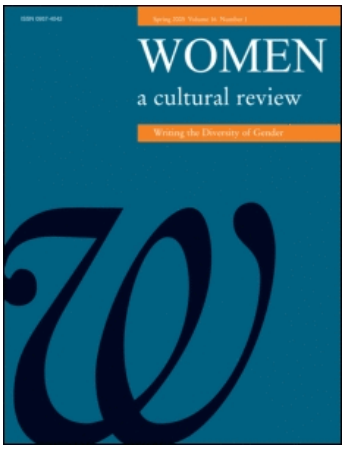

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Sexing the Manifesto: Mina Loy, Feminism and Futurism

ACCORDING to Roger Conover, 'Mina Loy's goal was simply to become the most original woman of her generation' (1996: xiii). While the audacity of this ambition might account for Loy's association with nearly every avant-garde movement of her day—Futurism, Imagism, Dada and Surrealism—Loy's connection with these movements, like her fluid association with the various national cultures of England, Italy, France and the United States, also made her one of Modernism's most elusive figures. It is as though Loy was everywhere but paradoxically nowhere, so much so that by the early 1920s a rumour began circulating in Paris that Mina Loy was an invented artistic persona. Hearing this story Loy turned up at one of Natalie Barney's notorious salons and formally declared, 'I assure you that I am indeed a living being. But it is necessary to stay very unknown' (Conover 1996: xii). Like her mythic status as the most original woman of her generation, as well as the most elusive, Loy's writing, especially from this early period, is at once difficult and luminous, radically original and yet clearly struggling with the legacy of traditional political and poetic form. While so much of her work is ignited by the collective energies and innovations of various avant-garde precepts, it also remains distinctly and defiantly autonomous, providing a challenge to the gendering of modernism as a masculine innovative enterprise.

Despite the mounting stature of Loy's critical reception, her legendary status still seems to overshadow the difficulty of her idiosyncratic voice, with its heightened polemical effect evident not only in the manifesto writings, a genre premised on passionate disputation, but also in the early poetry, in the form of an elegant dissonance that navigates the pleasures

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and dangers of poetic and sexual compensation. Although Loy's radical experimentation with language and poetic form has always attracted praise, with Ezra Pound claiming that she was one of a few American poets (the others were Moore and Williams) writing anything of interest in verse (Conover 1996: xv), a residual unease about the excessiveness of her experimentation has dogged her critical reception. More recently, Michael Thurston has hinted at the difficulty of Loy's poetry, noting that *Lunar Baedecker* 'is not without its flaws; even a sympathetic reader today might be put off by Loy's insistent alliteration' (Thurston 2006: 413). This follows Thurston's inclusion of excerpts of Harriet Monroe's notoriously damning review in 1923: 'this poet's style, like that of many another radical, dilutes instead of concentrates' (Thurston 2006: 413). Monroe goes on to claim that Loy's poetry is 'descriptive, explanatory, philosophic—in short, prose, which no amount of radical empiricism, in the sound and exclamatory arrangement of words and lines, can transform … into the stuff of poetry' (Thurston 2006: 413).

Thurston's inclusion of Monroe's review reinforces the ongoing difficulty of Loy's work for many readers, with its intellectual density and difficult syntax, although he contends that both 'Love Songs' and 'Parturition' are two examples of Loy's oeuvre that merit 'obvious and lasting power' (Thurston 2006: 413). While Loy's poetry over the years has certainly become the subject of heightened critical interest to the point that she has been well and truly reclaimed, according to Thom Gunn, into the modernist poetic canon, her 'Feminist Manifesto' still seems to haunt the critical reception of her work as well as the critical relationship between the 'Feminist Manifesto' and her long poem, 'Songs to Johannes' (also know as 'Love Songs').[1] Loy was acutely aware of the troubling and troubled nature of her brand of 'feminine politics', all the more so because of its expression through what was still regarded as a masculine polemical mode—the manifesto. But pitched as it is against Futurist attitudes to women (although also in part inspired by the defiance of its political and social vision) as well as the suffragist's own reformist political programme, with its promotion of female abstinence and general suspicion of women's erotic expression, Loy was perhaps canny to conclude that her manifesto would not fit in anywhere. By contrast, 'Love Songs' appears to provide an intricate exploration of many of the manifesto's more decisive claims and might be read as a more critically satisfying and sophisticated exploration of women's sexual and emotional resistance and complicity. I would argue, however, that both manifesto and long poem signal an affective ambivalence that governs Loy's complex relationship to Futurism and feminism, and which confounds any straightforward reading of her sexual and aesthetic

