

“Such loss is no loss”:
Exploring Queer Poetics
in H.D.’s Archive and “Eurydice”

An English Literature Thesis

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Approaching the archival work involved in this project, I saw myself as some sort of archaeologist. I imagined that, through my privileged access to H.D.’s letters, I would reconstruct H.D. in a way that no one had been able to do before. I thought I was excavating a secret key that would unlock her and, through me, reveal the pearl of H.D.’s deepest truth to the world. More ideologically than that, I was hoping to discover a fully legible lesbian love story between H.D. and her non-binary partner Bryher, and to use that achieved intimacy to read deeper into her poetry, to reach a level of familiarity with her mind that would make me feel like I knew her personally. But what the archive¹ swiftly revealed to me is that there is no singular H.D., and there is certainly no blatant, out-and-proud gay love story in the convoluted life H.D. led. Far from being a glamorous archaeologist stumbling upon an unopened tomb, I was more like a starving traveller happening upon a smashed statue in the sand, and finding that the pieces almost fit together but not in any way that resembles a human face².

At first, discovering an incoherent H.D. felt like a failure; what was I going to write about if my poet-of-choice didn’t exist in any way that conformed to narrative convention? But after I

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² I am chronicling all of this because I have come up with no better way to demonstrate how I arrived at these theories and conclusions than to begin the story from my personal point of view. I think the tendency of literary analysis to deny any emotional investment by the author is misleading, and a mistake; humans are categorically bad at separating what we are thinking from what we are feeling, yet literary criticism demands an unreasonable level of detachment from the text and the analytical product. As a queer woman I have personal stakes in this project, and I fully acknowledge that my emotional investment guided me to my conclusions. I think following that journey is both the most straightforward path of explanation for this thesis, and the most interesting.

was introduced to queer archive theory, my perspective began to shift. I learned that fragments and illegible silences are the hallmarks of the queer archive, and that they cannot be removed. Efforts to bridge those narrative gaps and glue together the fragments ignore the fact that the incoherencies of queer existence are there to protect as much as they are enforced by social norms. Trying to fill them with a haphazard approximation of experience based on well-meaning conjecture is to eradicate an integral part of the queer experience. Put another way, those withdrawals from narrative *are* queerness. That realization led me away from my attempts at reconstruction, and refocused me onto exploring the way that H.D. uses and encourages those gaps in her work, and in the glimpses of her life that the letters allow. H.D.'s identity is complex, and she often withdrew from society instinctively as a means of self-preservation and self-identification. Through the letters in the Bryn Mawr archive, a close reading of H.D.'s poem "Eurydice," and the queer theories of reticence (by Catherine Imbriglio) and disidentification (by José Muñoz), this essay examines the way that H.D.'s withdrawal from legibility and her navigation of societal and modernist norms allowed her to create her own boundaries, rules, and universes in which to explore and formulate her queer identity.

In the archival work, the letter that stood out as the most generative was written by H.D. during a tumultuous time in her earlier life. The letter, addressed to H.D.'s friend and fellow writer John Cournos³, was written in 1919, a year in which H.D.'s career as a poet and writer

³ Cournos was a somewhat auxiliary member of H.D.'s circle of modernist contemporaries. He befriended Frost, Yeats, Eliot, and Pound, and through Pound he was introduced to H.D. and Richard Aldington, who were a couple at the time. He became an enthusiastic third wheel to H.D. and Aldington's marriage, and during the Zeppelin Raids of WWI the three of them rented a cottage by the sea in North Devonshire where "John very nearly fell in love with H.D.," and where "on at least one occasion they all bathed naked together in the sea" (Satterthwaite 402). However, in 1917, Aldington began an affair with Dorothy Yorke, the woman Cournos had been in love with for almost a decade, for which Cournos solely blamed H.D. (403). Directly afterward, Cournos made an aborted romantic and sexual offer to H.D., which she rejected, only serving to increase his resentment towards her. By 1919 the friendship between H.D. and Cournos has been complicated by the events of 1917. There are hints to their beginning estrangement in this letter, such as the lines "I must see you one day and have a good talk. I really must. You and I

was starting to take root. H.D. later refers to this part of her life as a “psychic death” (Guest 103); she had just given birth to her daughter Perdita, been diagnosed fatally with the flu, and ended her marriage to her husband Richard Aldington. During this tumultuous time she also met and began living with Bryher, who was unstable herself, and dealing with intense mental health issues that stemmed at least in part from her gender dysphoria. In this letter, entitled “Writes in confidence about Bryher’s state of mind” from the Bryn Mawr Special Collections, H.D. appeals to Cournos for help with Bryher’s condition, confessing in ambiguous and contradictory terms the relationship between Bryher and herself.

After inviting Cournos to the opera, HD opens the letter with,

I am hoping you can [will]⁴ like Bryher. I am writing you in strict confidence about her. You must not speak to Fletcher or anyone. But she is going everyday to a specialist and there is possibility of insanity. The doctor tells me that her sanity for the present depends on me. This sounds exaggeration but you are used to the exaggerations of life. She likes you but remember she is horribly sensitive and covers it. She is devoted to me. I can do nothing, am only hoping, if I have the strength, to open her mind to possibilities. She is shut in and blind to life and I have never, never met so tragic a ~~lif~~epersonality.

