time" (41). She goes on, "I am not writing a novel called *Nero* about the world's richest art star in space. I am not writing a book called *Kansas City Spleen*. I am not writing a sequel to *Kansas City Spleen* called *Bitch's Maldoror*" (ibid.). Like the poet Akhmatova cited by Agamben, Boyer admits that she is *capable* of writing, or having the potential to write something in particular within the circumstances of her existence. Yet Boyer complicates this admission, too. Although these books may never be written, by giving their titles—*1994*, *Nero, Kansas City Spleen*, and *Bitch's Maldoror*—she nevertheless brings the idea of these different works into being. This creates a paradox in relation to their status as production. On the one hand, by bringing these works into print as titles, not as texts, she seems to have exhausted their potential. Yet, conversely, the writing of the poem "Not Writing" itself has only been brought to fruition through the presence of these non-written books. Although all routes for producing new material seem to exist in conflict with what Boyer admits is her own inability to produce, this in itself has its own perverse form of productivity. As she explains in "What Is 'Not Writing," deliberately using the language of creation, "[t]here are years, days, hours, minutes, weeks, moments, and other measures of time spent in the production of 'not writing'" (46).

Exploring this paradox, Turner has recently identified the presence of "paralipsis" in Boyer's writing, the rhetorical figuration of "stating something through the claim not to be stating it" (122). For Turner, the recurrent sentence "I am not writing" is a paraliptic formulation of the highest order. Precisely "[o]n account of its capacity to address itself paraliptically," Turner observes, the act of writing in general, but especially Boyer's,

> distinguishes itself from other forms of work, even as it shares and reveals some of their qualities. Marking out its own difference as writing, this poetic mode not only diagnoses the dilemmas of work under contemporary neoliberal capitalism but…also points toward the transformative possibilities of its own performance of and expressed resistance to labor. (124)

There are many moments in Boyer's collection where writing is figured as labor, not least when it is written through metaphors of sewing and dressmaking. Noting this, Turner offers important insights into the paradoxes of creative work in modernity. As thinkers in the Italian autonomous tradition have shown, she suggests, "creativity and even disobedience have become traits more likely to be prized by capitalism than anathema to it" (Turner 126). Specifically, Turner reads Boyer's crisis of writing as a commentary on the contemporary crisis of work, a crisis associated with a fixation on flexibility and versatility in the workplace. But as Turner notes, flexibility is also a crucial feature of the poetic form. If the "language of flexibility has been appropriated and utilized by neoliberal capitalism as a criterion for workplace success," she writes, then "poetic form models a different sort of flexibility," such as when it "asks us to imagine possible similarities and channels of communication between the different spaces through which it moves, while also serving as a material reminder of difference" (Turner 124–25). Taking Turner's suggestion further, we could argue that Boyer is re-appropriating the symptoms of capitalistic crisis into strategies of creative resistance.

Boyer complicates this theme in another poem in the collection, "The Open Book." Using the metaphor of bookkeeping, in this poem she perceives a situation in current politics and society in which all things are subjected to assiduous reckoning and accounting. Deploying the theme of the account to encapsulate a fixation with the ethics of transparency, she describes how economics, and especially the capitalist exhortation to desire profit, have become so intertwined with contemporary subjectivity as to seem inextricable. Boyer makes explicit a set of links between practices of profit-making and the ideology of transparency that has aided capitalism's ascendancy. Beginning in the opening lines of the poem, she attempts to expose how this link affects us as contemporary actors.

> It's only necessary to make a transparent account if it's necessary to have accounting, and its only necessary to have accounting in the service of a profitable outcome. To account in the service of profit is to assume the desirability of profit. (Boyer 34)

Writing against the assumption that profit should be read as an end toward which people ought to strive, Boyer launches an injunction against an ideology of wealth-making, one of the bourgeois founding emphases of the United States.[4] "To account in the service of profit is to assume

[4] By deploying the bookkeeping metaphor to explore the pervasive ethics of transparency, Boyer underscores that ethic's specifically American energies. Notably, it was Benjamin

the desirability of profit," Boyer continues, encouraging us to question long-held beliefs about the mutual affinities between profit and desire. These injunctions are made all the more powerful by coming from a feminist-precariat perspective. "The Open Book" describes a female protagonist, a metaphorical bookkeeper—perhaps modeled on Boyer's own past work as a bank clerk—whose attitude to her role presents a challenge to any suggestion that ambition and acquisition should be so entangled.

