

City University of New York (CUNY)

CUNY Academic Works

Theses and Dissertations

Hunter College

Fall 1-6-2022

"Nothing 'Personal' To Lose": Alice Notley's "I" and the Poetics of Encounter in Disobedience

Christina T. Baulch
CUNY Hunter College

[How does access to this work benefit you? Let us know!](#)

More information about this work at: https://academicworks.cuny.edu/hc_sas_etds/824

Discover additional works at: <https://academicworks.cuny.edu>

This work is made publicly available by the City University of New York (CUNY).
Contact: AcademicWorks@cuny.edu

“Nothing ‘Personal’ To Lose”:
Alice Notley’s “I” and the Poetics of Encounter in *Disobedience*

by
Christina Baulch

Submitted in partial fulfillment of the
requirements for the degree of
Master of Arts (English), Hunter College,
The City University of New York

2021

December 15, 2021
Date

Amy Moorman Robbins
Signature of Sponsor

December 16, 2021
Date

Nijah Noel Cunningham
Signature of Second Reader

“Nothing ‘Personal’ To Lose”:

Alice Notley’s “I” and the Poetics of Encounter in *Disobedience*

In 1995, Alice Notley, a poet long associated with the New York School, moved permanently from her home in New York to Paris; there, during one of France’s most politically charged and violent periods of recent history, Notley began writing her long poem *Disobedience* (2001). Throughout *Disobedience*, Notley makes readers continually aware of the anxiety that pervades not only her present cultural context, but also her attempts to find or maintain a sense of self amidst constant mediation. Her long poem features a speaker who, amidst all these external pressures, witnesses or hears of bomb detonations, sends a Robert Mitchum-like gumshoe detective into a dream world, and looks for her own “soulcore” in caves and the métro underground (102). Reimagining the use of an oft-decried lyric-I in a volatile world, tracing the movement of this “I” throughout multiple genres of low and high culture, *Disobedience* is a work of constant encounter, both desired and undesired. The “I” is often perceived as an isolated ego, but Notley’s search for self-identity necessitates plurality through a continued poetics of encounter. Notley’s poetics of encounter brings the “I” into continual and complex conversation with history, politics, and mass culture, thus situating it within, and not sequestered from, the world and its mediation.

For Notley, border crossings, such as the one she makes in moving to France, are symbolic of a change in self–other relations. By moving, she leaves the physical United States as well as its abbreviation the “U.S” or “us,” — the collective subject pronoun consolidating separate individuals into a uniform grammatical unit. Resisting political movements and poetic schools with exacting, exclusive definitions, Notley uses the “I” perspective and its physical

form of a vertical line to make a strike upon paper, literally, with each appearance: a strike against suppression, against so-called movements, and against labels that constitute containment in the linguistic form. I argue that it is in these kinds of resistance and boundary-crossings that the “I” of *Disobedience* emerges.

This essay explores three categories of encounter and border fluidity in *Disobedience*: encounters and borders that are geographic, linguistic, and of the body (that is, encounters with other human selves in the world). Entering the tradition of the American long poem, *Disobedience* actively confronts and anticipates a serious and urgent reality—the echoes of which are felt today in the likes of Donald Trump and the Taliban’s assumption of power in Afghanistan, both of whom privilege the power of a homogenous collective over intellectualism or the individual. Yet, the voice of this extended poem is a speaker who, like Notley herself, is a middle-aged woman, seen in diminishing regard over time. What society attempts to render invisible, Notley makes legible as she draws attention to one individual’s formation as the mediated subject of material history, politics, mass culture, and other systems of thought control.

The Question of the “I”

Alice Notley’s use of a lyric “I” can be contextualized within the well-rehearsed debate about and resistance to vocal homogeneity and persona centrism in poetry. The 1978 “Aesthetic Tendency and the Politics of Poetry: A Manifesto” by Language poets Ron Silliman, Lyn Hejinian, Bob Perelman, et al., is a foundational document in this critical conversation. The essay posits that the “I” has been used in a “stultifyingly steady state” in poetry, for it has been continually made “personal,” “expressive,” and “provincial,” maintaining a narrow-minded or

unseeing world view (262). The self that the “I” represents is not authentic, the writers argue, because it is an “aestheticized surface” isolated from the world, yet one that has been held up in “heroic” form within individual works as well as in the creative writing programs that produce such poetry (263). The Language poets are certainly right to strive for inclusivity and a poetics which opens itself up to a wider range of forms, voices, and histories— but in practice, the Manifesto only demonstrates the opposite, and does not acknowledge that what it resists is actually a particular kind of poetic “I.” The writers use rhetoric such as “openness of self” and “openness to the world,” advocating for a “wider, more inclusive address” through their proposed “not-I form”; what is ultimately valorized in the argument, however, is their own work and their own perspectives (266, 269). This collective of writers, a group comprised of four white men and two white women, cites their own poetry as demonstrative and exemplary of this openness, and they state explicitly that “we would all, in short, admit to being primarily interested in our own work” (273). Furthermore, the writers assert that they will be in contact “with writers whose work we think is worthwhile,” which they call “freedom of association” (272). This “freedom” strikes me as a coded exclusionism, for the continual repetition of the group’s own “we” serves as the position of choice and voice of value (273). “We,” after all, is still the first-person— it is the first person pluralized. Given that the Manifesto writers seem to desire at the essay’s start to question the notion of literary canon and who gets to decide upon it, the Manifesto is ultimately ironic. Demonstrating the very practices it supposedly wishes to resist, the Manifesto upholds a canon of the Language poets’ own work, valorizing only the writers they choose and advocating for writing within their defined poetic school. Here it bears noting that poetic schools are exclusionary by definition through their specification of required

characteristics to “belong.” The poets’ mere resistance to the “I” does not make their praxis inclusive.