Immediately evident to any reader of this passage is the anxiety and stress that her relationship with a tormented Bryher is causing H.D.. Yet, one cannot help but feel that there is an entire subterranean, palimpsestic letter underlying the written words. The helpless panic serves as a

are not people, we are forces of some sort,” which seems like an appeal to a common perspective that they used to share. Regardless of this tension, however, it is clear that H.D. still considers Cournos a friend whom she can lean on in asking for support with Bryher.

⁴ H.D. wrote this letter on a typewriter. There are multiple typos in the letter, making the typos themselves interesting sites of contestation and management of information. One can only guess at the motivations behind H.D.’s correcting her writing, and whether the word choice was a conscious or subconscious choice to alter her narrative. I kept this typo of “can will” in the transcription because to choose one word would greatly alter the tone of the sentence; “I hope you *will* like Bryher” is a phrase that carries significantly less tension and uncertainty than “I hope you *can* like Bryher,” and the negotiation of how H.D. presents Bryher to Cournos in advance of their meeting is a central conflict in the letter, which speaks to how H.D. herself was grappling with her perception of Bryher at the time.

veneer and a distraction for something that is being withheld, something that is present only through its conspicuous absence in the same way that one can tell the shape of something cut from a piece of paper by looking at the hole left behind. While H.D. is perfectly comfortable expounding on Bryher's state of mind and her emotional attachment to H.D., H.D. never articulates how she feels about Bryher beyond a state of general anxiety over her life and mental health. In fact, this passage provides no structure that would confirm or deny the existence of any of H.D.'s feelings towards Bryher, positive or negative. Instead, H.D. allows Bryher's feelings to eclipse and mask the absence of her's, as in the lines "she is horribly sensitive and covers it. She is devoted to me. I can do nothing". H.D. can do nothing and, implicitly, feels nothing, allowing Bryher to carry all of the sensitivity and devotion for the both of them. In this way, H.D. transfers the emotions that she would take ownership of were she capable of full disclosure onto Bryher, creating a slippage of signification: in the world of the letter that H.D. has constructed, Bryher's emotions equal the absence of H.D.'s, even though the reader can see, via the trick of the paper cutout, that the conspicuous absence is really an unmistakable presence.

H.D.'s repeated descriptions of Bryher's "insanity" and "horrible sensitivity" point to another slippage in this passage, as H.D. transfers Bryher's poor mental health onto Bryher's affection for H.D. (and, as established above, the "absence" of H.D.'s affection for Bryher). H.D. conflates insanity with Bryher's "devotion" to her, thus creating a pathologization of Bryher's homosexual attraction and affection, and, transitively, pathologizing the homosexual nature of the relationship between the two women. The beginning of the passage points towards this slippage of signification, as the "strict confidence" that H.D. asks from Cournos first seems to be necessary due to the social stigma around insanity, yet the sentences "she is going everyday to a

specialist and there is possibility of insanity” and “The doctor tells me that her sanity for the present depends on me” overlays insanity with dependence, and transfer the stigma of insanity to the scandal of homosexual relationships. This slippage confuses what exactly H.D. is requesting Cournos keep hidden; is it Bryher’s insanity, or Bryher’s love for H.D. (and H.D.’s “absent” love for Bryher)?

The palimpsestic overlays within this first passage of H.D.’s letter speak to the tension between the binaries of public/private and secrecy/disclosure that Eve Kosofsky Sedgwick reminds us are the hallmarks of texts written from within the closet (Sedgwick 72). In her work *The Epistemology of the Closet*, Sedgwick explores these binaries through imagining individual queer perspectives as well as the interaction between heteronormative society and the queer minority. The closet, Sedgwick claims, “has been...inexhaustibly productive of modern Western culture and history at large,” defining not only the queer experience but also determining majoritarian identification through the heterosexual desire to differentiate between straight and gay (68), and thereby making all secrecy a manifestation of the secrecy of (homo)sexuality (74). Sedgwick describes the positionality of the closeted queer person in heteronormative culture as “bayoneted through and through, from both sides, by the vectors of a disclosure at once compulsory and forbidden⁵” (70). This “double bind” that Sedgwick observes denies the

⁵ Sedgwick examines a Fourth Circuit court case from Montgomery County, Maryland, concerning an eighth-grade science teacher named Acanfora who was “transferred to a nonteaching position by the Board of Education when they learned he was gay. When Acanfora spoke to news media, such as ‘60 Minutes’ and the Public Broadcasting System, about his situation, he was refused a new contract entirely” (69). What Sedgwick finds most notable about this case is that “each of the two rulings in *Acanfora* emphasized that the teacher’s homosexuality ‘itself’ would not have provided an acceptable ground for denying him employment. Each of the courts relied in its decision on an implicit distinction between the supposedly protected and bracketable fact of Acanfora’s homosexuality proper, on the one hand, and on the other hand his highly vulnerable management of information about it. So very vulnerable does this latter exercise prove to be, however, and vulnerable to such a contradictory array of interdictions, that the space for simply existing as a gay person who is a teacher is in fact bayoneted through and through, from both sides, by the vectors of a disclosure at once compulsory and forbidden.”