In the model that Boyer critiques, even the person who is deployed to uphold transparency through bookkeeping is assumed to want to profit themselves. Within this model, it is "assumed" that the bookkeeper's "heart is naturally a heart desiring profit." This is because "profit" is "assumed to be desirable, and if she is in the service of profit, it's assumed she would like to profit also, and that what she would do if there were no transparency is to cause herself to profit" (Boyer 34).

According to Boyer, the bookkeeper must display—through the visible evidence of the act of bookkeeping—how she manages to suspend her own desire to profit for the benefit of whomever or whatever she serves. The female accountant must, in other words, make an exhibition of transparency,

> 'something to show'—a performance, for the order of business, that her desires are in accord with its, that she would so naturally desire profit as to want to steal it and therefore her "something to show" is the naturalness of the larger body's desires. (Boyer 34–35)

In abstract terms, this figure works as a way to call into question the desirability of profit. But the embodied feminine subjectivity of the figure is also highly significant. On the one hand, she might give us cause to reflect on the female exception to primitive accumulative practices, such as was brought to light in studies like *Caliban and the Witch: Women, the Body, and Primitive Accumulation*, where Silvia Federici connects the rise of capitalist accumulation and rationality with the demonization of women as witches and the regulation of women's bodily autonomy. Alternatively, the figure may underline the unremunerated role that women have historically played in the expansion of capital through social reproduction, as suggested by Federici's International Wages for Housework Movement

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Franklin's fixation on double-entry bookkeeping that for Max Weber, in *The Protestant Ethic*, epitomized Calvinistic profit seeking. Weber particularly converges on Franklin's "ideal of the honest man of recognized credit" and his attendant ideology of the "duty of the individual toward the increase of his capital, which is assumed as an end in itself" that are especially prevalent in his diary entries (16–17).

among others (see Toupin 2018). In light of the national context in which Boyer is writing, as well as the "ethic" of accumulation that has been paired with it, we may say that "The Open Book" offers a uniquely feminist riposte to any suggestion that profit should be a desirable "end in itself."

While exploring the reasons one might want to refuse participating in the multiplication of profit, "The Open Book" conveys another, subtler, message. By deploying the metaphor of bookkeeping, Boyer encourages us to reflect on the fetishization of transparency in current liberal-democratic thought. In this respect, she taps into ongoing philosophical debates about the relationship between visibility and truth. Against the model of visibility as integrity, which critics have suggested has become the norm in political thought, Boyer proposes "another veracity" (36). This alternative model of truth, she suggests, includes such clandestine strategies as "conspiracy, corners, shadows, slantwise, evasion, unsaying-ness, negation, and under-the-beds" (ibid.). At the culmination of this list are "opacity" and "multiplicity," terms which Boyer offers as modes of human inclination that may be able to defy both productivity and transparency together. "To refuse a bookkeeperly transparency," she says, "is to protect the multiplicity of what we really want" (ibid.). By challenging the moral dogma of accountability, Boyer suggests, we may be able to re-establish other, more open-ended possibilities for making both meaning and truth.

Other philosophical critiques of the politics of transparency have, like Boyer's poetry, tended to privilege the implicit over the explicit and the esoteric over the overt. Agamben's own work has often been concerned with transparency and the problems it has engendered as an ideology. Within *Homo Sacer: Sovereign Power and Bare Life*, Agamben suggests that the Western democratic promise of openness has often functioned as an attractive overlay, one that conceals an array of secretive government actions, from the perpetration of inhumane atrocities to the daily interference with bodies through biopolitical techniques. It is this paradoxical situation that Agamben gestures toward in the opening pages of *Homo Sacer*, when he describes the "bloody mystification of a new planetary order" that has arisen after the Iraq and Balkan wars (12). These are issues that have long occupied Agamben. In one of his earlier pieces, "Oedipus and the Sphinx," he converges on the topic of opacity through an investigation of signification, meaning, and openness and their oppositional, metaphorical representation in the figures of the Sphinx and Oedipus (*Stanzas* 135–140). In another essay, "Pardes: The Writing of Potentiality" in *Potentialities*, he connects the questions of potential,

signification, and transparency of language to writing, especially engaging with the Derridean question of *différance* and the displacement of meaning that paradoxically engenders signification (205–19). Across these different explorations, the question of transparency, especially as it is invoked within contemporary liberal democratic discourses, is never for Agamben too far from the question of human potential, or "what we can not do."