Works in the field of avant-garde poetics, such as the Language Manifesto, often frame themselves within the problematic notion of “progress” and linear movement. Walter Benjamin illustrates the danger of “progress” in his description of the *Angelus Novus* painting, writing how “the storm irresistibly propels [the angel] into the future to which his back is turned, while the pile of debris before him grows skyward. This storm is what we call progress” (258). Benjamin’s point is that placing focus on the supposed future of “progress,” or in this case, on plurality instead of the individual, without accounting for history, is a dangerous and irresponsible route that leaves further debris. Postmodern poetics scholar Romana Huk examines the idea of progress in relation to Language poetics in her seminal essay, “The Progress of the Avant-Garde: Reading/Writing Race and Culture.” For Huk, the call for pluralism over the persona fails to take into account the racial, cultural, and material histories of the individual subjects, thus raising the question “whose identity is being pluralized?” (146). If the pluralized identity is yet another bourgeois, white subject or group, then this change in focus is another form of suppression. This “erasure of particular national and raced histories” is “self-perpetuating” on its own (146). As Huk shows in her essay, the problem is not the “I” itself, but a particular usage of it.

Alice Notley, also a white woman, writes linguistically experimental poetry that serves as a prime testing ground for the faults of the Language Manifesto’s argument. Her poetry, close to and yet outside of the Language movement, bursts with encounter, fluidity, and engagement with the world, and yet she explores the potential for community in all of these areas by using the lyric “I.”

Disobedient Geography

Disobedience begins with the presentation of a crossed geographic boundary; the speaker has left America and relocated to France, a new national context beyond the country, continental and oceanic borders she has known (3). As this boundary-crossing begins the poem and the work, it sets the tone for the speaker's experience and subsequent quest for a self-identity. Not only will she need to adapt to her new surroundings, but she also exists now in a new relationship to her previous location. Indicating uncertainty despite the first section's title and date specificity of "(July 30-October 6, 1995)," Notley's opening poem "Change the Forms in Dreams" begins:

moved here for no reason. don't seem to be anywhere

That's better. (3, *original line spacing*)

Notley's use of white space between the first and second lines opens multiple interpretative possibilities; in the first, the speaker laments the futility of her move to France, and in the second, she celebrates her move to nowhere, enjoying a liminal state of between. As no punctuation appears after "anywhere" in line 1, the lines can be read as one continuous sentence, "don't seem to be anywhere that's better" (3). In this interpretation, we meet a speaker who is frustrated by her relocation. Despite self-reminders that "I left I left the U.S.," the United States continues to make itself felt as present throughout the speaker's world. In a later poem, the speaker is surprised to encounter a harmonica-wielding "middle-aged French woman" in a French bar who is "dolefully playing / 'America the Beautiful'" instead of a French tune (244).

This song represents the United States the speaker supposedly left behind, but attention to its lyrics also reveals its praise of a border-to-border perpetuation of American values— it repeats, “and crown thy good with brotherhood / from sea to shining sea,” the sea referring to the oceans on each side of the country. In another moment, the speaker dreams and finds herself “on top of the skyline, Chicago or Paris,” relating two cities with starkly different silhouettes and on two distant continents without drawing attention to these differences or the supposed borders between them (191). The speaker thus tells us in the first poem that “I moved for no reason,” as “borders” are not finite, fixed places, but rather are experienced as blurry, fluctuating relationships.

White space, as seen in “Change the Forms in Dreams,” constitutes an integral aspect of Notley’s poetics. Whereas one might read blank space as silence or an absence of voice, in *Disobedience* white space functions as a continuation of Notley’s, reflecting her attention to the reader and how they may discern meaning apart from or alongside her intention. Aware that the reader may elide her first and second lines into one and miss her alternate meanings, Notley inserts several lines of space between them. The addition of capitalization on “That’s better” in line two further implies the start of a new sentence; read in this manner, Notley’s speaker finds herself not “to be anywhere” and seems to find freedom in this liminal position (3). Free of association with any single country or specific category, the speaker enacts a second move within the text— a move down the page— and remarks “That’s better,” relieved (3).

The speaker conceptualizes her own relocation in language play that works at the level of the specific and the symbolic. As the poem continues, the speaker does not repeat “America” or spell out “United States,” the country she left, but instead tells us in a strange repetition that “I left I left the U.S.” (3). In a text emphasizing use of the “I” as a tool of resistance, the doubling of “I left I left the U.S” signifies her exit from the country and the “us.” Collective identities like

the “brotherhood” in “America the Beautiful” are presented as ideals in patriotic rhetoric, but for Notley represent the erasure of the individual, as one must conform in order to belong. Notley’s ongoing critique of masculinist collective identities is playfully apparent in “I Know You’ll Make Fun of the Clothes the Magi Are Wearing.” Here, the speaker describes how “all the men the male leaders / of the world are swaggering / in Egypt right now / at the anti-terrorist convention” (178). In effect, convention implies homogeneity; attendees of the doubly signifying “convention” unite physically and ideologically around a shared interest in eliminating difference. In the sense of a literary convention, too, an author must follow a prescribed set of characteristics for their work to belong to a desired genre. Notley then describes the mass of anti-terrorist men as “swaggering,” as their collectivism draws more attention to themselves as a group than to the supposed issue at hand (178). “Swaggering” anti-terrorists are also ironic, for “swaggering” figures attempt to assert dominance through their pose— a form of intimidation itself. Not being “anywhere,” as the speaker declares at the start of *Disobedience*, thus means the speaker has left behind both the United States— the physical country— as well as the many “us” groups attempting to claim her, and as we will later explore, this is how her “I” begins to form.

