Sylvia Plath and White Ignorance: Race and Gender in "The Arrival of the Bee Box"

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Sylvia Plath wrote in the midst of growing racial tensions in 1950's and 1960's America. Her work demonstrates ambivalence towards her role as a middle-class white woman. In this paper, I examine the racial implications in Plath's color terms. I disagree with Renée Curry's reading in White Women Writing White *that Plath only considers her whiteness insofar as it affects herself. Through a phenomenological study of how whiteness shifts meaning in this poem, I hope to show that Curry's negative estimation is only partly right. I suggest that embodiment is a problem for Plath in general, and this contributes to her inability to fully examine other bodies.*

> "Everything you painted you painted white"
> (Hughes, 1998, p. 197)

In this paper, I show how philosophy and poetry can help each other work out their overlapping concerns.* I focus on the concepts of releasement, freedom, otherness and difference, especially as they relate to race. Sylvia Plath's poetry is instructive for uncovering the ways in which privilege remains hidden to individual subjects, entire groups of people, and within poetry. Merleau-Ponty's phenomenological account of the body will reveal Plath's inabilities to properly understand her own embodiment as a subject and agent who is at once privileged and marginalized. Recently, Renée Curry has suggested that Plath's extensive use of color terms should be analyzed for their social and political meanings. While I agree with Curry on this point, I disagree with her claim that Plath does not move beyond her own interests and concerns. Phenomenology helps us see Plath's limitations are not limited to ignorance of the raced body. Rather, her ignorance of the body in general affects and infects her ability to more fully understand race and gender.

Theorizing Difference

Difference and questions concerning otherness have become popular topics of inquiry especially in postmodernist, multiculturalist and feminist writings. Theorists sometimes exoticize that which they come to understand and denote as Other. Scholars who wish to describe that which appears

Janus Head, 10(1), 137-156.

foreign and alien frequently evoke Other with a capital 'O'. Many philosophers and literary theorists silently denote the Other as non-white. Otherness then becomes dark, colorful, dangerous, and exciting. It is too easy for non-nonwhites to equate race with those who are other than white, color with those who are non-white. As I hope to show through Plath's questions about otherness and difference, it is difficult for the white eye to see itself seeing whitely. In fact, bell hooks (1990) asserts: "Postmodernist discourses are often exclusionary even as they call attention to, appropriate even, the experience of "difference" and Otherness…"(p. 23).

To most North Americans and Europeans, the existence of objective racial categories seems self-evident. Individuals, writes Berel Lang (2000), "seem to fit into one of three or four groups, defined by obvious physical characteristics"(p. 4). However, white liberals often proudly proclaim they know race does not exist. That is, there are no biological, scientific underpinnings to the category race, no real essence that separates the supposed races that ordinary people continue to classify. When white liberals pronounce that race is not an issue for them, Charles Mills (1998) suggests, "…they are already tacitly positioned as white persons, culturally and cognitively European, racially privileged members of the West" (p. xv). For Mills, race has a dual nature. Even though race is not biological, physical, or essential, does not entail it is not real. For Mills, race should be understood as "both real and unreal" (p. xiv).

Sylvia Plath wrote in the midst of growing racial tensions in 1950's and 1960's America. Her journals and poetry record her heterogeneous feelings towards her status as a middle-class white woman in 1950's New England. The presence of racial imagery throughout her poetry and the virtual absence of reflection on real racial politics in either her published or non-published work are instructive for recovering the white eye to itself in at least three ways:

1. Her color usage in the poetry displays a painterly sensibility.
2. Her marked ambivalence about her triple role as victim, oppressor, and white woman creates a helpful guide for those who have not yet come to terms with their positions of social privilege.
3. Plath's searching for releasement and spirituality in her poetry reveals a powerful Plath spirituality, rooted in nature and the unification of the universe through love. When we read for Plath's spiritual themes alongside her inability to fully understand her privileged position, we can further un-

derstand the duality that persists in contemporary white American identity: "The desire to claim racial purity while ignoring the cultural blending and appropriation that are inextricably part of its form" (Babb, 1998, p. 43).

Taken in its entirety, Plath's speakers question gender, spirituality, and language itself. Her poetry, like other great poetic works, exhibits hyper-reflection, a questioning of foundational assumptions and continual openness. Poetry's structure parallels existential phenomenology's method of continually examining one's theoretical commitments. The two have much to offer each other. In particular, Merleau-Ponty's phenomenological method is intimately connected with perception, an important concept for literary criticism.