Another recent critique of transparency has come from Agamben's intellectual inheritors, the French philosophical collective Tiqqun. Active from the late 1990s, this semi-anonymous group named themselves after *Tikkun Olam*, an ancient Hebrew phrase for "world repair," a term that has come to imply the practice of positive action in the pursuit of social justice in contemporary Jewish thought. In general, Tiqqun have drawn attention to a political undercurrent forming in opposition to the logic of transparency. Across two volumes of the *Tiqqun* journal, published in 1999 and 2001, Tiqqun variously describe forms of resistance based on principles of anonymity, opacity and non-hierarchy, and even "headlessness." There they describe various "communities of defection" as movements away from normative political principles, such as in their descriptions in the essay "Thèses sur le Parti Imaginaire" of the "Imaginary Party," loosely based on Georges Bataille's "negative community" (*Tiqqun 1* 50–71).

One of Tiqqun's most potent and controversial essays, "Échographie d'une puissance," deploys the metaphor of the sonogram to interrogate the issue of transparency in late modernity (*Tiqqun 2* 194–233). Tiqqun use the metaphor of the ultrasound to encapsulate how questions of human potentiality and possibility have become bound up with a probing ethics of transparency. Using a feminist lens, they conclude that any nuanced model of the contemporary subject is unachievable. They give two clear reasons for this. First, they cite Western culture's foundation on a model of universal humanism, a model which they say has neglected sexual difference. Second, they point to a contemporary neoliberal "techno-scientific" (*modele du savoir techno-scientifique*) approach to the human (and, by extension, to human knowledge and politics), an approach they say has promoted simplistic ideals of truth and transparency. "Western universalism," they suggest, is a "system of knowledge-power that has for millennia knowingly founded itself on the fiction of the transparent 'I.'" Looking at the implications of this "fiction," Tiqqun warn that this ideal of

transparency effectively allows the "techno-scientific model of knowledge" to avoid "ever being called into question by its own discourse."[5]

Even more recently, the philosopher Byung-Chul Han has added further shades to these critiques. For him, a certain ideology of transparency now manifests through a range of forms, from a prevalent doctrine of positivity that increasingly underpins contemporary neoliberal discourses, to an emerging legalistic obsession with evidence. A growing consensus within modernity, Han argues in *The Transparency Society*, "a systemic compulsion gripping all social processes and subjecting them to a deep-reaching change," now depends on transparency for its function. With far-reaching consequences, this compulsion culminates variously in a "calibrated," "machinic," and "totalitarian" society, one built on an enormous amount of information and communication which, rather than alleviating a lack of clarity, paradoxically "deepens it" (Han 2, 8). Ultimately, Han warns, we should recognize the malignant nature of such an ideology. That is, we should understand it both as a tool and a result of a "control society" that operates through digital panoptic structures of excess: "excessive exposure," "hyper-communication," "pornographic display-of-the-self," exhibitionism, voyeurism, and ultimately, exploitation. For Han, it appears that we have freely given ourselves over to this problem through our everyday consent to digital culture, a culture whose logic works through an "auto-exploitation," in which one appears to be "master and entrepreneur of oneself" (46–49).

In a related effort, the political philosophers Sabine Baume and Yannis Papadopoulos have distinguished and critiqued a "growing enthusiasm" for transparency in public life, along with a rise in discourses lauding the merits of transparency in politics. In a recent article, they diagnose what they see as a pervasive conceptual over-determination of "transparency," one that has elevated it to the status of modern panacea. This attitude, they suggest, has its roots in political ideologies of publicity and light promoted by utilitarian social reformer, Jeremy Bentham. Especially significant for them is Bentham's tract "On Publicity," which includes prescriptions about the "moralization of politics," "public confidence,"

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[5] This translation from the French is my own. The quote appears in the original French publication as follows: "L'universalisme occidental a vécu dans le mythe de l'être neutre producteur de vérité, se donnant ainsi les armes d'une oppression innommable, créant un apport de force pour lequel le vocabulaire du savoir existant ne pouvait pas fournir de mots. L'effacement du sujet, le surgissement du Bloom sont les effets sismiques d'un système de savoir-pouvoir qui s'est sciemment fondé pendant des millénaires sur la fiction du «moi transparent», celui qui peut composer avec le modèle du savoir techno-scientifique en s'y superposant sans jamais être mis en question par son discours, telle une machine de guerre innocente" (205).

and "consent," building toward a positive call for total transparency (169,171).[6] It is here that Baume and Papadopoulos note an originary conceptual transference between ideas of morality, public opinion, and luminosity. As they suggest, we need to "replace exaggerated expectations regarding transparency." This is because the more "transparency becomes a 'magic' concept, the more it risks being devalued in the face of experience" (Baume and Papadopoulos 187).