France, 1995

The anxiety-ridden cultural and political climate of 1995 Paris radiates throughout the work; this is the context and background for the speaker’s quest for selfhood and identity amidst violent collective ideologies. At this moment in France’s history, politically-motivated mass bombings were a regular occurrence; from July to October 1995 alone, 9 attacks were launched in Paris by the Armed Islamic Group of Algeria (GIA), and most of these were bombs detonated in public places such as train stations and markets, leaving hundreds wounded and some dead

(Shapiro and Suzan 80-81). Notley's poems are located exactly and explicitly in this time frame, as in the first section of "A Scarf of Bitter Water", marked "July 30-October 6, 1995" (1).

Also during this time, far-right conservatism and anti-immigration sentiments resounded in France—sometimes in elections, but especially in everyday rhetoric. Historian David Blatt writes in *Post-Colonial Cultures in France* that this period displayed:

resurgent popular and political xenophobia...in which post-colonial immigrants served as a lightning rod for fears about worsening socio-economic conditions, the breakdown of public order...and the erosion of national identity and culture.
(40)

These immigrant-fearing ideologies revived an insistence upon "republican principles of undifferentiated citizenship and a firm rejection of any public recognition of ethnic and cultural identities" — in other words, any marker of cultural difference was to be suppressed in favor of conforming to France's nationalist ideal (40-41).

As negative social sentiment and paranoia surged, government policies and leaders sought to turn suppressive ideologies into oppressive reality. In 1993, French Interior Minister Charles Pasqua announced his goal for "immigration zéro," aiming to halt all border-crossing and thus turning once-legal movement into illegal transgression that would be enforceable by the regular police (Guiraudon 4). While that totalizing policy ended due to its negative economic effects, the anti-immigrant message was clear and pervasive throughout the decade. The French motto of "liberté, égalité, fraternité" was, in practice, only designated for a select few, and those at the margins had to conform with the rules of the Nation or risk being rejected entirely. At the center of this movement was Jean-Marie Le Pen, France's National Front President from 1972 until 2011, the year he was succeeded by his daughter Marine. In a backlash against the early

1980s, which had been characterized by an excitement for “le droit à la différence” (the right to difference), Le Pen and his party’s influence were said to cause a “lépenisation des esprits” in opposition. His repressive, nativist ideologies swept public opinion and media—and by 2002, his influence brought a surprisingly strong electoral turnout in his favor (Shohat 137).

Given *Disobedience*’s placement within the arch-conservative climate of late-20th century France and Notley’s writing about this climate from a female perspective, the gender dynamic at play in the election’s turnout and in public opinion should not go unnoticed. The electoral turnout of 2002 and positive public opinion of Le Pen were led by men, many of whom expressed openly misogynistic beliefs. In one such declaration in 1996, Le Pen stated that “women do not have the ‘property of their person’ and do not hold control over their own bodies, as their bodies belong to the ‘nation’ and to ‘nature’” (Scirinzi 3). The mention of women was absent from the National Front’s official program except in the context of family and maternity (3). Women, in other words, were seen by the Front as child-bearers meant to maintain the Party’s idealized homogeneous demographic and were not recognized as having selfhood of their own.

This terrifying atmosphere confronts *Disobedience*’s speaker in both “real” and “dream” spaces. At times, the speaker’s voice resembles a news radio announcing that “another bomb exploded in Paris... / eighteen people including some little kids injured...The suspect group especially targeted women” (18). At other moments, the explosions enter her dreams: “I dream that / a bomb might injure me...isn’t that real possibility a dream” (70). Notley destabilizes this political climate, however, by invoking wordplay, turning Le Pen, for instance, into “Le Pen-is,” her pun serving as a rejection of his discrimination and emphasizing the phallogentric nature of his party structure and principles (227). Notley has no control over her real-world circumstances

and what may or may not explode on a given day, but the literary, dream-infused spaces of her poems are hers for the crafting, reflecting alternative possibilities to the state of the material world; in her writing, encounters with others are continuous, and shifting borders— even if momentarily unsettling — are read as liberating even when threat looms.

Undesirable Encounters: The American Film Noir Detective Trope in *Disobedience*

It is widely accepted that American film noir, a genre that Notley makes frequent reference to in *Disobedience*, projects a mood or affect that intertwines themes of desire and danger. The tension characterizing most films in the genre lies between the central male character, the detective, and the “femme fatale” who causes or attempts to cause the man’s downfall through seduction and duplicity. The hardboiled detective of noir convention does not believe himself to be so easily charmed; rather, he projects an image of unsentimental toughness as he tries to maintain his reputation and his masculinity against the alluring threat of the woman. Upon further inspection, however, every attitude shown onscreen—whether the persona of the detective or of the femme fatale—is a performance: a performance for the audience and for the characters within the narrative, deceiving one another about their “true” identity. Thus, literal performances in the theatrical sense are frequent additions to the films, inviting the viewer to enter the dazzling but claustrophobic world themselves. According to film historian Alain Silver, noir cinematographers used wide-angle lenses intentionally to place the audience into the filmic space, as opposed to the usual “endistancing” telephoto lenses employed in other genres of filmmaking (16). Audiences become implicated in the enticements offered to the film’s characters, such as the extended scenes of performance, leading the enamored viewer to believe they have entered into a relationship of mutual spectatorship with the on-screen personages.