Phenomenological Approach to Poetry

Phenomenological approaches to philosophy and literature share a commitment to describing phenomena as we encounter them in the world. In this paper, I extend the theoretical commitments of phenomenology to an applied study of an individual poem in order to explore how we can understand a poem through the multiple aspects of our embodiment. I use embodiment here in the expanded way introduced by Maurice Merleau-Ponty (1907-1961), French phenomenologist and co-founder with Sartre of existential philosophy. He rejected Descartes' portrayal of the mind as entirely separable from the body and his depiction of the body as a mere machine. Descartes' proposed dichotomy between the mind and body has heavily influenced Western philosophy, religion and medicine, most notably in positing a split between reason and the emotions.

For Descartes, only the mind achieves rational thought, whereas for Merleau-Ponty, the body is rational. Merleau-Ponty describes four overlapping and dynamic aspects of the body that are constantly at work: the rational (cognitive-linguistic), social, motor, and perceptual.[1] When we respond to a poem, our understanding is not a mental act narrowly conceived but rather a bodily event where we begin to see and act according to the poem given by the author. Poetry provides access to a type of language we do not usually find in everyday speech. Merleau-Ponty (1962) calls this second order expression or non-empirical language. Merleau-Ponty's (1964) description of how we perceive visual artworks is instructive for understanding poetry: "It is more accurate to say that I see according to it [the artwork], or with it, than that I *see it*" (p. 164). Merleau-

Ponty's phenomenological method, which can be used to describe artworks with a broad understanding of rationality and the body, enhances other approaches to understanding art: literary criticism, historical accounts, and sociological methodologies. Phenomenology should not replace other ways of understanding poetry. Still, it deepens our understanding of the gestural and embodied nature of language and speech.

A single artwork discloses concrete ideas and concepts through the lines of the work. An artwork should receive the same ontological status as a single philosophical text rather than being classified as a secondary source or illustration of a separate philosophical theory or school of thought. Too often, philosophers use artworks to prove an already assumed theory or set of philosophical claims. One challenge for phenomenology is to reveal the materiality of language usually suppressed and hidden in our calculative-rational discourse.[2] In our perception, receiving, and breathing in of a poem, we also come to see according to the lines, rhythms, and undulations of its lines. Merleau-Ponty's (1964) remarks about painting and breath are quite revealing in this context, "There really is inspiration and expiration of Being, action and passion so slightly discernible that it becomes impossible to distinguish between what sees and what is seen, what paints and what is painted" (p. 167). Merleau-Ponty describes how artworks allow us to see according to the use of space, time, and language set up in the work. Artworks teach us about the historical period out of which they arise.[3] For example, we actually begin to see impressionistically when we stand before a painting by Monet. Similarly, poetry can teach us to see according to its lines, spaces, absences, and tensions. Artworks hold phenomena in such a way that we can begin to see what we ordinarily take for granted.

Poetry is particularly important for working out the central issues of phenomenology.[4] It allows us to experience readily the flow of lived time, the colors of sounds, and our body's fusion with things, qualities phenomenology also demonstrates. A phenomenology of single artworks helps illuminate how each needs the other and can enrich one another. Merleau-Ponty would call this potential relationship chiasmic, where chiasm denotes a relationship where dominance and hierarchy are replaced by mutuality between dependence and independence.[5] He even suggests (1968) that philosophy itself could be understood using the idea of a chiasm:

> …the idea of *chiasm*, that is to say: every relation to being is *simultaneously* holding and being held, the hold is held, it is *inscribed* and inscribed in the same being that it holds.
>
> Starting from there, elaborate an idea of philosophy: it cannot be total and active hold…It is the simultaneous experience of the holding and held in all orders.

When art and philosophy are understood as chiasmically bending towards each other, philosophy holds art while artworks hold our philosophical concepts.

Plath and Racial Imagery

Sylvia Plath wrote before the emergence of second-wave feminism, when possibilities for women and women writers were beginning to expand. Early Plath scholarship focused more on sensational aspects of Plath's life rather than her writings. In particular, speculations concerning Plath's possible schizophrenia and manic-depression as well as her suicide attempts continue to make it difficult to separate Plath the author from the speakers we encounter in her poetic works. Plath's marriage to British poet laureate Ted Hughes launched her into the literary elite while exposing her to scrutiny usually reserved for non-poets. Her eventual separation from Hughes as well as rumors of his infidelity and abuse continue to ignite attention from feminists, fans, and critics.[6] The publication of Hughes' partly autobiographical *Birthday Letters* and the film *Sylvia* have only strengthened interest in Plath as well as her relationship with Hughes. It is not surprising that critics and devotees of Plath's work emphasize the need for studies that do not conflate biography with poetry. Phenomenological approaches that remain centered on the body like Merleau-Ponty's provide an instructive addition to Plath scholarship, particularly for understanding color terms [dark, light, white, black] in her work.[7]