existence of homosexuality in both the private and public spheres, creating a cultural and social incoherency surrounding the public/private binary. This incoherency manifests itself not only in the large-scale contexts of the legal and educational systems but also in the personal experiences of every closeted queer person, as it complicates the image of the closet itself. The inside/outside binary of the image of the closet creates a false promise of safety that the public/private incoherency undermines completely. Staying in the closet guarantees no safety, as to leave one's homosexuality undisclosed is a threat to heterosexual society, yet stepping out of the closet and attempting to take control of one's public narrative does not guarantee agency over one's own narrative, as "one's authority to describe her or his own sexuality might well be impeached" upon its publication (78). By outlining the immobilizing and impossible dynamics of this "double bind," Sedgwick makes intellectually accessible "the radical uncertainty closeted gay people are likely to feel about who is in control of information about their sexual identity" (79).

H.D.'s letter to John Cournos exemplifies the queer struggle with this "radical uncertainty" and with navigating the incoherency of the public/private border. While H.D. is not subject to any governmental or otherwise institutional forces that are policing her disclosure of her sexuality from the outside, what one reads in the letter is an internalized policing that speaks to H.D.'s personal anxieties about both the existence of her relationship with Bryher and its disclosure to anyone outside of that relationship. H.D. is attempting to navigate the public/private border on two levels, a subconscious one and an interpersonal one. The subconscious navigation manifests in the slippage of H.D.'s feelings into Bryher's, leaving that conspicuous affection-shaped hole, and slippage of the stigma of insanity into the stigma of homosexuality, creating a joint pathologization that some would label as internalized homophobia. Meanwhile,

H.D.'s demands for confidentiality exemplify her attempts at controlling her own narrative and mediating its disclosure across the interpersonal public/private boundary between her and Cournos. Later in the letter, in a highly symbolic and historicized symbol of censorship, H.D. demands of Cournos that he "burn this letter." This weighted phrase carries all of the tensions previously outlined in the letter—internalized homophobia and shame, reticence and attempts at self-protection, and internalized self-policing—yet it also helps elucidate the existence of H.D.'s queerness beyond her relationship with Bryher. The desire to destroy a letter that she has already been careful to cleanse of any direct implications, and the desperate move to exert control over what she has already disclosed, are expressions of H.D.'s struggle to navigate the social world and the written word through queerness.

The slippages in H.D.'s letter have been described in different terms by critics like Catherine Imbriglio as "reticence." In using Sedgwick's concepts of the public/private and secrecy/disclosure dynamics of the closet as a foundational theory, Imbriglio extrapolates the ways John Ashbery navigates speaking from within his closet through his poetry. For Imbriglio, Ashbery's reticence becomes apparent when one compares the universality that Ashbery himself claims to strive for in his poetry, and the uneven accessibility of the poetry itself. In the poem "Some Trees," Imbriglio identifies the multiple ways in which the poem resists a specificity that would bring the reader closer to the poem, writing "The poem's formal and rhetorical gestures accommodate the goals of a composition which seems to want to exclude as much as possible time, specificity, and even desire" (Imbriglio 262). While Ashbery's purported poetic aim is to portray love in ways that everyone can understand, his poetry actively works against that impulse through this reticence. Of this strategy, Imbriglio writes that "these disjunctive strategies create a

space from which to enact a powerful, distinctive, and disruptive poetics. Such a poetics is at once rhetorically open and reticent; its poetic strategies enact a ‘rhetoric of the closet’ which is initially a solution (one can enclose and disclose at the same time) to all sorts of problems of articulation (including those of sexual difference)” (259). Using this “rhetoric of the closet” to “enclose and disclose at the same time,” Ashbery communicates sentiments to his majoritarian audience that differ completely from the disruptive poetics that those with subterranean identities like queerness⁶ will find in his work. This disjunctive space allows Ashbery to attempt to navigate the incoherency of the public/private in his poetry, as he is able to both disclose and occlude simultaneously, maneuvering around the “double-bind” identified by Sedgwick through the creation of his own form of signification.

H.D. uses the exact same tactic of reticence that Ashbery uses in his poetry in order to maneuver around the public/private incoherency in her letter to Cournois. While Imbriglio encounters Ashbery’s reticence through the disjunction between the universality that he professes and the alienating lack of specificity in his poetry, in H.D.’s letter her reticence comes through in the palimpsestic layering of meaning between what she discloses and what she chooses to leave as subtext. The letter continues to develop these transferences in the following passage,

I have again and again told her that I can not stand the strain of living with her and yet I can not leave her. She helps me in many ways but I want freedom and if the tie becomes too much, I must leave her. Yet I know my influence may help her and may help many, many others later. But I am not a philanthropist. I must have my freedom first and if the strain becomes too great, I shall just chuck her and the maddening problem of her life. There may be a doom over her and I may be only hurting myself trying to help her. On the other hand, she may be made for

⁶ Imbriglio is careful not to make any claims on Ashbery’s sexuality, and chooses not to specify whether he occupies a queer closet or a generally linguistic one. Instead, she draws a parallel between the queer closet and Ashbery’s reticence, writing “the reticence which appears in Ashbery’s texts often resembles, but is not always the same as, the silence which activates the gay closet” (260).

happiness, her own and other peoples and I may be her means of escape, her one means, and it would be base of me not to help her. I am fond of the girl, but I am not strong and if this thing is not soon helped, this madness of hers, a real suicidal madness, I can not stay with her.