Even as certain lenses and plot-devices were used in the making of classic noir films to bring the audience *into* the film, and, specifically, closer to the onscreen woman, cinematographers also worked in the opposite direction; in order to heighten the sexual tension of their atmosphere, they placed filters over their camera lenses to give women “statuesque beauty that seems more seductive but less attainable,” an image “far removed from the feeling of softness and vulnerability” that other Hollywood films aimed to give their female leads (Silver 14). Noir film is thus an allure itself, and an allure predicated on the idea of gender difference. The female lead is welcome to escape for a short while, but the implicit argument of each film is that any attempt to freely cross boundaries, and particularly to cross those between the supposed role of the man and the role of the woman, are dangerous and disruptive to societal order. By conclusion, most noir films have played out a logic by which attempts to disrupt what the detective has been working to keep in alignment are punishable by death, and subsequent noir plots begin the same process again.

Engaging the genre of noir and its entrenched gender ideology, Notley contextualizes *Disobedience*'s central dynamic – the speaker's continual encounter with the omnipresent Detective Hardwood – in the anxious atmosphere of 1995 France and the U.S she left behind (8). Playing with the real-life name of a well-known actor in noir film, Notley alternatively names her fictional detective “Mitch-Ham,” after Robert Mitchum, the nickname referencing his hyper-masculine, repetitive roles (13). Mitchum's characters were so similar that he famously stated in an interview, “I kept the same suit for six years - and the same dialogue. We just changed the title of the picture and the leading lady” (qtd. in Halliwell 289). Though women, too, played “leading” roles, it was always Mitchum's character who remained at the center of the spotlight, a fact that reflects the larger cultural centrality of the heterosexual male.

And yet, Notley's reference to film noir does not serve to reify the genre's conventions, but rather to reveal its construct through distortion. Transported into a dream-world of cinema, her speaker voices and then disorients the noir genre's conventions, purposefully disrupting the repetitive cycle mentioned and embodied by Mitchum. One such encounter occurs in "What's Suppressed," the second poem of *Disobedience*, which begins:

I dream I'm a detective a man
trying to catch a woman
I'm in a barroom with small reflector-mirrors
high in each corner.
She's in the locked back room.
I pretend to be drunk

To blend in until she comes out?
into this room of the self full
of others and mirrors. (5)

The endings of lines one and two, "man" and "woman," set up the binary and archetypal heterosexual tension between a male detective and his femme fatale, a woman who is 'wanted' both as an object of his desire and as one who is 'wanted' by the law. The hallmarks of the noir genre are all present: in line three, Notley describes reflector-mirrors, which heighten the paranoia of watching and being watched and thus give a sense of claustrophobia. Also present are the common noir themes of the loneliness of waiting in a crowded place, small-town settings, and desire mixed with danger and, often, with alcohol. These descriptions read as we expect from a noir, except for a few details: the mention of the speaker's dream in which *she* is the male detective, the uncertainty emphasized by the question mark after "to blend in until she comes out?", and the bar as a "room of the self."

Notley destabilizes the notion of identity through allusions to noir wherein she blurs the boundary between the detective and the "I" through the troubling of these gender norms. The gumshoe private detective trope was a stable archetype in American culture, exemplified

especially by Raymond Chandler's character Philip Marlowe, who appeared in more than 10 different films and television series, and was played by Mitchum twice. Unlike the Marlowe universe, Notley's detective has no singular name, and neither does his sought-after woman or speaker. Among the detective's many titles are Harward, Hardwood, Hardshroud, Hardwill, Hardon, Hardword, Hardwig, Hardtime, Hardlife, and Hardknight, with Hardwood being the most common and therefore the name used in this paper to minimize confusion (Notley 8; 15; 26; 39; 86; 115; 121; 139; 145; 214). Notley's creation of the name "Hardwood" unearths an irony in Mitchum's characters; the two individual adjectives comprising this nickname, hard and wood, associate the detective with the phallus, and together, reflect his inability or unwillingness to change—something "hard" is "set in stone," finalized. Robert Mitchum, cast into variations of the same role across multiple film genres, is a kind of "hardwood" in Hollywood, a stable archetype and, specifically, an archetype of a tough-shelled masculine man. Yet in Notley's poem, this "stability" is actually predictability, which undermines the masculine authority the character means to assert. Like a chameleon, the Hardwood-character absorbs aspects of the poetic environment surrounding his mention and shifts accordingly. "Hardword," for example, is used after a discussion of language, and "Hardwig" comes after the mention of the late Roy Orbison, an alleged wig-wearer. This slippage alerts us to Notley's witty humor and emphasizes the artifice of the gumshoe image; the persona asserted by the Noir detective is a performance, and not necessarily innate to the individual or what constitutes a "male" role.

The relationship that Notley depicts *between* the detective and speaker is consistently slippery, allowing the female speaker to take control of the dynamic and her agency within it. In the opening of "What's Suppressed," we first note the speaker's change from her usual female gendering to "a man," giving her the active role (5). Though the seemingly-other character, a

“woman” and “soul,” hide in the back room, the speaker announces that “a shadowy man in a gun-coat has come to find me...define soul: I am soul” (6). Here, the detective has separated from the “me” and reverted to masculine gendering— the speaker is both the detective and the detected, the one looking for the “soul” and the soul itself. Delineations between the “two” characters are so blurred that the “man with a coat and a gun” at the start of the poem is a “man in a gun-coat” by the poem’s end—the detective’s accessories meld into a wearable identity, the once-implicit violence of the detective now immediately apparent (5-6).