All of these interventions share significant overlaps that might help illuminate Anne Boyer's own problems with transparency. On the one hand, they ask us to reconsider an affinity between transparency and integrity that these writers suggest is becoming pervasive in political thinking. While warning that calls for an increased visibility are not always innocuous pleas for better governance, each of them caution that transparency should not be taken as a magic cure for political dishonesty. In one way or another, all of them also connect the issue of transparency to the political question of what the human is capable of within capitalist modernity. If Han alerts us to the unforeseen problems that arise when we make ourselves and our lives digitally transparent, Tiqqun diagnose the penetration of scopic mechanisms into all areas of our existence. Similarly, while Baume and Papadopoulos call us to appraise assumptions that transparency can act as a panacea for liberal democracy, Agamben suggests transparency's systemic links with global forms of imperialism and oppression. At the same time, Agamben's earlier work suggests that this problem is exposed in our relationship with language. It is in his respect, most of all, that these critiques of transparency resonate throughout Boyer's collection. With her willingness to live with "negative capability," as Maureen McLane has suggested, or with her desire to accept her own undeciphered sense of what constitutes refusal, Boyer's poetic subject shows a profound mistrust of the logic of transparency. In her mind, refusal as a category can at once be held as a pathology, but also figure as a site of "heroic" undecidability.

"The Animal Model of Inescapable Shock"

A further dimension of Boyer's impotentiality arises in the very first poem in *Garment Against Women*, "The Animal Model of Inescapable Shock." Deploying scientific animal testing as a metaphor to think about the

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[6] Baume and Papadopoulos interpret Bentham's "On Publicity" from an arranged collection of Bentham's works by the French editor Etienne Dumont.

contemporary human condition, the poem describes a laboratory where animal test subjects are subjected to a series of electrical shocks. Through this testing, the animals eventually self-manifest what Boyer calls "analgesics." As she elaborates, these analgesics flood the body with "endogenous opioids along with cortisol and other arousing inner substances," leading to a kind of chemically induced Stockholm syndrome (2). In this state, the shocked animals begin to enjoy the shocks that they are undergoing. Although no straining of the imagination is required to understand Boyer's metaphor for the human condition, at the poem's conclusion, she chooses to frame it explicitly as a critique of capitalism. "Also, how is Capital not an infinite laboratory called 'conditions'?" she writes, adding, "And where is the edge of the electrified grid?" (ibid.). If Boyer's "animal model" is meant to give a sense of the "infinite" inescapability of our condition within advanced capitalism, then it deliberately offers no clear vision of how to resist these shocks. As Walt Hunter has suggested in a recent reading of this poem, it is precisely this vulnerability that emerges in Boyer's writing as a form of politics in its own right.

According to Hunter's reading, "The Animal Model of Inescapable Shock" works as both a variation on and an antidote to a popular model of ode poetry that has tried to summon collective political energy against the individuating, destructive forces of what he calls "late late capitalism" (234). Against the impetus of many recent ode poets to "figure forth the possibilities of a common life," something Hunter particularly notes in the work of the British poets Keston Sutherland and the late Sean Bonny, Boyer's writing presents us with something altogether more tragic (233). If, as Sutherland himself suggests, the odal form strives "energetically to occupy the commons of sensation and desire," then Boyer's work represents a "particularly grim turn on the poetic rhapsody," where "the rhetoric of lyric is spoken through the subject subsumed by capital, and the odal mastery over form becomes a series of evasive maneuvers within it" (Hunter 234). Identifying the important potential of "exhaustion" in Boyer's poetry, Hunter reads it as complicating some of the more straightforward political ideas presented by Sutherland and Bonny, notably the suggestion that contemporary precarity might be resolved through collective political energy.