1 Bonnie Kime Scott notes that Loy 'gained stunning momentum in recent modernist studies … for her feminism, her own approach to the lyric, and her reflections on other modernists and modernist questions, including Futurism, James Joyce, and Gertrude Stein' (in Bradshaw and Dettmar, p. 539).

politics. 'Love Songs' does not simply erase the troubling certitude of the 'Feminist Manifesto' but absorbs the difficulties of its sexual politics into a poetic idiom of risk and danger as well as its opposite, compensation and pleasure.[2] In other words, both perform their antagonisms within the formal constraints of the genres they also aspire to reformulate.

Futurism and the Manifesto

Although Loy distanced herself from the label 'Futurist', writing to Carl Van Vechten that she should not really be considered a Futurist, adding 'Marrinetti influenced me—merely by waking me up' (Burke 1996: 178), Marinetti's bombastic exuberance and fierce anti-traditionalism had certainly ignited her own political and poetic convictions. In particular, Loy enthusiastically embraced the manifesto form, drafting her own 'Aphorisms on Futurism' only months before the 'Feminist Manifesto' in 1914.[3] By this time the Futurist movement had successfully imported the political manifesto (of which *The Communist Manifesto* was the most exemplary model) into the art manifesto, utilising technologies of mass communication in the service of a radical new form of artistic activism. While initially the manifesto was seen as only a vehicle for the ideas and values associated with this new artistic movement, the extraordinary flurry of manifesto activity associated with Futurism, often under the direct instruction of Marinetti, soon established the manifesto as 'the master genre of the movement' (Puchner 2006: 75). Indeed, the high drama of Marinetti's 1909 *The Founding and Manifesto of Futurism,* with its apocalyptic narrative of an exhilarating late-night car ride serving as the central metaphor for its reckless abandonment of tradition, produces what Cinzia Sartini Blum has called the manifesto's 'oratorical impetus, and exalted, epic tone' (1996: 40). In positioning the artist as the heroic figure of a new kind of public art, situated between political activism and mass-media entrepreneurship, Marinetti attempted to remove art from its traditional loci: the stultifying interior of museums, libraries and other cultural institutions, as well as the private domain of domestic contemplation. In the hands of the Futurists, particularly under Marinetti's persuasive guidance, the manifesto form increasingly emphasised the performative, rhetorical and multimedia qualities of art, stressing, as Tyrus Miller has argued, its engagement with an everyday affective experience (2006: 169), in so far as the art work's public emotional impact becomes paramount to its potential transformative power.

2 Contrary to my reading of the similar thematic ground explored in both the manifesto and 'Love Songs', Rachel Blau DuPlessis argues that 'at the very least the poem stands in a contradictory relation to the manifesto' (1998: 53).

3 In a typewritten copy of 'Aphorisms', held in the Loy papers at the Bienecke, the original title is crossed out and replaced with 'Aphorisms on Modernism'. One wonders if this is an attempt, after the fact, to distance herself from the Futurist movement.

Written at the pinnacle of her relationships with both Marinetti and Giovanni Papini,[4] Loy's own Futurist-inspired manifesto, 'Aphorisms on Futurism', pays tribute to the spirit of the movement while also developing its own idiosyncratic radical voice.[5] Although 'Aphorisms' reads and looks like a manifesto, it refuses the we/them dichotomy that typically underwrites the logic of the manifesto speaking position. Rather, Loy delivers a series of forceful maxims, addressed to an indefinable 'You':

> DIE in the past
> Live in the Future
> . . .
> LIFE is only limited by our prejudices
> . . .
> DESTROY them and you cease to be at the mercy of yourself
> . . .
> FORGET that you live in houses, that you may live in yourself—
> . . .
> ACCEPT the tremendous truth of Futurism
> Leaving all those
> —Knick-knacks.— (Loy in Conover 1996: 149–52).