The suspenseful atmosphere reaches its height in “What’s Suppressed” with the mention of the bar as a “room of the self full / of others and mirrors” (line 9). When one views their reflection in a mirror—whether an ordinary mirror or that of a funhouse—we recognize that the distortion both is and is not our own. A chase in a “room of the self full / of others and mirrors” makes this duality literal and is especially reminiscent of the unsettling final scene of Orson Welles’s 1947 film *The Lady From Shanghai* (ibid.). In Welles’s film, realizing her new lover Michael is about to discover her true identity in a murder plot, Elsa (played by Rita Hayworth) leads Michael (played by Welles) to a funhouse where she intends to disorient all parties. The room full of mirrors in “What’s Suppressed” calls to mind this image from *The Lady from Shanghai*; in both works, the multiplying and then cracking image demonstrates how pinpointing a stable identity is extremely difficult, if not impossible:



Figure 1: From Orson Welles's *The Lady from Shanghai*

As illustrated in the latter two frames, shots made at “Elsa” do not hit Elsa at all but instead hit her mirror-image, a visual confirmation that the real target is difficult to separate from its doubles. The mirror images appear to be as “real” as the people they reflect, increasing the likelihood of shooting the wrong target or being identified unknowingly. Notley’s speaker thus “like[s] the mirrors” because of how they visually destabilize the structures overtaking her (5). If any element of the speaker’s selfhood *is* personal and belongs specifically to her, it cannot be easily taken away from her possession in a room full of mirrors and disorientation.

One problematic and troubling reference to shifting identity that recurs in *Disobedience* within the plot of finding or being found is the speaker’s stated desire “to find or be a dark woman” (17). It is undeniable that this phrase reflects a culturally-appropriative desire for dark or black skin, as the phrase makes an appearance in reference to race and ethnicity; the speaker notes in one poem that “I’ve found a dark woman, a chicana” (19). Problematic as the reference is, it is possible or even likely that Notley is also using playing with the word “dark” to suggest the male of film noir. But whereas the “noir” of film noir means dark or black in the sense of mystery or mood, a meaning *supposedly* distinct from race, it is also true that lighting conventions in the genre actually serve to emphasize whiteness¹. Nevertheless, men in noir films very often are covered in shadow by the on-set lights and purposely so, to ascribe to their image

¹ A study of Notley’s representations of race is long overdue and merits its own paper.

a status of seriousness and keep them “unknowable.” Take, for instance, the lighting in these shots from the noir classic *Out of the Past* (Tourneur 1947):



Figures 2 and 3: Robert Mitchum and Virginia Huston in *Out of the Past*. Directed by Jacques Tourneur, performances by Robert Mitchum and Jane Greer, RKO Radio Pictures, 1947. Stills from, respectively, *BAMFStyle* and *IMDB*.

Throughout this film, Robert Mitchum, as the elusive private-eye Jeff Markham, is hidden in a dark shadow that blends his trench coat, hat, and face together. Conversely, Ann, his love interest, is brightly lit, and so much so that individual strands of her hair are discernible on the left side of her face. The high contrast reflects in visual terms the film’s thematic insistence on gender difference and the uneven balance of power; whether we refer to the home-bound, docile character Ann or the on-the-run femme fatale Kathie, the detective ultimately finds both women to be predictable and, in the case of Kathie, punishable. The detective, here and elsewhere, can follow and overcome every movement of his target as easily as we can tell the two figures apart. In *Out of the Past*, the detective’s own morals prevail as Kathie’s motives are “brought to the light,” plot-wise and visually.

In an essay dedicated to the stylization of women in noir sequences, scholar-critics Christophe Gelly and Delphine Letort demonstrate how the tying of lighting decisions to plot

events was a common technique in the film noir genre. Using “dark” in the way that Notley does, Gelly and Letort write that “the [Noir] woman is more fully in the light, the man posed so that [his body is a] dark shape” (96); they use *The Big Sleep* (1946) as an example, noting how Bogart’s “dark shape” is particularly posed so that he seems to yearn to be in Bacall’s light (96). The bright lighting therefore signifies not only a woman, but specifically a desirable woman who is placed on continual display. The idea of a “dark” woman in film lighting was indeed nearly nonexistent; Hollywood convention favored dramatic lighting and staging focused on the white woman, directing viewer attention to the woman, her physical features, and her whiteness, across genres. *Sabrina*, for instance, is a romantic comedy, and yet exhibits the same pattern of stark lighting contrast between its lead male and lead female:

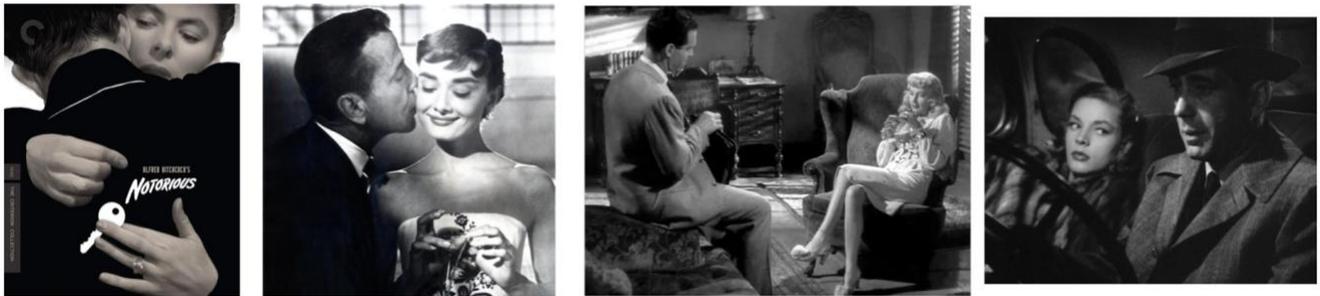


Figure 4: Left to right, marketing image for *Notorious* (Dir. Alfred Hitchcock, 1946) and film stills from, respectively, *Sabrina* (Dir. Billy Wilder, 1954), *Double Indemnity* (Dir. Billy Wilder, 1944), and *The Big Sleep* (Dir. Howard Hawks, 1946).