In this article, I explore Plath's "The Arrival of the Bee Box" where she uses colors to explore questions concerning power, powerlessness, difference and otherness. Although Plath's poetry does sometimes romanticize the racially Other, her work also allows us to experience the limitations of this view. In her important work and the first examination of Plath's whiteness, *White Women Writing White*, Renée Curry claims Plath's poetry reveals contradictory notions regarding the privileges of occupying a white body.

I agree with Curry on this point. However, unlike Curry, I do think Plath interrogates her own whiteness in her poetry. I focus on "The Arrival of the Bee Box" for three main reasons. First, this poem remains one of Plath's most hopeful poems.[8] Plath wanted her bee sequence poems, including "The Arrival of the Bee Box," to complete the *Ariel* poems. Plath intended *Ariel* to begin with "love" from "Morning Song" and end with "spring" from "Wintering." However, Ted Hughes, *Ariel's* first editor, reordered the poems in its first print version, leaving Plath's intentions invisible. Literary critic Susan Van Dyne (1993) explains, "When Plath chose to conclude *Ariel* with this group of poems, she recognized that the series point, at least figuratively, toward survival"(p. 101). The poem helps reveal what I would call an "Other Plath," one who transcends the more familiar portrait of a suicide obsessed poetess driven to suicide by Hughes or some combination of physical and mental illnesses. Second, the poem's subtext concerns the slave trade, and so is particularly relevant for a study of Plath and racism. Finally, the bee sequence reprises childhood issues for Plath, and provides insights into her overall personal and artistic development. Plath's father was a famous bee scholar and beekeeper. So, though my article is not a biographical study of Plath, it does illuminate themes and questions Plath pursued throughout her life. Here, I focus on Plath's confrontation with race in order to recover how whiteness easily becomes invisible to the white eye. We will see how this speaker suffers when she is unable to see her own social privileges.

Releasing Whiteness

Curry argues that Plath's remarkable use of colors, especially black and white, need to be explored beyond their symbolic meanings. Curry (2000) claims there are racial meanings in Plath's use of white, black, dark, and light (p. 25). Curry interrogates how Plath's imagination constructs whiteness. As indicated earlier, I agree with her central claim that there are racial implications lodged within Plath's extensive use of colors. However, I disagree with her argument that Plath only considers her whiteness insofar as it affects her personal goals. Plath's primary subject, writes Curry, "is that of the white female self buckling in on itself" (p. 168). Curry follows popular readings of Plath as a narcissistic, self-obsessed poet. Curry does not uncover enough of the other Plath available through phenomenological study of Plath's use of color. This other Plath moves beyond the binaries of male/female,

black/white, artist/woman, into a space where these binaries overlap and fuse with one another. Plath's romanticism allows her to examine what Herman Melville called "the power of blackness" (Morrison, 1993, p. 37). Romance, explains Toni Morrison, often reveals "American's fear of being outcast, of failing, of powerlessness; their fear of boundarylessness, of Nature unbridled and crouched for attack; their fear of the absence of so-called civilization; their fear of loneliness, of aggression both external and internal" (p. 37). This poem works out Morrison's descriptions of human freedom and terror in poetic language. In those places where Plath relates to the bees in this poem as subjects, where she moves beyond binaries, I would suggest we find a spiritual dimension in her writings. Here we see a connection with Merleau-Ponty's philosophy, which also searches out non-dualistic, spiritual encounters with the world, including art. I suggest that Plath's spirituality, though incomplete, does illuminate more than her own self.

A crucial aspect of spirituality is releasement, not releasement *from* something but rather releasement *towards* another way of being in the world. "The Arrival of the Bee Box" enables the reader to experience the advent of three related types of releasement. These are the same types described by medieval theologian Meister Eckhart: releasement towards things, oneself, and the divine. Heidegger emphasizes the "towards" in order to articulate the phenomena of releasement: letting-go and letting-be.[9] Plath's poetry puts us in touch with ways of being that transcend human control. The main themes of the poem: appropriation and releasement, power and powerlessness, show the speaker looking towards the future with a stance of anticipation and growing calmness towards self, others, and the things of this world.