Like a chemical precipitate, H.D.'s conflicted emotions regarding Bryher's dependence and her own unwilling role of nurse and "philanthropist" rise to the top, while their romantic relationship—undoubtedly one of the reasons that H.D. writes "I cannot leave her"—remains beneath the surface as subtext. The closest reference H.D. makes to her sexuality in this passage is the phrase "I am fond of the girl," an oversimplification of their dynamic that is so clearly evident from the rest of the passage that it almost reads as a euphemism. Unlike the other passage, this part of the letter offers insight into how feminine gender roles enable a preservation of that layering, for H.D. is clearly aware that the platonic caretaker role is socially acceptable as a facilitating force for relationships between women, while the role of lover is not. Yet, H.D. rejects the role of philanthropist, another historically female-gendered position⁷, which again points symbolically towards a conspicuous absence; if she is not Bryher's philanthropist, what is she? The reality is that H.D. is both caretaker and lover to Bryher at this point in their relationship, and while the foregrounding of the socially-accepted gender roles of caretaker, friend, and philanthropist read to heteronormative society as straight, the rejection of those roles and the conspicuous absence left by the slippages read as queer to those who understand what it means to navigate the public/private boundary. By foregrounding one identity while the other remains a static

⁷ Patrick Wilkinson, in his curated review of political theory on the role of women in the creation of welfare states, observes that "women activists were the key agents in the transmission of nineteenth-century gender biases into twentieth-century welfare policy" (Wilkinson 572). His review, entitled "The Selfless and the Helpless: Maternalist Origins of the US Welfare State," explores the factors that facilitated the transition of women away from the purely domestic sphere and into becoming "the standard-bearers for a gender-bound regime of social protections" (573). From this extensive history it is clear that H.D.'s invocation of the term "philanthropist" brings with it a gendered connotation that would have been even more apparent in 1919 than it is today.

undercurrent, H.D. creates her own realm of signification that allows her to preserve some semblance of privacy while disclosing different experiences each to the majoritarian and minoritarian spheres.

These slippages that form the reticence of H.D.'s queer archive speak to the various survival strategies that queer people employ while existing in a heteronormative, cisgendered world. José Muñoz labels these defensive strategies as “disidentifications,” and while this essay later explores the act of disidentification through a close reading of H.D.'s poem “Eurydice,” it is important to note here that the terms “reticence” and “disidentification” refer to the same act of defensive withdrawal that H.D. practiced in all facets of her life and work, from her archive and her poetry to her complex relationship with the modern classical tradition.

Leah Culligan Flack notes that H.D. was “buried” and excluded from both the modernist canon and the modernist classical tradition for decades. Even as the era of literary modernism defined itself as a movement of outsiders, H.D. occupied a space of additional removal. Socially, the modernists (led by figures like Ezra Pound, T.S. Eliot, and Virginia Woolf) conceived of themselves as “a centre of ‘civilized’ rebellion against the moral code of Victorianism” (Baldick 52), and marketed themselves to the public “in terms of exclusivity” (Armstrong 58). They portrayed themselves as both an ostracised creative minority and outsiders-by-choice, and the tendency towards linguistic and conceptual obscurity in their art reinforced that positionality (58). Given the tendency towards withdrawal reflected in H.D.'s archive, one would assume that she perfectly embodied the modernist stance; yet, according to Flack, H.D. felt ostracized in turn by the movement of which she was a part⁸. This othering was the catalyst that led H.D. to

⁸ Flack introduces the complex personal and professional dynamic between H.D. and Ezra Pound—whom H.D. considered a life-long friend and to whom she was briefly engaged before her marriage to Richard Aldington—as a limiting force in H.D.'s professional and creative career. Pound was the first person to publish H.D.'s poetry, and for

delve deeper into her countercultural classical translations; Flack writes “By identifying with Euripides as an antagonized author with a lost archive at a relatively early moment in her career, H.D. discovered a classical template by which to prefigure her own hostile reception and buried archive. Euripides helped H.D. to negotiate her relationship to a dominant tradition she associated not only with Homer but also with Pound, Eliot, Yeats, and Joyce” (Flack 162). H.D. mimicked Euripides’ positionality in the classical tradition and withdrew from the “outsider clique” of modernism and modernist classical studies. Creating a disidentificatory position at odds with modernism and its use of the classics allowed H.D. to engage in the same kind of “disruptive poets” present in Ashbery’s work, as her outsider status enabled her to critique modernism in much the same way that modernism purported to critique mainstream culture and society.