Loy's replacement of we/them with you/our signals a more intimate and personalised form of address, one which hints at her reluctance to fully identify with the programmatic scripts of Futurism. While the rejection of the material comforts of domesticity ('houses' and 'knick-knacks') reinforces a Futurist turn towards the vibrancy of art in the public sphere, it nevertheless reminds us that her intended audience is perhaps women, for whom the domestic represents the twin pulls of compensation and confinement, distraction and pacification. Opening her manifesto with the injunction to 'DIE in the past / Live in the Future', Loy seemingly renounces her domestic, Victorian upbringing as well as her immersion up to this point in *fin de siècle* aestheticism by embracing a Futurist love of momentum as a sustaining myth of self-renewal and aesthetic rejuvenation: 'THE velocity of velocities arrives in starting' and, later, 'THE Future is limitless—the past a trial of insidious reactions' (Loy in Conover 1996: 149–50). When 'Aphorisms' was published in June of that year in the American journal *Camera Work*, Loy's American audience was shocked by its conscious assimilation of masculine energy and audacity. Loy's tone, syntax and bold typography seemingly perturbed even those readers otherwise sympathetic to modernist experimental prose and precipitated what would become a constant theme in the early critical reaction to her work: her lack of literary decorum. Even those

4 Papini was political editor of *Lacerba*, a bi-weekly newspaper that published many Futurist-inspired manifestos.

5 Carolyn Burke, on the relationship of 'Love Songs' to both Futurism and Imagism, argues that 'the Futurists' reorientation of artistic attention to the modes of modern life prompted Loy's turn from fin-de-siècle aestheticism to an engagement with modernist art and poetry' (1987: 37).

who were sympathetic to her work, such as her editor Alfred Kreymborg, quipped, 'if she could dress like a lady, why couldn't she write like one' (Conover 1996: xvi).[6] Summing up the temper of critical responses at the time, Carolyn Burke writes, 'Whoever Mina Loy was, she had gone beyond the conventions of womanly feelings' (Burke 1996: 169–70). By embracing the masculinised rhetoric and loud typography of Futurism's own manifestos, Loy was certainly not endorsing its masculinised ideology but rather sympathised with its defiant courage to go against the grain of tradition and its deep commitment to the explosive power of the creative will to challenge both social and aesthetic convention. Like most avant-garde writers of the period, Loy espoused an intrinsic connection between aesthetic innovation and radical social change. And yet the absence of a we/they dichotomy in 'Aphorisms' conveys an anti-collective voice, one that reflects an underlying ambivalence towards the certitude of Futurist pronouncements and the hypo-machismo of the manifesto's conceited, epic tone. Indeed, the use of the second person pronoun 'You' seems to stage an imagined dialogue between competing selves: one representing tradition and the past with the other voicing the rewards of freedom and the future. The manifesto's address to 'You' thus becomes a self-admonishing reminder that Loy herself must overcome the constraints of decorum, both personal and aesthetic, if she is to reach her goal as one of the most original women, if not distinctive voices, of her generation. In this sense 'Aphorisms' stands as an important testing ground for both the 'Feminist Manifesto' and her long poem, 'Songs to Johannes'.

There is of course much in Marinetti's 1909 manifesto from which Loy would have wanted to distance herself. In shifting the manifesto's conceptual roots in revolution (a process geared towards emancipation) to that of war (with its own trajectory of annihilation), Marinetti overtly celebrates the 'masculine' qualities of aggression, courage, confidence and egotism, and denigrates the 'feminine' qualities of sentimentality, morality, dependency and predatory sexuality.[7] In glorifying speed, courage and war ('the world's only hygiene'), 'beautiful ideas worth dying for', and 'scorn for woman', and opposing 'moralism, feminism, every opportunistic or utilitarian cowardice' (in Caws 2001: 187), Futurism quickly established itself as a movement difficult for women to identify with, making the manifesto, at this particular historical juncture, an overtly masculinist genre.[8] Inserting the participants of his manifesto into a narrative of speed, action and audacious buffoonery, Marinetti signals the heroic and masculinised tenor of his new art form, which relies more on exaggeration and sheer declarative force than internal struggle or reflective exposition. As Marjorie Perloff has argued,

6 This echoes later criticism by Carl Van Vechten, who told Loy that she had great promise as a poet if only she would stop writing about sex (Conover 1996: xvi).

7 Marinetti's advocating of Italian race-superiority inspired his belief in women's exemplary social role as producers of 'pure' offspring who would guarantee the future of Italian superiority.