To develop Hunter's point, we might read Boyer's poems as part of a particular constellation of literary work that has explored exhaustion and vulnerability, both collective and individual, as a form of agency against the declining social organization of advanced capitalism. Displaying skepticism about any potential to organize in any "traditionally" revolutionary political

way, many of these recent works have featured subjects wracked by sickness and dejection. Taken together, these texts add another layer of nuance to contemporary discourses on commoning as a political act, suggesting that we identify the ontology of commonality as having its roots in dependency and vulnerability. Within *Garments Against Women* there is, as Hunter makes clear, a kind of suturing that takes place only through vulnerability. In line with a wider constellation of contemporary literary works, Boyer's poetry shuns an ideal of resistance built on the invulnerability of the ecstatic collective. Instead, she presents a metaphorical space in which certain stunted inclinations, hindered potentials, and deeper vulnerabilities may take precedent.

"Inclination" has recently emerged as a way of re-thinking contemporary politics from a feminist perspective in the work of Italian philosopher Adriana Cavarero. Challenging what she sees as a phallocratic norm in Western discourse, Cavarero seeks to overturn embedded associations between uprightness and erectness and morality and clear purpose. In an alternative geometric vision, Cavarero promotes an "ontology of the vulnerable" (14). According to Caverero, this ontology is best exemplified in the "maternal stereotype" of the Virgin and Child, an image she urges us to understand outside of its role in Christian iconography. In opposition to the subject of rectitude, which has existed as a paradigm in the popular political imagination for centuries, the inclining maternal duo offers an alternative model of morality. While rectitude finds its outlet as the "upright man" of modern philosophy, who "conforms to a vertical axis" that "functions as a principle and norm for its ethical posture," the Virgin and Child offer a powerful antithetical model of vulnerable subjectivity (6). With the maternal duo, Cavarero says,

> we are in the presence of a scene in which the vulnerable par excellence, the infant, not only unilaterally consigns itself to the other, but also, and more importantly, provides for originary bending, for a certain anomalous slope, for a posture. It is as if the fundamental concept of ethics were now seen, despite ages of sermons on moral uprightness, from the perspective of the vulnerable—or, more to the point, inclination. (14)

Against the traditionally upright political subject, Cavarero instead suggests dependency and leaning-toward as new models for political agency. Putting these motifs into contact with a survey of philosophical material, from Emmanuel Levinas to Hannah Arendt, Cavarero attempts to use the maternal figure beyond its traditional operation in discussions of ethics and care. Recognizing its greater ontological and phenomeno-

logical potential, she suggests that this inclining figure might ultimately be used as the starting point of a revitalized feminist political project.

Reading Cavarero's philosophical thesis alongside Hunter's assessment of Boyer's vulnerability, it is possible to identify a vital politics of inclination in *Garments Against Women*. Boyer's work, after all, makes visible the everyday experiences of maternality. In the poems "Twilight Revery" and "The Virus Reader," she describes and interrogates motherhood, detailing how her own relationship with her daughter is constantly inflected by the vicissitudes associated with a financially precarious existence. At the same time, her poems both critique and attempt to resist the normative standards associated with being "upright." "Venge-text" contains a meditation on the poet's perception of the color of the sky, which she suggests is blue, and how that perception can be mediated or changed by an ex-lover's command to perceive the sky differently, and not as blue. "He is the man" she writes, "who looks at the blue sky and says 'Do not remember this sky as blue'" (49). In "Ma Vie en Bling: A Memoir," Boyer offers a similar account of seeing the sea and perceiving it as nothingness, only to be told by an ex-lover that "it only appears to be nothing" (60).

If Cavarero urges us to encounter the iconographical stereotype of maternality with fresh eyes, then Boyer similarly plays with assumptions and stereotypes as a way of thinking about other potential political models. In "A Woman Shopping," Boyer explores the figure of the female consumer as another paraleptic ancillary. Claiming that this is a figure she will return to in the future, Boyer again fixates on the "plan" or the possibility to write.

> I will soon write a long, sad book called *A Woman Shopping*. It will be a book about what we are required to do and also a book about what we are hated for doing. (Boyer 47)

Here Boyer identifies the contradiction between the capitalist incitement to shop and the scorn that is poured on women for accepting that invitation. At the same time, and precisely through this identification, "A Woman Shopping" envisages the latent political potential in the often-maligned figure of the woman shopper.