In another manifestation of H.D.’s burial and erasure, in analysing H.D.’s work many critics choose to engage with her art through the romantic and platonic relationships that H.D. had throughout her life, instead of approaching it independently of her biography. It is as if H.D.’s work cannot be critically unpacked without first bringing to it a basic background on who she knew and loved⁹, a move that is not conventionally deemed necessary in contemporary

the first years of her literary career he served as the gatekeeper between her work and the public. As part of Pound’s quest to distinguish modernist poetry from everything that had come before, Pound labelled H.D.’s poetry as “Imagism” and H.D. herself as an “Imagiste,” which pigeonholed H.D. into a genre that was little more than a fad (Baldick 96). Due in part to this dynamic and to the intensely heteropatriarchal and exclusive nature of academic classical studies (of which Pound was an insider), H.D.’s poetry was not as well received by the public as was the poetry of her peers, and her translations were met with scorn and derision by other male classicists, including Pound.⁹ As an example of this tendency, Nora Crow Jaffe examines the ties between H.D.’s written word and her formation of self through her relationship with Freud. H.D. was Freud’s close friend and one of his analytical subjects; she referred to him as “papa” in her letters to Bryher and “The Master” in a poem of the same name expressing her frustration with him (Jaffe 96). She also wrote an entire *Tribute to Freud* upon his death. For theorists like Jaffe, addressing H.D.’s relationship with Freud is unavoidable when approaching her work. Jaffe also opens her essay with four pages of autobiographical context that begins with H.D.’s early life in Pennsylvania and follows H.D. to London and Greece.

literary criticism¹⁰. H.D. was many things and led a fascinating life; she was a wife and mother who was romantically involved with men, women, and non-binary people; she was a queer woman and a feminist who was born in suburban Pennsylvania, survived living in London during the Blitz in WWI, and for decades until the end of her life she lived with Bryher in Switzerland; she was a failed mathematician, a poet, a classicist, a novelist, and a translator. Given H.D.'s widely intersectional identity, it makes rhetorical sense to focus on only a handful of facets of her identity in order to develop an analysis of her work. But those readings ignore H.D.'s queerness in favor of focusing on H.D.'s identity as a woman among men and a feminist writer, while simultaneously making reference to H.D.'s withdrawal in a way that allows heteronormativity to rewrite H.D.'s queerness as the defensive act of a straight feminist woman. Other readings acknowledge her sexuality, but either do so solely to prove a point about her poetics¹¹, or with a limited narrative lens that focuses on a discussion of H.D.'s queer relationships without leaving room to explore her independent queer experiences¹². While examining these interpersonal relationships can be a useful exfoliating tool when approaching any poet's work –and specifically for readers who find H.D.'s verse to be relatively unforthcoming– those discussions distract from the underlying current of queerness that runs

¹⁰ I'm referring here to the way in which contemporary literary theory has been shaped, at least in part, by the New Critics (see Cleanth Brooks' *The Well Wrought Urn: Studies in the Structure of Poetry*).

¹¹ Lawrence S. Rainey examines H.D.'s poetry in order to judge the claims of those advocating for her inclusion into the modernist canon. Without investigating her work through a queer theoretical lens, he asserts that H.D.'s status as a lesbian is the only reason that other critics advocate for her inclusion in the canon, and that the technical skill of her poetry does not support these claims. The fact that Rainey can base his argument on the assertion that H.D. is a lesbian –an easily-debunked label– demonstrates both the critical propensity to allow H.D.'s romantic relationships to eclipse her work, and that H.D.'s identity has historically held a remarkable degree of critical malleability.

¹² Susan McCabe has an accurate sense of H.D.'s breadth of sexual identity. Her article "H.D. and Bryher: a modernist love story" seeks to defend H.D. and Bryher's relationship both from those who would de-eroticize it and label them platonic life-companions instead of partners and lovers, as well as from those who would romanticize it as an ideal of queer domestic bliss. Readings of H.D.'s relationships like McCabe's display an absolutely necessary and compelling reading of H.D.'s life and work. However, to read H.D.'s queerness through Bryher (or one of her other female lovers like Mary Frances Gregg) is to lose the individual elements of queer experience that underlie H.D.'s poetics.

through H.D.'s work and manifests itself through those very gaps that cannot be explained through the contexts of her relationships alone.

José Muñoz's theory of disidentification provides a rich framework through which to unpack the function of H.D.'s artistic and linguistic reticence without relying on the contexts of her relationships. In the introduction to his book *Disidentifications*, Muñoz identifies the process of disidentification as both an act of identity construction and of survival. Through case studies of performance art by queer minoritarian artists, Muñoz explores the responses of these artists to the reality of queer identity formation, concluding that "minoritarian subjects need to interface with different subcultural fields to activate their own senses of self," for "their...formation as subjects is...structured through multiple and sometimes conflicting sites of identification," (Muñoz 5) and consequently that "minority subjects...must work with/resist the conditions of (im)possibility that dominant culture generates" (6). That process of working with/resisting, later renamed through Pêcheux as "working on and against," is the process of disidentification, for "instead of buckling under the pressures of dominant ideology (identification, assimilation) or attempting to break free of its inescapable sphere (counteridentification, utopianism), this 'working on and against' is a strategy that tries to transform a cultural logic from within" (11). Disidentification directly correlates with terms that have already come up in this essay: Imbriglio's reticence is a disidentificatory act, the incoherency of the public/private that Sedgwick identifies is one of these "conflicting sites of identification" that minoritarian subjects must "work on and against," and the narrative gaps of the queer archive are the residuals of disidentification echoing from the past.