Joyce Carol Oates explains that Plath's poetry helps us diagnose the pathological aspects of our era (Alexander, 1984, p. 26). In part, Plath exposes this madness and drive towards nihilism through her poetry's inability to move beyond stereotypes. For example, she often evokes whiteness to symbolically conjure up purity, lack of sex-fullness and uses images of darkness to denote excess and sexual adventurousness. Plath's extensive color imagery can be found in her earliest works up until her final poems in *Ariel,* the ones that would make her famous. For example, in "Panther" she uses a black panther to denote a sexual predator. We find the speaker struggling with gaining power over color in "Soliloquy of the Solipsist." Black is seen as a threat to white people in "The Thin People." Plath repeats this theme of blackness as enslavement, entrapment and suffocation throughout her work. In "The Moon and the Yew Tree" the frequently repeated image of

black trees is used to express inadequacy as well as excess.

Renée Curry observes that in Plath's *Collected Poems*, fifty percent (117 poems) use the words white and/or black in order to signify power, fear, rationality, and (im)purity (p. 125). Yet, I think Plath's use of black, white, light, and dark to speak about her own body moves us beyond simple racial images of white self/ black other. In "The Arrival of the Bee Box" for example, Plath depicts the speaker's white body as visible, colored, and marked as white. This deviates from the customary "neutral white (male) body, normative ("flesh-colored," after all), unproblematic, vanishing from philosophical sight, invisibly visible…"(Mills, 1998, p. 16). We move towards a space that begins to disrupt the awful racial meanings available in the space of the poem and the actual historical events in the United States during the 1950's. Plath's poetry holds whiteness before our eyes so we can at least begin to see and hear it. Now, whiteness may not continue to be what Toni Morrison (1993) describes as "mute, meaningless, unfathomable, pointless, frozen, veiled, curtained, dreaded, senseless, implacable…" (p. 59).

The Arrival of the Bee Box

I ordered this, this clean wood box
Square as a chair and almost too heavy to lift.
I would say it was the coffin of a midget
Or a square baby
Were there not such a din in it.

The box is locked, it is dangerous.
I have to live with it overnight
And I can't keep away from it.
There are no windows, so I can't see what is in there.
There is only a little grid, no exit.

I put my eye to the grid.
It is dark, dark,
With the swarmy feeling of African hands
Minute and shrunk for export,
Black on black, angrily clambering.

How can I let them out?
It is the noise that appalls me most of all,
The unintelligible syllables.
It is like a Roman mob,
Small, taken one by one, but my god, together!

I lay my ear to furious Latin.
I am not a Caesar.
I have simply ordered a box of maniacs.
They can be sent back.
They can die, I need feed them nothing, I am the owner.

I wonder how hungry they are.
I wonder if they would forget me
If I just undid the locks and stood back and turned into a tree.
There is the laburnum, its blond colonnades,
And the petticoats of the cherry.

They might ignore me immediately
In my moon suit and funeral veil.
I am no source of honey
So why should they turn on me?
Tomorrow I will be sweet God, I will set them free.
The box is only temporary.[10]

Arriving: Phenomenological Entrances into the Poem

Our first entrance into the poem is through the presence of bees. These creatures are at once the most vulnerable and most powerful beings in the poem. We engage with them primarily as things that have been stockpiled into a box. The bees are primarily what they are not: free, autonomous, at home in their environment. They strive to break free from the flatness pressed upon them by their dwelling place. The speaker expresses fear and disdain towards the Other in the poem, the bees. Readers will experience the releasement of the bees to the extent the poet/speaker is able to remove the boxes that contain them. To do this we look at the silences in the poem. Absent space holds our glances beneath its surface (Interestingly, this space is still referred to as white space in literature classes.) Our exploration of Plath's

silences shows how our words, buildings, ways of dwelling may be shown to be maniacal as well. These bees which can be read as racial Others help illuminate how poetry can remain ignorant regarding racial politics.

In our everyday lives, bees are important to us primarily for their utility value: honey, food, beauty products, and recreation. In this poem, bees have been ordered to wait in their bee-box until humans are ready for them. Bees are made to follow the patterns of modern technology where nature can always be further divided and ordered: "Everywhere everything is ordered to stand by, to be immediately at hand, indeed to stand there just so that it may be on call for further ordering" (Heidegger, 1977, pp. 53-56). Our encounter with these poetic bees draws us towards an ethical issue about the ways humans have been unable in Heidegger's terminology to "let things be." Instead, we have challenged and demanded that objects and other people stand by (*bestehen*) and wait for further ordering and restructuring.[11] Plath suggests that being passive and letting things be requires an active willingness to engage with phenomena. This poem shows that releasement and freedom are events that happen to gendered and raced individuals. (Heidegger's writings on releasement miss this crucial point).[12] We witness this most poignantly in the final stanzas where the speaker's sex manifests itself: *There is the laburnum, its blond colonnades,/ And the petticoats of the cherry.*

These stanzas also situate the speaker as white. This completes the framing of the poem as far as race is concerned.[13] We begin the poem with the presence of these imported African bees, shipped by dark African hands and end with the speaker's blond presence.