8 In spite of its misogynist rhetoric, a few women found in Futurism's rejuvenation of social and aesthetic codes a space to articulate their own self-affirming model of creative ambition, though its less than progressive model of gendered relations also limited its realisation.

in spite of the huge ego that Marinetti elsewhere cultivated, his manifestos in fact continuously devalue 'questions of individual psychology and personal emotion' (Perloff 1986: 88), nowhere more evident than in the 1909 manifesto where 'Marinetti's selfhood is subordinated to the communal 'we' (the first word of the manifesto)' (Perloff 1986: 87). As a hybrid of poetic and political genres, Marinetti's manifesto eschews the personalised interiority of the lyric by embracing the dynamism of public rhetoric and performance; 'hence his rejection of psychologism—the introverted exploration of inner conflict—and his emphasis on extroverted action' (Blum 1996: 17). By contrast, Loy's 'Aphorisms', while denouncing the traditional 'feminine' world of domestic stasis and its association with a pre-modernist cloying aestheticism, still clings to a more intimate form of address, one that hints at an emotive intellectual and personal struggle.

In spite of the rhetorical conviction of its manifestos, Futurism, like many avant-garde movements, was fraught with contradiction; it was fiercely nationalistic and patriotic but also embraced the spirit of cosmopolitanism that increasingly defined a global modernism; it cultivated a heroic and often elitist vision of the artist while also redefining the art work within the realm of commodity culture and mass media. As such, Marinetti's condemnation of 'woman' and 'feminism' is similarly laden with contradiction and ambiguity.[9] While the denigration of 'woman' signals the association of 'the feminine' with an outmoded gendered system, one aligned with the malaise of bourgeois culture, and particularly women's place within the institutional structures of the family, marriage and Catholicism, his attack on 'feminism' contradicts his rather erratic association with the suffragette movement throughout this period. In 1910, as part of his assiduous promotion of the Futurist movement across Europe, Marinetti read his manifesto at the London Lyceum Club for Women; included in the audience were many of London's most militant suffragettes. Similarly, in 1912 Marinetti participated in a suffragette march, which ended in one of their notorious window-smashing campaigns. Marinetti's support of the campaign for women's suffrage, however, was at best opportunistic in so far as he believed that votes for women would speed the inevitable demise of an antiquated parliamentary system. There is little doubt that Marinetti was attracted to the anarchic energy of the suffragette's militancy, with their disruptive public protests and media attention, rather than the specifics of their cause, which paradoxically were aimed at participation in the very institution Marinetti everywhere denounces. Indeed, Futurism invariably relied on, and celebrated, the irrational and chaotic nature of the emotions let loose by the disruptive energies of a public art, which it

9 For an extended analysis of the contradictions of Futurism, see Blum, *The Other Modernism*.

positioned as an antidote to the rational and controlled nature of parliamentary democracy. The suffragette Margaret Wynne Nevinson observed the irony of this position when she wrote that what Marinetti admired were the suffragettes' methods rather than their demands, going on to conclude that '[t]he Suffragettes and Signor Marinetti are at one in deploring the existence of the serpent-of-old-Nile type of woman. But while the Futurists hold women responsible for what they consider a degenerate type of man, the Suffragette maintains that the erotic woman is a product of man's absolutism' (in Lyon 1999: 149). In other words, Marinetti and the suffragettes equally desired to eradicate the feminine ideal of the romantic woman. For Marinetti, this conventional type harboured both sentimentality and lust, which threatened the heroic procreative mission of Futurist Man; for Nevinson and the suffragettes, she was the very creation of woman in man's image serving his desires—one that threatened the ideology of purity and abstinence underpinning their reformist politics. It was precisely these overt proscriptions around sexuality that Loy takes to task in her manifesto and long poem, seemingly as irritated by feminists as she is by the Futurists.

The 'Feminist Manifesto'

Within months of the publication of 'Aphorisms on Futurism' and at the point in which her relationships with Papini and Marinetti had dwindled into emotional and intellectual disappointment, Loy wrote her highly idiosyncratic 'Feminist Manifesto', a piece she immediately sensed had no place in established political ideologies and which perhaps accounts for it remaining unpublished in her lifetime. Beginning with the emphatic declaration, 'The feminist movement as at present instituted is Inadequate' (Loy in Conover 1996: 153), Loy aggressively declares her deep suspicion of an equal rights feminism, insisting that the codes of gender already render the uneven development of universal rights to such a degree that universalism is not a reliable foundation on which to build an emancipatory politics. Exhorting women to go it alone, she proclaims:

> Cease to place your confidence in economic legislation, vice crusades & uniform education—you are glossing over Reality … be Brave & deny at the outset—that pathetic claptrap war cry Woman is the equal of man—She is NOT! … Leave off looking to men to find out what you are not—seek within yourselves to find out what you are (Loy in Conover 1996: 153–4).