This essay has already begun to explore H.D.'s disidentification through the reticence of her archive. But there is a reason Muñoz chooses to ground his exploration of disidentification through minoritarian art and performance; art exists right in the thick of the tempestuous public/private boundary in a way that archival materials, specifically private letters, do not match. Therefore, turning to H.D.'s art allows us to examine another, more performative element of H.D.'s disidentification. Her poem "Eurydice," written in 1917, fits appropriately into the schema that this essay has already established, as its date puts it within the same time period as the letter. "Eurydice" is one of H.D.'s most celebrated and well-known poems, due undoubtedly in part to the popularity and extensive history of adaptation held by the Greek myth it retells, "Orpheus and Eurydice." The poem is also lauded for its deliberately-feminist retelling of a myth which historically centers on the male experience of poetry, love, and failure. It is one of H.D.'s most clearly-autobiographical poems, as she writes from Eurydice's perspective using the first person, and as its writing directly coincided with her separation from Richard Aldington. H.D.'s approach to disidentification in "Eurydice" involves H.D.'s rejection of the myth's conventional logics, a rejection which manifests itself through the creation of a third realm of physical being, a perceptive dissonance between the two characters, and the Sapphic symbolism woven into the poem's floral imagery.

In Section I of "Eurydice," H.D. sets up a new yet recognizable dynamic between Orpheus and Eurydice, and between the underworld and the realm of the living. By setting the poem at the moment directly after Orpheus turns, H.D. provides the reader with the same basic plot points as the original myth¹³; Orpheus brings Eurydice up from the underworld, turns, and

¹³ This essay used Mandelbaum's translation of Ovid's *Metamorphoses* as its source material for the original myth.

watches Eurydice fade back below the earth. The first section introduces the underworld as the dark realm of peaceful death, where “dead lichens drip / dead cinders upon moss of ash,” and where Eurydice would have been free to have “grown from listlessness / into peace” (H.D. 9-20). By contrast, the earth is where the living walk, and where, had Orpheus not turned around, Eurydice “could have slept among the live flowers / at last” (4-5). The reader learns that Orpheus has robbed Eurydice of another chance at life, all for the price of his “arrogance / and...ruthlessness” (6-7). Through the clear distinctions between life and death, the underworld and the earth, and the two characters, the first section of the poem provides the framework for a feminist reading which emphasizes the gender-based power imbalance between Orpheus and Eurydice, and celebrates Eurydice’s rage¹⁴.

Yet, H.D. blurs these distinctions almost immediately by creating a third spatial realm that does not exist in the straightforward dichotomy of the first section. After being “swept back,” Eurydice speaks to Orpheus from a place that has “only flame upon flame / and black among the red sparks,” a place she describes as “hell” and “nothingness” (21-28), which does not offer her the same chance to “rest with the dead” as the first underworld she encountered did. By creating this vague third spatial realm, H.D. makes her first move at stepping outside of the original myth’s dichotomous structure and towards her ultimate move of disidentification, which announces itself with a stunning volta in Section V. Until this move, Eurydice has been consistent in her confrontation of Orpheus for his selfish abuse of power, and in her mourning

¹⁴ For an example of such a reading, see Elizabeth Dodd’s examination of “Eurydice” in *The Veiled Mirror and the Woman Poet* (1992). Dodd primarily focuses on the way H.D. embedded herself into classical characters (another example of H.D.’s art read through her biography), and sees the revision of myth as a feminist act, elaborating that “In H.D.’s revisionist mythmaking, the plight of the female speaker at the hands of the egocentric male eclipses the traditional emphasis on the power of the poet” (54). Like Jaffe, Dodd finds significance in H.D.’s omission of Orpheus’ role as poet. Dodd’s reading makes similar observations to this essay, but filters them through a straight feminist lens in contrast to the queer theories used here.

for her freedom and access to living things, represented largely through the imagery of flowers like hyacinth, crocuses, and saffron; she laments “all the flowers that cut through the earth, / all, all the flowers are lost; / everything is lost” (53-55). Yet, in her own figurative “turn,” Eurydice then flips the entire structure of signification that the poem has established up until that point on its head, with the lines beginning with “such loss is no loss” and ending with “I have more light” (96-116). In these lines, comfortingly familiar opposites collapse into one another: death is life, darkness is light, and in the lines “my hell is no worse than yours / though you pass among the flowers” the distinction between the earth and hell blurs to such a degree that these two opposing realms become indistinguishable from one another (108-109). Even the flowers that Eurydice so mourned in sections I-IV she does not mourn any longer, for she states “and the flowers / if I should tell you / you would turn from your own fit paths / toward hell” (117-120). Even though, earlier in the poem, Eurydice says “if I could have caught up from the earth, / the whole of the flowers of the earth / ...I could have dared the loss,” with this volta that establishes that loss is no loss, one learns that the flowers Eurydice has lost do not compare to any of the ones she has in her new realm (72-80). In collapsing the structures of signification of the first four sections of the poem and allowing Eurydice to inhabit a realm that exists outside of those dichotomies, H.D. practices the “working on and against” of disidentification by working within Ovid’s plot and content structures while simultaneously undermining the logic of those very structures. Through this process, H.D. disidentifies from the classical tradition and from the heteronormative gender roles governing the myth. Additionally, Eurydice’s physical withdrawal from the two spheres of existence offered to her by Ovid mimics the reticence and refusal to disclose of H.D.’s letter to John Cournos, written only two years after “Eurydice.”