Notley unearths the artifice of the Hollywood convention of visual gender difference in “Breaking the Sound Barrier,” where she makes multiple references to the 1954 Technicolor Western *River of No Return*. Black and white film’s use of high and low lighting to contrast a brightly lit and highly objectified woman and a “dark” man in film would no longer work, so

directors brought attention to the female body through costume, camera angle, and plot cues. In *River of No Return*, Kay Weston (played by Marilyn Monroe) is an engaged dance hall performer who crosses paths with a hard-willed Matt Calder (played by Robert Mitchum) on the film's titular river. The film is often praised for its vibrant and earthen scenery, but Notley draws our attention instead to the scene's construction:

There is a river
called the River of No Return . . .
Young Mitch-ham, you starred in that movie.
What a stained color of life that was then—
bright northern blue and green. (84)

The mid-line whitespace in lines one and two parallels the cadence of the film's titular opening and closing song, sung in the film first by Mitchum and later by Monroe. Where each whitespace mark appears in Notley's stanza, the respective singer took a pause or held their previous note. In the film, these pauses were intended to be romantic, but Notley's re-written version is emphatic, building tense anticipation of each word. By isolating the "No" in "River of No Return," and then refraining "no return" as the poem continues, Notley alters the meaning from the river as an object of beauty to the river as full of danger and regret (86-87). One way of interpreting Notley's adjective "stained" is that it refers to the literal process of film-dyeing that constitutes Technicolor. Both the process of Technicolor and the negative connotation of "stained" emphasize artifice; that which is stained has been technically altered or harmed, even if it has an attractive end result.

The true stain on *River of No Return*, what Notley later calls "sadness," is its treatment and portrayal of the lone female as she exists on and off the screen. Throughout the film, Monroe as Kay is continually undressed in long sequences in front of the camera, attacked by supposed "Indians" for the prize of her shirt, manhandled, and nearly raped by Matt, who "saves" Kay

from her career as a showgirl at the conclusion of the film by carrying her out of a performance, mid-song, into his waiting carriage. In fact, during the film's production, Monroe, the actress behind the mistreated character, nearly drowned and was ultimately left with an injured leg from the intense rescue (*The Washington Post*). This on and off-screen exploitation was commonplace and one of numerous examples of filmic convention used to profit from the ill-treatment and objectification of women. Monroe was also featured in revealing poses in posters for *River of No Return* across the globe, her portrait often much larger than the film's own title or its river stunts to draw attention to her body:

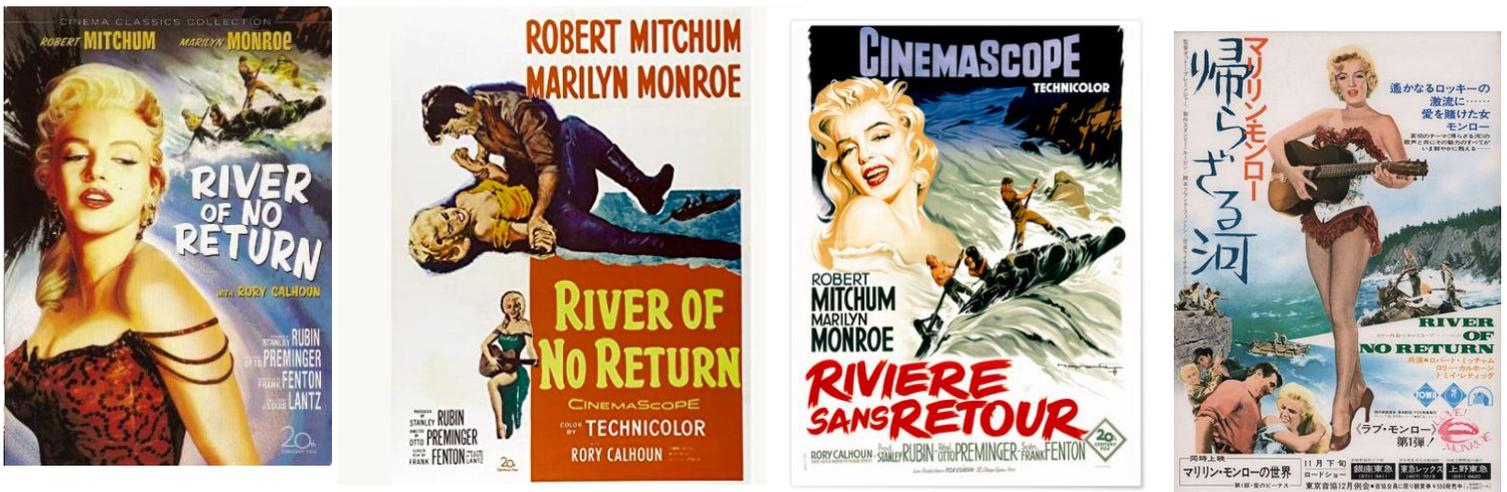


Figure 5: Posters for *River of No Return* on Amazon.com

Marilyn Monroe's portrayal in *River of No Return* aligns her with the image of a femme fatale, even though the film is not a film noir. *River of No Return* was marketed in a variety of poster designs, four of which are featured above. The four designs included are representative of the continued depiction of the woman as both object of desire and object of threat. Here it bears noting that analysis of Notley's interspersing of mass media, such as her extended reference to