Tensions and Resistance

The rhythm of the poem beats with a crisp turned-up tone that gains momentum from the ever-present visibility of the speaker. What I mean by 'turned up' is that the accents of the words bring our voices to a rising pitch. This contributes to the tension and anger that comprise the poem's cognitive content. The lines jut forth from the stomach with a punching movement. This punching feeling begins with the poem's double 'this' in the first line.[14] The accented word 'this' reverberates throughout the work. The effect is less visible (though still present) when we observe the words on the page. We hear the effect of repetition when the speaker/poet transmits a line, phrase, or single word and then repeats it:

This, this
Dark, dark
Black on black
One by one
They can be
They can die
I wonder
I wonder

Here, we see the broad lines of the poem which are framed through repetition. The "ee" sound is present from the beginning. Stanza three in particular contains the words swarmy and angrily as well as the slant rhyme on eye. The speaker unites blackness with "the swarmy feeling of African hands." Repetition realizes its most pronounced sounding in the last stanza's overflowing 'ee' sounds. These potentially gentle words end with an open 'ee' sound, counterpointing the sharp buzzing of the bees as well as the more pronounced repetitions we have just heard and seen. The proliferation of rhyme draws us closer to the poem as the speaker now draws closer to the bee box. This rhyming finally frees freedom from within the poem. We hear: The box is only temporary.

The speaker internalizes the world's violence and absorbs it into her own body. She becomes at once less and more than human in her imagined transformation into a tree: *I wonder if they would forget me/ If I just undid the locks and stood back and turned into a tree.* These terminal lines light up the speaker's femininity. If she turns into a tree, these bees will inhabit and overpower her. Remarkably, the speaker cannot imagine herself as a powerful woman so she imagines herself as a tree: masculine, sedimented. She objectifies herself, and performs this own objectification for the reader to see. The body that emerges bursts forth with the marking of femininity yet conceals a hidden power, identifiable by the laburnum. The poem asks if the "I" of the poem, this unspecified "I" who first ordered this box of bees might be forgotten by these creatures if the bees were able to experience releasement from their artificial sheltering place. Rhyme and repetition draw us in and then allow us to care about the speaker's existence. After all, we know we are all owners at least to some extent. This female beekeeper expresses her ambivalence about taking care of these bees who will in turn produce honey to take care of others. Plath departs from classical poems about bees, most famously Virgil's *Georgics*, Book IV, which praise beekeeping and explain how

beekeeping was taught to mankind.[15] In Plath's poem, a female beekeeper struggles with the male authority given to her (the speaker even assumes the ultimate white role of God), and must decide how she will relate with those who have been enslaved.[16]

Plath romanticizes the bees and these African hands as somehow closer to nature and the body than her own. Sadly, she cannot see these dark hands as fully human. The speaker aligns these hands with the swarming bees themselves through the use of the word 'swarmy' in her description:

> It is dark, dark,
> With the swarmy feeling of African hands
> Minute and shrunk for export,
> Black on black, angrily clambering.

Plath belies her own desire to forge a poetics that would transcend the cultural limitations of her historical position. She cannot completely address her own racial privilege. Curry claims that Plath's realizations of white privilege do not challenge her beyond her own personal situation. Plath's poetic writings, says Curry (2000), are limited to a study of Plath herself (p. 124). I claim Curry's reading of Plath remains too limited, especially her claim that revelations about white privilege that contemporary readers may discover appear "unwittingly" from her poetry. Though I agree with Curry that Plath does not interrogate her own social privileges as much as writers like Melville, in her best poems she does radiate outside her own personal cares and concerns. For example, in "The Arrival of the Bee Box," Plath questions the history of the slave trade and attempts to come to terms with her place in this complex story as a subject marked by whiteness. Plath does not hide the speaker's whiteness in this poem; rather, she begins to expose the privilege needed to ask the questions posed by the speaker.