Loy's repudiation of conventional bourgeois notions of progress (legislation, education and moral reform), as well as her call for 'total demolition' rather than 'reform', reveal her allegiance to an avant-garde anti-parliamentarianism, and as we have already seen in 'Aphorisms', a Futurist-inspired ideology of total social and political renewal. But unlike Marinetti's embracing of war as a modern cleansing tool, Loy takes an altogether different path for her vision of a brave new world for women by extending her critique beyond an avant-garde (indeed Futurist) attack on democratic organisation, suggesting that existing cultural institutions (even avant-garde ones) will not provide a useful model on which women might come to terms with existing social and sexual inequalities. Instead, Loy stakes her radical vision of emancipation on individual consciousness and on the recognition of the psychological constraints impeding women's self-determination and independence; only from the vantage point of individual consciousness will women come to address their psychological dependency on men.[10]

Here, of course, Loy also directly challenges existing suffragist efforts for political reform and of particular concern for her are the vice crusades that formed the core of the social purity movement that had dominated British feminism during the period from 1908–1914. Indeed, Loy's manifesto implicitly responds to Christabel Pankhurst's polemical tract, *The Great Scourge and How To End It* (1914), which was written when Pankhurst was in exile in France and published shortly before Loy wrote her manifesto. Pankhurst's tract was one of the most notorious and widely publicised attempts in this period to link feminist and social purity agendas. The 'great scourge' represented the rampant spread of venereal disease through prostitution, though for Pankhurst, its most debilitating consequence was the infection of unsuspecting bourgeois wives by their degenerate husbands. Advocating a connection between the great scourge and Britain's declining population, Pankhurst mobilised the common suffragist metaphor of the state as the home writ large, suggesting that since women were competent managers in the home, they potentially had much to offer outside it. Like many social purity feminists she believed in the spiritual superiority of women against men's susceptibility to baser sexual instincts; she thus promoted sexual abstinence for the entire British male population. With her slogan 'Votes for women, chastity for men' Pankhurst deployed a normative idiom of female sexuality (one that stipulated women's 'natural' disinclination towards sex), promoting celibacy and chastity as a solution to women's independence and self-control.

10 Loy's emphasis on women breaking out of their psychological dependency on men forms interesting parallels with the consciousness-raising groups of second-wave feminism.

Although the suffrage movement dominated British feminism at this point, it was certainly not unchallenged. The British periodical, *The*

Freewoman, first published in 1911, occupied one such space of dissent and criticism, forcefully challenging the organisation and ideology of the suffrage movement. The journal promoted a feminism founded on the New Woman ideology of individuality, autonomy and creative talent; its views were explicitly anti-statist, rejecting outright the association between home and state and the idea that responsible motherhood and homemaking would necessarily make women responsible citizens. The ideology of individuality and autonomy promoted in the journal was a defiant reaction to the 'feminine values' (self-sacrifice, obedience, duty) promoted by the suffrage movement. As Lucy Delap argues, '*Freewoman* contributors were painfully aware of women's tendency to collude in their own subordination by internalising qualities such as self-sacrifice or overblown altruism' (2002: 621). Dora Marsden, the journal's editor, also strongly opposed the eugenic movement for its 'conspiracy against the poor', calling the Eugenics Education Society a 'danger to the community' (Allen 2000: 487). *The Freewoman* and its later incarnation, *The New Freewoman*, were also exemplary in their time for the extraordinary discussions on sexuality and the promotion of free love and sexual experimentation for women. Libertarian advocates such as Stella Browne, Dora Marsden and Rebecca West promoted what they called 'a new morality of free sexual unions', explicitly challenging the anti-sex stance of social purity feminists.[11]

Loy's manifesto, however, moves beyond the congealed sides of the debate between social purity and free love by combining and radically transforming aspects of both. Loy certainly denounces social purity's normative moralism when she declares, 'there is nothing impure in sex—except in the mental attitude to it' (Loy in Conover 1996: 156). For Loy, it is not the 'sexual embrace' itself that limits women's autonomy but the cultural values associated with it. She writes:

> the first & greatest sacrifice you have to make is of your 'virtue'. The fictitious value of woman as identified with her physical purity—is too easy a stand-by—rendering her lethargic in the acquisition of intrinsic merits of character by which she could obtain a concrete value—therefore, the first self-enforced law for the female sex, as a protection against the man-made bogy of virtue—which is the principal instrument of her subjection, would be the unconditional surgical destruction of virginity through-out the female population at puberty— (Loy in Conover 1996: 154–5).