In addition to Eurydice's inhabiting a physical space in which the rules and structures of the source material do not apply, "Eurydice" holds another layer of disidentification that manifests itself as a dissonance between Orpheus' perception of Eurydice and her own self-perception and experience. In asking Orpheus what he saw in her face when he turned around, Eurydice invites him to lay his perception of her face over her own, allowing Orpheus' gaze to create a palimpsest¹⁵ of perceptions of Eurydice, with her perception of her own identity blanketed and obscured by his perception of her. She asks if he saw "the light of your own face, / the fire of your own presence?" (38-39), a question that implies that Orpheus never saw Eurydice at all, and only selfishly saw himself reflected in her. Eurydice, on the other hand, knows differently; she asks, with delicious irony strengthened by the enjambment of the line, "What had my face to offer / but reflex of the earth" (40-41). In Eurydice's face is the whole earth, the rawness and blistering vitality of nature, of "lightning," (42-49), yet with Orpheus' gaze layered on top of her's, Orpheus perceives Eurydice only as a mirror of himself. This disjunction creates what essentially amounts to two different poems within "Eurydice," in a manner that is highly reminiscent of the reticence of H.D's archive; Orpheus experiences the narrative of the original myth and layers that on top of Eurydice's experience, even as she inhabits a separate realm both physically and perceptively in which she resembles more of an elemental being than a human woman.

¹⁵ Margaret Bruzelius also examines the palimpsestic layering of Orpheus' gaze and Eurydice's subjectivity in a similar structure to this essay, while viewing it through the different lenses of gender, art, and feminism. Bruzelius sees Orpheus' artistic gaze as a confining force that restricts Eurydice to the gendered role of model and muse, and silences her voice as an artist in her own right (much in the same way that H.D.'s voice was constrained by Pound's framing of her work as "Imagism," and his appropriation of her as his muse) (449). For Bruzelius, the palimpsest is "an unlimited layering of perceptions through time and space" that creates an infinitely reciprocal gaze between artist and muse, thereby erasing the boundaries that create the gendered power dynamic between the two characters and freeing Eurydice from the gendered and artistic constraints imposed upon her (450).

H.D. also creates a reticent space through the specific floral imagery that she employs. While the “flowers of the earth” signify the life among the living that Eurydice has lost, the species of flowers that Eurydice names carry histories of queer signification that date back to Sappho’s classical fragments. Of Sappho¹⁶, H.D. reflects that ““I think of the words of Sappho... as colours...transcending colour yet containing...all colour”” (Collecott 91). H.D. fills “Eurydice” with a full complement of Sapphic colors, painting with “azure,” “gold,” and “blue crocuses,” “golden” saffron, and “hyacinth color,” while in the final lines of the poem she describes hell as a “red rose” (H.D. 135). Diana Collecott labels this riot of color H.D.’s “Sapphic palette,” as it imbues the poem with an underlying queer signification that supports Eurydice’s acts of disidentification¹⁷. Furthermore, the flowers themselves have specific Sapphic references that extend beyond H.D.’s association with Sappho and color. Crocuses appear in Sappho’s bridal songs (Collecott 22), while other Sapphic fragments include saffron (276) and hyacinth (217) in the same poetics of listing that H.D. mimics centuries later. Additionally, “wind-flower,” another flower reference in “Eurydice” (H.D. 47) refers to the anemone, known to those familiar with Ovid’s *Metamorphoses* as the flower into which Venus turns her lover Adonis after Adonis is killed by a boar (Mandelbaum 356). According to Collecott, Adonis was celebrated in festivals held by female-only communities, becoming a sapphic symbol that transcended the heteronormative structure of the original Ovid in a way that would have

¹⁶ Of all queer poets, Sappho is perhaps the most emblematic of queer silence and the fragmentation of the queer archive. While Flack highlights H.D.’s identification with Euripides, others like Collecott have made it clear that Sappho was an equally important influence on H.D.’s construction of her identity as a queer artist.

¹⁷ For Collecott, H.D.’s “Sapphic palette” represents less of a specifically queer act and more of a reclamation of female agency within the structure of a heterosexual relationship. Collecott claims that the connection of crocuses with Sappho’s bridal songs “explores the possibility of a new marriage between Orpheus and Eurydice” (22), and that these sapphic symbols represent “not only a recovery of the female voice, but also a recuperation of presence and energy for the female self” (24). While it is tempting to read a certain level of queer erasure into this line of analysis, it remains that emphasizing the feminism in Sappho’s lesbianism allows Collecott to explore her main concern of thwarted feminine desire in “Eurydice” (214).

undoubtedly appealed to H.D. (220). With these connotations, H.D.'s invocation of the anemone both deepens the queer intertext of the poem and points towards H.D.'s intimacy with the classical tradition in a way that, in light of her positionality in relation to modern classicism, reads as a defiant reclamation¹⁸. The flowers' history of sapphic symbolism also calls back to Imbriglio's explanation of Ashbery's reticence as a disjunctive poetics that allows him to simultaneously enclose and disclose to different audiences, as those familiar with the queer history of classical studies will pick up on the sapphic symbols in "Eurydice," while the majority of readers will take the flowers at face-value and interpret them conventionally as symbols of life's fleeting beauty. This layering of queer symbols provides yet another sphere in which H.D. fills "Eurydice" with acts of disidentification.