When we move deeper into the poem, we distance ourselves from this speaker's ignorances, mainly her ignoring of these bees. The poet's knowledge should not be conflated with this speaker's ignorance. As readers, we move away from the voice of the speaker, a voice boxed within this poem and locked inside its own box. The only thing visible inside the tiny grid is the blackness growing on top of continuing blackness. The bees are invisible expect for the black which shines forth. It is dark, dark and we move forth from this line to its counterpoint phrase: *Black on Black*. These lines produce a doubling of blackness and darkness. The poem forces us to confront this darkness. Black becomes visible as the blackness inside the bee box meets

with the African hands who prepared these bees for shipment. The speaker at least begins to understand the growing anger and frustration of the bees on their own terms. Plath, her speaker, and readers of the poem suffer when they/we are unable to see their/our own social privileges.

Contemporary readers cannot ignore the ways the poem moves us toward it, then pushes us back, and finally repeats this movement. Plath's ambiguities and difficulties with racial issues emerge in this and other poems. Of course, not every poet is concerned the social and political dimensions of their work. Whether they should in fact be concerned is a separate question. Fortunately, Plath has claimed, especially in her correspondence and journals, that she wanted her writings to be about more than her own life. In a 1962 interview she says: "I think my powers immediately come out of the sensuous and emotional experiences I have, but I must say I cannot sympathize with these cries from the heart that are informed by nothing except a needle or a knife, or whatever it is…I believe it should be relevant, and relevant to the larger things, the bigger things such as Hiroshima and Dachau and so on" (Plath, 1966). I claim that though Plath started to investigate the difficult questions about white ignorance that need to be asked, she could have deconstructed stereotypes about black, white, dark, light even more, especially given her desire for political relevance. For example, this poem exhibits Plath's struggles with myths about black sexuality. Plath's struggle exemplifies current fears concerning black sexuality. Cornel West describes this painful tradition as one where "The dominant myths [of black sexuality] draw black women and men either as threatening creatures who have the potential for sexual power over whites, or as harmless, desexed underlings of a white culture" (West, 1993, p. 83). Bell hooks explains that American literature has routinely joined metaphors for colonization and freedom with discussions of sexual images: free countries are equated with free men and domination is understood as a loss of manhood throughout the American literary canon (hooks, 1990, p. 57).

Plath uses the interplay between bees and the speaker of the poem to display the movement between power and powerlessness. For Plath, power shifts between the speaker and the bees. The sensuality of the bees, African hands, and the speaker's bodily presence create a dimension that recalls myths concerning black bodies that hooks and West deconstruct. The juxtaposition of African hands and blond colonnades evokes myths concerning black sexuality and appetite as excessive, in need of regulation. We are reminded of our own society's inability to properly understand black appetite. For example, scholars ignore black women's anorexia and bulimia, black Muslim

leaders often adopt paternalistic approaches to black mothers and nutrition, and finally there are the stereotypes of black mothers as inadequate, prone to drug use, and unable to control their desires in such a way that requires welfare assistance. Doris Witt (1995) argues that Jean Anthelme Brillat-Savarin was correct in asserting, "Tell me what African-American women are said to eat, and I shall tell you what Americans fear they are" (p. 409). Witt then explains how African American women have been absent from discussions of eating disorders yet overly present in discussions of fetal rights. She examines how the construction of black female appetite reveals the fears and desires of white women concerning embodiment, motherhood, sexuality, and identity.

The common thread among these contemporary mis-readings of black appetite as well as Plath's earlier misunderstanding is an inability to understand the natural black body. In Plath's poem, black bodies are the colonized, whereas the white speaker holds godlike mastery over these irrational maniacs. Plath naturalizes black bodies as primitive, dangerous, excessively sexual. Part of Plath's limitations here are not due to racial prejudice though. Plath displays marked ambivalence about embodiment generally in her poems, particularly her own female body. We see the intersection of gender and racial meanings at work in this poem. I think if Plath had been able to remove the boxes that remain from Cartesian dualistic thinking that separates mind from body, reason from emotion, male from female, she would have been in a better position to understand other bodies as well as her own.

In order to move beyond the stereotypes evoked, Plath would need to de-naturalize the color black, move beyond black as threatening into a space where the boxes that now limit the speaker and poet would be removed. This would be a space where the box would really only be temporary as the last line of this poem promises but does not quite deliver. The speaker knows where she must go; she moves towards this last line: *The box is only temporary.* We do not witness the bees' releasement within the space of the poem. On this, Plath is silent.