While Loy's radical insistence on the surgical destruction of the hymen of all pubescent girls rests on an attempt to dismantle the cultural illusions prohibiting women's sexual and social autonomy, her solution comes

11 Early polarised debates between free love advocates and social purity reformers inaugurated a recurring feature of feminist polemical debate: between those that define sex in terms of the dangers it poses for women (exploitation, sexual abuse, contamination) and those that promote women's autonomous sexual expression. The tension between the feminist social purity movement and the libertarian advocates of free love in pre-war Britain form a striking parallel to the anti-pornography and pro-sex feminist debates of the 1980s and 1990s.

dangerously close to imbibing an aggressive Futurist hyperbole, one that problematically, for a feminist position, locates social aberrations within women's own bodies. And yet, for Loy, the trap of decorum, or what she calls 'the man-made bogy of virtue', not only limits women's sexual autonomy but forces them to choose between sexuality and reproduction. As Loy argues, women's sexual relations are traditionally confined to the mutually exclusive classes of 'mother' and 'mistress', which perpetuate women's forced dependence on men in terms of either 'Parasitism' or 'Prostitution', with 'Negation' (the suffragist solution) remaining the final option outside these classes. Overcoming the division between mistress and mother, indeed actively subscribing to both these experiences, is what will make women sexually, and even intellectually, 'complete':

> The first illusion it is to your interest to demolish is the division of women into two classes **the mistress, & the mother** every well-balanced & developed woman knows that is not true, Nature has endowed the complete woman with a faculty for expressing herself through all her functions—there are **no restrictions** the woman who is so incompletely evolved as to be un-self-conscious in sex, will prove a restrictive influence on the temperamental expansion of the next generation; the woman who is a poor mistress will be an incompetent mother—an inferior mentality—& will enjoy an inadequate apprehension of **Life** (Loy in Conover 1996: 154).

Loy's emphatic insistence on the mutually beneficial roles of mistress and mother reads as a forceful critique of Valentine de Saint-Point's earlier separation of these spheres in her 'Manifesto of Futurist Woman' (1912):

> Woman should be mother or lover. Real mothers will always be mediocre lovers, and lovers, insufficient mothers, through their excess. Equal in front of life, these two women complete each other (in Caws 2001: 216).

The first and most widely publicised contribution by a woman associated with Futurism, de Saint-Point's manifesto reacts to Marinetti's notorious 'scorn for woman' statement, albeit by reading it as rejection of the overtly feminising nature of the contemporary age, but nevertheless endorses virility as 'a new dogma of energy in order to arrive at a period of superior humanity' (in Caws 2001: 214). Rejecting feminism for its misguided attempt to restore order to the 'primordial fatality' of woman, thereby diluting her 'fecundating power' (in Caws 2001: 215), de Saint-Point's manifesto ends up championing a conventional view of the 'instinctive, irrational, ''essence'' of woman, recasting it as aggressive,

futurist vitalism' (Blum 1996: 105). Although de Saint-Point, contrary to Marnetti, upholds a vision of women's erotic power as at least equal to the heroic virility of Futurist man, her insistence on the mutually exclusive roles of mother and lover reduces the maternal woman's role to a conformist vision of duty and self-sacrifice, foreclosing her own experience of erotic (and indeed maternal) agency.