and subversion of *River of No Return*, elucidates the specific mediating forces at work around Notley's speaker and her "I." Marilyn Monroe appears on these posters not in the form of her 'actual' self, but as the still embodiment of an ideal designed by a paradoxical and masculinist system. By the logic of the film's plot synopsis and title, the river-rapid setting should be the film's center of visual focus. Yet, the allegedly beautiful-but-dangerous foreground is made the *background* of each poster, favoring another type of vulnerable beauty instead: Marilyn Monroe as Kay. Taking on King Kong-like dimensions in relation to the other figures in the artwork, Monroe's face, exposed chest, and bare legs prevail over each poster's textual and visual elements, emphasizing the simultaneous desirability and danger of her presence along the river. In the leftmost American poster, Kay wears not her usual costume of ponytail and jeans, but a red, off-shoulder dress, her lips parted seductively as she gazes down at the comparatively small Mitchum-driven raft and the film's production information. In the second American poster, the river is barely visible, appearing as a smudge of blue beneath Monroe's raised foot. Though Monroe's image is not as large as it is in the other three posters, her image appears twice. The French and Japanese depictions follow the same patterning of placing the woman in a primary yet objectified position, exemplifying that these "Hollywood Habits" as I have earlier referred to them are symptomatic of larger societal structures. In the Japanese poster, Monroe's image appears three times, and the mark of her lipstick is stamped into the bottom right with the signature, "Love! Monroe," implying that she enjoys such a magnified spotlight. These decisions create an illusive narrative in which Monroe as Kay is a ubiquitous and revered presence in the film, despite the reality of harsh treatment and disdain that the character and actress actually experienced. The speaker of Notley's long poem, located in this exploitative milieu, continually

confronts this social location, which extends beyond the borders of her physical residence in France.

Notley ties the image of a camera and its seeking viewfinder to the everyday gaze, which is just as insidious, by using the rhetoric of sight and being seen. The implicit message of each Monroe-centric advertisement analyzed above is that the woman's importance is her role in the male's self-preservation, rather than her own individual identity. Though Monroe's image is the largest across the posters, she is always accompanied by Mitchum, whose portraits emphasize action and masculinity. The second American poster uses rust-brown coloring, a stereotypically-masculine hue aligned with the outdoor setting, at the top and bottom of the poster to draw viewer attention to the figures in between. There, Monroe is pinned down by Mitchum as he attempts rape, Monroe's body positioned so as to give the camera a view down her shirt. Depicting a similar image, Notley describes her speaker in "The Islanders Remember That There Are No Women and No Men" as "so tied up and gagged, still, I'm a view of a body on the floor / feet first so you can see that I'm wearing jeans" (26). The speaker of this poem is not Marilyn Monroe nor in a film, but her position to the reader and to the imagined spectator functions like an on-screen figure would. Her body is a "view," and has been stylized according to the desires of an "out of frame" person. Within the frame of the stanza, the speaker's legs are seen first and don a pair of jeans; no other part of the body, let alone the figure's face, are visible. The speaker is neither a person nor a body in this stance, but a "view of a body," several degrees of separation existing between her selfhood and her physical presence. Furthermore, she is "gagged" so as to be unable to speak, much like the objectified poster images which are, by their material nature, inanimate. In the lower depiction of Monroe in the second *River of No Return* poster, she is portrayed as smiling and dons a fitted green dress as part of a dance hall performance, perhaps to

diminish or offset the grimacing pain she exhibits in the first image. Decisions such as these perpetuate an ideology that this violent and violating action of attempted rape is somehow necessary or performed in the woman's best interest. Overtake the object of desire (the woman), and Mitchum-as-Matt Calder can conquer the ultimate "female" of Mother Nature—the river—too, emerging as the man he set out to be. This is, of course, a terrifying idea. Unlike in *River*, however, Notley's portrayal of the speaker as a view seeks to draw our attention to the intentionality behind this ideology, rather than to uphold it as truth.

Notley's critique of the representations of women in film make a valuable and still-timely point about gender, power, and cultural influence in mass-market Hollywood film, but her upending of the male/female gender binary and attack on widely distributed images of a toxic masculinity does not appear to address or account for Hollywood's insidious reinforcement and ongoing dissemination of whiteness. Here I want to pause to emphasize that Hollywood representations of women of color are widely known to be oppressive and deeply painful in very specific ways, and these representations have had a formative role on Notley's contemporaries who are women of color. When Black actors did appear in films during the 1930s and 40s, the decades of film noir, they were most often typecast in demeaning roles, and held to racialized standards of beauty (Benshoff 80-3). A 2021 report by the Geena Davis Institute on Gender in Media finds the situation today improved by only small margins; Black women and women of color appear just about proportionally to their percentage of the U.S population, but are still twice as likely to be shown as "partially or fully nude" as are white women (4-6). In Hollywood's earlier years, too, black women appeared either as extremely sexualized or, alternatively, undesirable, their identity always defined by sex or their supposed lack of it (1). As

Notley does not interrogate Hollywood's representations, commercialization, and sexualization of Black women, further discussion is beyond the purview of this paper.