Through these elements of physicality, perception, and symbolism, H.D. layers the representation of the dominant ideology over the queer response of disidentification in "Eurydice." Later in the poem, after the poem's re-enactment of the moment Orpheus turns, Eurydice identifies Orpheus as "you who have your own light, / who are to yourself a presence, / who need no presence;" (80-82). These lines are both a perfect articulation of what it means for an individual to have privilege, and an exact representation of the ways that dominant ideologies function in and structure society. In thinking of Orpheus as the dominant ideology itself, we can return once again to Muñoz's exploration of disidentification, and trace it back to its foundational theorists¹⁹. In Althusser's model, the citizen turns in response to the hail, thus

¹⁸ Given the themes of death and transformation in the original "Venus and Adonis," the presence of the anemone also reinforces "Eurydice's" underlying theme of the blurred boundary between life and death.

¹⁹ Muñoz pulls from the theories of subject formation and interpellation articulated by Louis Althusser and Michel Pêcheux. Of Althusser, Muñoz summarizes "Althusser's 'Ideology and Ideological State Apparatuses' was among the first articulations of the role of ideology in theorizing subject formation. For Althusser, ideology is an inescapable realm in which subjects are called into being or 'hailed,' a process he calls interpellation" (11). Interpellation occurs when the subject turns in response to being hailed, for in the act of turning they identify

identifying with the dominant ideology. Even though Orpheus is the one who turns, one can view his gaze, so often mentioned in “Eurydice,” as acting as a visual, non-verbal hail, as he projects the dominant ideology onto the blank canvas that he perceives Eurydice’s face (and therefore her identity) to be, while Eurydice remains motionless and mute. If one ignores the jumbled roles that break the Althusserian mould, one can read Orpheus’s turn as a moment of interpellation, and an attempt to exert control. But this moment could also be another instance of the perceptive dissonance that fills and defines the disidentification of the poem, for Eurydice’s motionlessness could be read as a non-response to the hail, and another act of disidentification with the dominant ideology. She invites Orpheus to project himself onto her face, allowing him to overlay his perception of her on top of who she really is in a shroud that functions in much the same way that the socially acceptable gender role of platonic caretaker functions to hide the romantic nature of H.D.’s relationship with Bryher in H.D.’s letter to John Cournos. Here, in Eurydice’s muteness, is both a literal expression of reticence and a figurative parallel to the reticence in H.D.’s archive.

While H.D. uses an intertextual and linguistic relationship with the classics in order to formulate her disidentification in “Eurydice,” she also allowed her Hellenism to physically pull her free from her social and cultural contexts in her own life. In 1920, one year after H.D. wrote her anxiety-filled letter to John Cournos, she travelled to Greece with Bryher on a trip that both freed her creatively and greatly strengthened the relationship between the two women (Guest 168). According to Susan McCabe, “The pair’s nostalgic Hellenism, that is their unified desire to

themselves as the intended recipient, therefore identifying with the dominant ideology in a process that they have no control over (Lee). Pêcheux expands on Althusser’s idea of interpellation with the idea of “Good Subjects” and “Bad Subjects,” with the Good Subject being the one who turns naturally in response to being hailed, and with the Bad Subject as one who refuses to turn, who turns but feels wrong, or who does not hear themselves being hailed at all (Muñoz 11).

re-enter the Greek past...was a means for both survival as 'queers' in lived time and as a means of crossing spatial and temporal borders, in a gymnasium without an address" (McCabe).

Through the image of the "gymnasium without an address," McCabe inadvertently provides a perfect expression of the way H.D. used the classics as a means of disidentification by creating a physical, mental, and creative sphere of freedom and safety in which to explore, play with, and formulate her queerness independent of the pressures that strangle her linguistic expression and prompt her reticence in the letter to Cournos.

What I want to propose through this study of H.D.'s queer poetics is a different conception of queer sexuality itself. H.D.'s disidentification across all aspects of her life, from her archive to her art, demonstrates that queerness is an epistemological stance that extends beyond the identity determined by one's choice of romantic and/or sexual partners. For H.D., her queerness manifests as a purposeful withdrawal and re-situation of herself as an outsider and observer of her societal and cultural contexts, whether those were the gender roles she grew up with in Pennsylvania or the formal, intellectual, and gendered constraints of the modernist movement. Her sexual fluidity is an important aspect of her queerness that remains tethered to this epistemology, but her relationships are not what make her queer. My hope is that this essay's exploration of the vastness of H.D.'s queer imagination, from the letters to "Eurydice" to H.D.'s Hellenism, serves to broaden the conception of queerness beyond its relational and sexual contexts, thereby allowing us to continue expanding the conversation of queerness to encompass all of culture, history, and society.

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