It is precisely this binary model of mistress and mother that Loy refuses in her manifesto. Concerned that the separation of these roles limits women's capacity for a fully realised sexual autonomy, Loy advocates a radical form of unsentimental sex ('Women must destroy in themselves, the desire to be loved') alongside every woman's 'right to maternity' (Loy in Conover 1996: 155). Loy was not the only supporter of free love to embrace the potentially powerful experience of maternity; contradicting her initial claim that 'Every woman has a right to maternity', Loy imbibes, in part at least, the eugenic arguments of the social purity, race responsibility and contemporary birth control movements, and the idea that 'superior' women must breed to counter the 'undesirable' offspring of 'the unfit or degenerate members of her sex' (Loy in Conover 1996: 155). Here Loy's autonomous feminism comes close to the Futurists' race superiority agenda, as well as to social purity's eugenic values, although her vision of women's 'race-responsibility' is also distinctly predicated on an avant-garde and New Woman ideology that positions creative artists as the responsible bearers of social change. For Loy, maternity should be infused with the same passion and creativity as aesthetic production, so that maternity itself becomes what Loy calls, in her poem 'Parturition', written in the same year as the manifesto, 'cosmic reproductivity' (Loy in Conover 1996: 7). For Loy, the reproductive body is not merely a metaphor for the female poet's creative endeavours, but rather that maternity itself should involve no less of the spiritual and intellectual absorption that pertains to aesthetic creation. In writing maternity back into women's sexual desire and intellectual and creative ambition, Loy asserts an utterly original position for her time. In this sense it could be said that Loy's biologism differs radically from the more traditional association of female reproduction with nature, for it is precisely the passion and intellect of the female poetess, and what she brings to her offspring, that marks her out from 'loveless copulations'—as Burke suggests, Loy's maternalist philosophy hinges on her independence and her sense of self-creative fulfilment (Burke 1996: 179). In her attempt to eradicate the dichotomy of 'mistress' and 'mother' Loy renders the creativity of the maternal on a par with the creativity of the poet.

If Loy's manifesto at times seems to hold women themselves responsible for their own subjugation, she also singles out various 'man-made' cultural institutions as culprits in the subordination of women. In this sense Loy appears less concerned with the war between the sexes than with revealing the propensity of biological and cultural differences to become reified within the institutional organs of patriarchy, even avant-garde ones. For Loy, both the gendering of morality (by social purity) and the gendering of aesthetics (by the Futurists) enforce social illusions that render 'woman' as either innately superior or innately inferior. In this sense, while Loy does not deny that women are constrained by cultural roles and institutions, she resists a version of sexual morality that assigns fixed virtues to men and women, such that both are equally parasitic and exploitative. She thus uses the subject of the 'sexual embrace' to demonstrate the very instability of sexual difference, with both men and women being 'at the mercy of the advantage that each can take of the other's sexual dependence' (Loy in Conover 1996: 154).

The manifesto's unusual mix of maternalist philosophy, New Woman ideology, radical sexual politics and quasi-eugenic moralism created a highly idiosyncratic position that reveals the competing claims of Loy's feminism and avant-gardism, and demonstrates a dynamic of resistance and complicity in terms of her relationship with Futurism. Perhaps cautious after the scandalous reception of her 'Aphorisms of Futurism', Loy could not bring herself to publish the 'Feminist Manifesto'. She was, however, not entirely finished with the subject of the 'the sexual embrace'; that would become the central preoccupation of her long poem written over the next few years.

'Love Songs'

As a sardonic portrait of sexual discontent and a poetic repudiation of traditional romantic lyric poetry, 'Love Songs' forms an important addendum to the bold and decisive claims of the manifesto. Almost satirically signalling the narrator's failure to heed the warnings of the earlier 'Feminist Manifesto', 'Love Songs' charts the waning of a love affair, its speaker at once clinging to the enchantments of physical desire and cynically alive to the emotional and psychological destruction it has reaped. But while the semblance of a narrative structures the poem, what it presents is a series of disarticulated fragments of an intellectual and sexual relationship. Insisting that love (either sexual desire or the love lyric) brings its 'own-self distortion', the poem privileges unresolved ambiguity, foreclosing the possibility of any claim to comprehensive

representation or even understanding of the events that take place. In other words, from the beginning Loy flags the different register and generic conventions assumed by the love lyric, alerting her audience to the 'fantasies' spawned by poetic self-reflection:

> Spawn of Fantasies
> Silting the Appraisable
> Pig Cupid his rosy snout
> Rooting erotic garbage
> 'Once upon a time'
> Pulls a weed white star topped
> Among wild oats sown in mucus-membrane (Loy in Conover 1996: 53).