On this point, Boyer appears to be in contact with established discourses linking gender and consumption. According to cultural historians, women in the 19th century often established financial and social independence through buying. Both Anne Friedberg and Dorothy Davis have outlined how consumption patterns changed or intensified with the rise of the autonomous female consumer, with both critics

mentioning the emancipatory possibilities offered by new patterns and platforms for consumption. Considering more recent intersections between autonomy and consumption, the Wages for Housework movement first accepted, and then politicized, gendered stereotypes of women and shopping. In doing so, they wanted to provide nuance for their theories of social reproduction by extending the critique of work, and especially housework, into all areas of society, including consumption. In particular, original Wages for Housework advocates Mariarosa Dalla Costa and Selma James recognized that "those social relationships which women are denied because they are cut off from socially organized labor, they often try to compensate for by buying things," and that "women buy things for their home because that home is the only proof that they exist" (45).

Just as Boyer identifies intersections between the history of literature and the history of shop-going, she seems also to suggest the cultural impossibility of the "flâneuse." Popularized in 19th–century Paris, the flâneur is the subject who can look without having to buy; somebody who can watch the city without feeling watched, and who altogether inhabits a distinctly idealized, independent realm. He is the *promeneur* who takes "refuge in the shadow of the cities" (Benjamin 442). By contrast, as has been well-worked through in feminist literature, the female city walker has more often than not appeared in culture as associated with the "baser" material worlds of shopping or sex work (Wolff 40; Buck-Morss 119; Friedberg 36). As Anne Boyer herself puts it in "A Woman Shopping"

> The flâneur as a poet is an agent free of purses, but a woman is not a woman without a strap over her shoulder or a clutch in her hand. (47)

In these prior cultural investigations, women's agency in urban settings was always seen to be configured to male permission or else to the culture of the commodity. All of these ways of looking at the problem, I suggest, are applicable to Boyer's poetry, and might help us to expand and engage with her work in multiple ways. While Boyer may be critically reflecting on any political position that aligns basic freedoms or agency with purchasing power as damaging to feminist politics, she may also be asking us to consider its historical relevance for women's autonomy.

Conclusion

In a sense, reading Boyer's poetry allows us to negotiate the arc of Agamben's potentiality in surprising ways. Agamben and Boyer are both

thinkers who force us to stretch our imagination in reconsidering everyday acts of interpretation, doing, and being. They both constitute their philosophies through affective language, and they both espouse a type of communal potentiality of poetry. But what also becomes apparent is that both thinkers have gaps in their understanding of the meaning of writing, potential, and being-in-the-world; gaps that can, to some extent, be rectified when the two are engaged together.

Agamben's potentiality has often been deemed as either too ambivalent and ungrounded as a concept or else too dependent on examples to be elaborated clearly. Another criticism is that potential, in Agamben's reading, seems to elide the possibility of being utilized in any philosophical interrogation of sexual difference. Both of these accusations of ambivalence, however, point to the very freedom of interpretation that Agamben's concept allows. One of the aims of this chapter has been to use Boyer's poetry to provide a ground for this ambivalence, putting the concept in touch with contemporary issues, in what Agamben himself might call "new use" (*Nudities* 102). At the same time, my interrogations have sought to rectify the scant consideration given to Boyer's poetry and especially to its complex considerations of writing and its relationship to other forms of potential. As suggested by Agamben's deployment of literature in bringing the concept of potential into philosophical debate, it is fit to accommodate new considerations such as those raised through Boyer's work.

Ultimately, I want to suggest that thinking with Boyer's poetry through such categories as precarity, vulnerability, and feminism can expose the deeper relevance of Agamben's work while pointing to new possibilities for thinking through potential and impotentiality in the present day. Perhaps, following Agamben's potentiality, we might develop feminist pheno-menological accounts of women's writing to complement and complicate established philosophical interrogations, such as Hélène Cixous's "*ecriture feminine*" or Luce Irigaray's particular form of sexed thought, speech, and writing. Pursuing these connections, we might explore new links between questions of potential and actuality, advancing feminist critiques grounded in questions of sexual, ontological, or phenomenological difference while complicating a variety of categories with implications for feminist politics, from transparency and uprightness to their counterparts, vulnerability, inclination, and lack.

Reading Boyer's autobiographical poetry alongside Agamben's decades-old question of what constitutes human potential, we may be able to expand the parameters of debates on human agency at this moment in modernity. More precisely, Boyer can also be used to widen

the scope of Agamben's interventions on human potential. Against the arguably universalizing ontology of potentiality and its opposite, as suggested by Agamben, Boyer's work offers a uniquely feminist phenomenological perspective, one that finds its voice through themes of vulnerability, perception, stereotype, and maternality. In this sense, the collection allows us to consider not only what it is possible to do under contemporary neoliberal conditions, but also what it is possible for us *not* to do and how we may recognize this.

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