Ignoring Others

As readers, we do not easily admit we have done anything harmful to these bees. Still, the failures of this speaker become increasingly more visible as we allow ourselves to envision the "sweet" future spoken of but not obtained by this speaker. The poem draws us in as collective owners of these

bees. The work justifies our own ignorance of these bees, these Others, as rational; it justifies our forgetting of collective guilt. After all, the speaker reassures, we are not the maniacs. We also are not the ones responsible for sending this box of bees out into the world. The speaker indicates her distance from the means of production by contrasting the hands of the exporters with her own white platinum colonnades. The speaker brings these bees into this clean wood box, a place stripped bare of the bees' home. Throughout our reading of the poem, we suppose we are not the maniacs since we control and delineate a clean line between ourselves and the bees, between our language and the language of the poem.

The speaker does not initially recognize that the way in which she relates to the other is through a forceful false synthesis. This aspect of the poem speaks to us about the back and forth movement that underlies the process of belonging together. Heidegger (1969) explains the two ways belonging together can be understood. The customary way claims that "the meaning of belonging is determined by the word together" (p. 29). Here two terms are united by an "authoritative synthesis," a forceful joining together characterized by systematization.[17] The second way of understanding belonging together is as *belonging* together. This is what Heiddeger calls the event of appropriation (*Ereignis*). In German this means to make appropriate, and this helps us understand that unity can only happen at an appropriate time. This time is in some ways beyond the control of humans and yet at the same time requires that we actively prepare for this event of appropriation, when relationships will be appropriate, tender, and just. Plath poetically describes this first way of relating to others, the forceful joining together, as characterized by an inability to hear the other. She shifts from the Western philosophical preoccupation with sight and vision into a space where hearing is central. We hear the buzzing unintelligible un-silence of the bees that overwhelms the speaker when she remains consumed by her mastery of others. At this point, the box remains that which is the most prominent. The bees have been pushed back, pushed down, and are determined by their status as boxed, framed, and encased.

Plath's Racism? Beyond the Bee-Box

The appearance of Plath's whiteness shifts even within this single poem. We see this through the speaker's shifting sense of entitlement and the various ways she exploits these bees. Charles Mills explains what I have designated

as a moral lack as an epistemic disadvantage as well: "They [whites] have suffered the cognitive handicaps that usually come with social privilege." This poem demonstrates Mills' assertion (1998) that race is "intersubjectively constructed" (p. 134). Race and racism are not comprised of a set of feelings, attitudes, or beliefs. Rather, they are better understood as systems of advantages and disadvantages (p. 134). In this poem, these systems are described as boxes that construct and shape our place in this world as maniacs, owners, possessions, free persons, charmers, seducers, moral agents. The boxes in the poem contain the speaker's ignorances and display the speaker's white ignorance. These boxes, these substantive moral failings create ignorance, in this case ignorance of these African bees. Those situated as white can forget because they never knew these bees' experiences. Racism then is a dynamic changing phenomenon that happens in the world (and in poetry). This poem enacts the speaker's coming into a self that comes into the world as at once privileged in her whiteness and victimized and restricted through her femininity.

It is difficult if not impossible to determine the extent of Plath's actual racism or her commitment to biological, psychological, or metaphysical racism. What is becoming clear though is that her work possesses real silences that prevent her from fully speaking about questions concerning racism. Even though I have suggested that Plath's writings are not as problematic as Curry claims, I agree that Plath does sometimes romanticize and naturalize the racially other. Plath sought to bridge poetry and real world activism. However, she fails to fully live up to her expressed moral, poetic, and political goals. There are several ways in which we can respond to these failings:

1. Reject the thinker outright.
2. Claim there is a separation between the thinker and his/her work
3. Claim there is no separation and that the silences and limitations are central to the thinker's work. This does not entail though that we must reject their views categorically. In fact, these limitations may speak in such a way as to teach us about our own moral limitations.

I would suggest that this third approach most fully accounts for the depth of Plath's work. Yes, as Curry argues and we have seen through our examination of this poem, Plath was limited by her own stereotypes of black and white. However, her poetry does not simply remain in the realm of stereotypic blackness and whiteness. As I have tried to show by uncovering Plath's

epistemic and ethical position as a white speaker/poet, her poetry expresses ambivalence about her multiple roles as victim and oppressor. The tensions Plath and her speakers felt become our problem as we take up our position as moral agents. I have focused on the white subject in order to move away from discussions of difference and otherness where the focus remains on those who are other-than-white. This is crucial if we are to fully understand the disadvantaged position of the white eye when it is unable to fully see how racism limits its understanding of the world.