Through its explicit representation of sexual intercourse, Loy provides a provocative challenge to the codes of lyric and social decorum, a theme already amply developed in her earlier manifesto writing. With the phallic-snouted 'Pig Cupid' as her unconventional muse, rooting around in the 'erotic garbage' of love's sentimental clichés, 'once upon a time', the poet begins by sifting through the overgrown terrain of romantic imagery. Or is the speaker's own cynical diatribe against love merely the 'spawn of fantasies', illusions which attempt to compensate for a love gone awry? Here the ambiguity of the poem's syntax reminds us that any free love sowing of 'wild oats' may quickly become those 'suspect places' that trap the lover and the poetess into a false sense of security, revealing a continual movement throughout the poem between what Rachel Blau DuPlessis calls the twin pulls of sexual pleasure and emotional danger. Loy is clearly committed to women's right to autonomous sexual expression, yet her poem does not entirely escape the rhetoric of danger associated with women's sexual autonomy—though for Loy these dangers are psychological rather than physical.

In spite of the speaker's desire for the sentimental language of love, any momentary indulgence in its compensatory economy (like the deceptively timeless experience of orgasm, rendered early on as 'Eternity in a skyrocket') only serves to cloud the emotional dangers of heterosexual romance. In contrast to the idealisation inherent in the speaker's experience of the timeless fluidity of 'orgasm', sexual intercourse is also reduced to 'infructuous impulses', the 'wanton duality' of 'the skin-sack' and a 'clock-work mechanism / Running down against time / To which I am not paced' (Loy in Conover 1996: 54). Hinting at the rushed pace of coitus, the speaker renders sexual intercourse as a failure of timing, intimating both sexual dissatisfaction and the failure of conception. Here, and at other moments throughout the poem, Loy's breech of decorum resides in rendering the microscopic detail of the

'sexual embrace', as if to drive home to her readers the manifesto's assertion 'that there is nothing impure in sex' (Loy in Conover 1996: 156). Similarly, the representation of the body throughout the poem writes against the streamlined, efficient body–machine of Futurism, so that the visceral, leaky and convulsive qualities of the body (orgasm, hiccoughs, saliva, mucus membrane, spermatozoa, sweat) insinuate themselves into the rhythms of the language, producing a discordant combination of scientific and everyday somatic idioms. Refusing to privilege either the biological or the romantic, the physical or the metaphysical, Loy continually holds them in an unresolved tension that conveys the poem's frustrated tempo of sexual and poetic satisfaction and dissatisfaction.

Indeed, throughout the poem the failure of love and sexual satisfaction is rendered as a failure of poetic language so that the poem's alternating rhythm of amorous hope, sexual frustration and disenchantment becomes in itself a desire for the compensatory language of sentiment, the traditional function of the love lyric, as well as an ironic dismissal of its ameliorating effects. While Burke rightly argues that Loy's 'Futurist-inspired aesthetic allows her to depict stages in the mind's shifting attempts to understand both the emotional riddles posed by intimate relationships and the cultural conventions that shape responses to them' (Burke 1987: 44), Loy remains equally sceptical of traditional romantic language with its implicit coding of the feminine as sentimental and emotional, and a male modernist celebration of impersonality and emotional detachment. In this way the poem refuses to resolve the division between a detached and analytical modernism and the more sentimental topoi of the love lyric. In deliberately cultivating incohesion and discontinuity, 'Love Songs' achieves what Janet Lyon calls a 'parallax vision', a multiple and shifting perspective that refuses to dissolve the integrity of each view and, thus, continually deferring meaning, closure, arrival. As Zizek has shown, the critical potential of a 'parallax view' lies in its refusal to enact a 'dialectical synthesis' of opposites; rather it invites a radical critical position that hinges precisely on an irreducible gap between positions themselves; what he defines as a facing up 'to the reality that is exposed through difference' (Zizek 2005: 232). While 'Love Songs' complicates the manifesto's brave new world of women's emotional and psychological independence, by exploring in detail the somatic and psychic fragilities of sexual desire, it is worth remembering that the 'Feminist Manifesto' also works through the frustrations of existing political and aesthetic ideologies. In spite of their very different generic conventions, and indeed Loy's modifications to those

conventions, both struggle to develop a radical new idiom that would challenge social and psychological definitions of womanhood, revealing instead the way in which the political and the sexual, and indeed the aesthetic, are always the product of fractured allegiances. It is Loy's absolute commitment to the 'reality' of difference as it informs the complicated nexus between aesthetics, politics and desire, that makes her not only one of the most distinctive voices of her generation but also a potent voice for ours.

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