Notes

* Condensed from my forthcoming book, *Releasing Philosophy, Thinking Art: A Phenomenological Study of Sylvia Plath's Poetry* (Aurora, Colorado: The Davies Group, Publishers).

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[1] Samuel Mallin was the first to explain these four aspects of Merleau-Ponty's work in *Merleau-Ponty's Philosophy* (1979). New Haven: Yale University Press.

[2] Merleau-Ponty distinguishes authentic speech that contains a gestural meaning from second order expression that comprises the majority of empirical language. See Merleau-Ponty. (1962). *Phenomenology of Perception.* London: Routledge and Kegan Paul (p. xx).

[3] In particular see, Merleau-Ponty. (1964). *Primacy of Perception.* Evanston: Northwestern (p. 163) and *Phenomenology of Perception* (p. xx).

[4] My phenomenological work on poetry has been influenced by the writings of Samuel B. Mallin whose work clarifies contemporary philosophical issues by describing truths revealed through visual art. See his *Art Line Thought*. (1996) Dordrecht: Kluwer Academic Publishers.

[5] This methodology applies Merleau-Ponty's understanding of phenomenology to single artworks. Heidegger's emphasis on individual poems is instructive. For Heidegger, experiencing a poem grants us access to the poetic dimension in language, its relationship to Being and its place in determining the historical process of presencing. Both thinkers emphasize that the poetic is a dimension of language and life that has been suppressed by the reductive totalization that characterizes this age.

[6] The publication of Hughes' book of poetry, *Birthday Letters* (1998). New York: Farrar, Straus, & Giroux broke his long silence concerning his relationship with Plath and the details concerning his ex-wife's suicide.

[7] See Ellen Miller. (2002). Philosophizing with Sylvia Plath: An Embodied Hermeneutic of Color in Ariel. *Philosophy Today*, Volume 46, Issue 2.

[8] David Holbrook who has declared Plath's writing as indicative of a schizoid personality admits that this poem is one of Plath's most "normal" poems since she is able to relate to the bees not merely as appendages of her own identity but as creatures in themselves. See David Holbrook. (1988). *Sylvia Plath: Poetry and Existence.* London: Athlone Press.

[9] Heidegger's fullest exposition of his concept of *Gelassenheit* (releasement) can be found in his *Discourse on Thinking.* (1966). New York: Harper & Row. See Meister Eckhart's German sermons for his exposition concerning releasement.

[10] See Sylvia Plath. (1992). *The Collected Poems.* New York: HarperPerennial. This poem is dated October 4, 1962, just four months before Plath's death on February 11, 1963.

[11] See especially Martin Heidegger (1977). *Question Concerning Technology and Other Essays.*New York: Harper & Row (pp. 14-19) and *Discourse on Thinking.* (1966). New York: Harper & Row (pp. 53-56).

[12] Heidegger knew this, but his writings remain ignorant regarding how gender and race impact and influence the process of releasement.

[13] We come to understand that the speaker is white in part because we know Plath is white. Though I try to separate Plath the writer from the speaker's in her poems, it is not imperative that we separate them entirely. We realize that Plath does not cross race as some writers cross gender in their writing.

[14] See Plath's interview with Peter Orr where she explains her own understanding of the development and growth in her writing: "This is something I didn't do in my earlier poems. For example, my first book, *The Colossus,* I can't read any of the poems aloud now. I didn't write them to be read aloud. They, in fact, quite privately, bore me. These ones that I have just read, the ones that are very recent, I've got to say them, I speak them to myself, and I think that this in my own writing development is quite a new thing with me, and whatever lucidity they may have comes from the fact that I say them to myself, I say them aloud." From *The Poet Speaks: Interviews with Contemporary Poets Conducted by Hilary Morrish, Peter Orr, John Press, and Ian Scott-Kilvery.* (1966). London: Routledge.

[15] Virgil's *Georgics* explains the legend of Aristæus. *Aristæus, the son of the god Apollo, had a beehive. He wanted to seduce Eurydice, Orpheus' wife, who died from a snake bite because she had refused Aristæus' advances. In revenge, Orpheus destroyed Aristæus' hive. To appease the wrath of the gods, Aristæus scarified four bulls and four heifers. From their entrails, new swarms suddenly appeared, so Aristæus was able to rebuild his hive and teach beekeeping to men.* See Virgil. (1983). *The Georgics.* New York: Viking Press.

[16] Members of the American Society of Aesthetics provided helpful comments on ways in which Plath's poem departs from classical myths concerning bees and beekeeping.

[17] For Heidegger, Hegel's system and to a lesser extent Kant's exemplify this understanding of relationship.

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