Mass Culture and the Individual

In *Disobedience*, Notley mines mass culture for references that the audience may recognize, shifting the focus from familiar content to mass culture's function as a vehicle for furthering the work of globalization, a process that relies upon the exploitation of women. As the reader's gaze is attracted to or distracted by the images and products of mass culture, Notley subtly draws our attention to the underlying project of cultural standardization and the maintaining of strict gender codes, politically regressive ideals that would reach their apex during the Cold War. Andreas Huyssen, writing in "Mass Culture as Woman," shows how works belonging to modernism and the avant-garde attempted to define their work, which was deemed masculine, in differentiation to mass culture, which was deemed feminine. Quoting a well-known cultural theorist, he argues that:

Stuart Hall is perfectly right to point out that the hidden subject of mass culture is precisely 'the masses' [...] but when the 19th and early 20th centuries conjured up the threat of the masses 'rattling at the gate,' to quote Hall, and lamented the concomitant decline of culture and civilization (which mass culture was invariably accused of causing), there was yet another subject. In the age of nascent socialism *and* the first major women's movement in Europe, the masses knocking at the gate were also women, knocking at the gate of a male-dominated culture. (47)

Huyssen identifies the convergence of two lines of thought—one in which mass culture is a form of broad appeal, aimed at the “masses” rather than the taste of the individual, and emphasizes that the fear of the masses is not only the size of the audience, but its gender; masses of women equals a massive threat to masculinity, upon which so-called “high art” forms are created and depend. Notley’s own engagement with mass culture does not gender mass culture’s content or produced works, but rather peers into the industry behind it. Ironically, and as Notley uncovers in various ways, it is the case that although mass culture has historically been associated with women, the industry is overwhelmingly male. Scrolling through the available programming on her television in the poem “In Any Movie Whatsoever, In Order To Be Working Actors,” Notley’s speaker finds only “psychotic” programs spouting influence; in one such show, “extraterrestrials leave their green blood/on FBI agents and Russian clones/one agent’s sister’s been brought up by an E.T.” (195). The syntactic blurring between these disparate elements is comic. With Notley’s contracted spelling of “sister’s” instead of “sister has,” we do not know if the “Russian clone” described belongs to the agent’s sister, who was raised by an alien, or is the sister herself. The lack of distinction between these characters is of less importance to Notley than is the show’s superseding of political relations and history. For the purpose of consumptive and profitable entertainment, it references Russia, the FBI, and extraterrestrials in a reductive manner. The plight of the agent and her sister becomes lost in the galactic plot line as the show exhibits a preference for globalization and ethnocentrism over individual history.

Whether through creative plot lines such as the FBI-E.T. program, or in children’s animation, Notley’s speaker in “In Any Movie Whatsoever” repeatedly exposes mass culture’s implicit demands for homogeneity of opinion. She demonstrates how in television programs and film, storylines are designed to portray specific protagonists and antagonists, and the viewer is

ordinarily expected to agree with these distinctions. At one point, trying to find viable programming on a different television network, the speaker of “In Any Movie” recognizes that she is supposed to “sympathize with a rogue assassin / after his latest seven murders / and in the case of both shows believe in vast conspiracies,” but she is unable to agree (195-6). In aggregate, Notley’s descriptions of the media create a dual sense of spectatorship; the speaker is a viewer within the poem, watching and describing what she sees, at the same time that this speaker-as-viewer mimics the reader who encounters and critiques words and images on the page. It is unlikely that either viewer—the speaker or the reader—should find “seven murders” to be sympathetic; only in the contextual logic of the program would such an attitude arise. This kind of implicit demand appears even in programming for children, Notley finds, for the speaker moves on to watch a children’s movie commercial and recognizes that she is meant to care for “doughy things [who] are in danger” (195). The creatures are intended to look “darling,” but the speaker argues that they are clearly “molded,” in other words, artificially crafted for a specific belief, unnatural (195).

Notley’s descriptions of absurd media may seem purely comedic at first glance, but they also model the kind of critical reading she hopes to see performed upon passive forms of consumption. The “doughy things,” for instance, seem harmless, but they are tied to a larger machine that attempts to pass along specific ideals. Cinema and television can be exercises in empathy and highly influential, given the entry of these media into the domestic space, but the producing group’s motivations may not be readily apparent to the passive spectator. The speaker’s tone of anger and disdain heightens with the entrance into the poem of the acclaimed French New Wave actor, the late Jean-Paul Belmondo, whose status in cinema is perhaps meant to lend authority to the speaker’s frustration. “Jean-Paul Belmondo is pissed off,” Notley writes,

for “his new movie / is being released in comparatively few French theaters; / Disney’s *Toy Story* is being released in 500 theaters across France” (196). Like tangible products, mainstream films are made and distributed by corporations; *Toy Story* was created by a globally recognizable billion-dollar industry unto itself and its plot is about commodities (toys) themselves.

Belmondo’s new film, meanwhile, was Claude Lelouch’s *Les Misérables*, a meditation on social class and poverty. Only *Toy Story*, the most “commercial” film of the two, received wide-scale attention. Notley’s juxtaposition of these two films—one a mainstream production and one independent—as well as her critique of each differing reception, parallels her own position as an “experimental” poet. Like the earlier French New Wave in cinema, which emphasized ‘raw’ realism and overt critique and disruption of mainstream techniques, so-called alternative or experimental poetry like Notley’s own often critiques the mainstream, defining itself by intentional difference. The lyric “I” in poetry, too, is not always the bourgeois and dominating “I” form that has been presumed as its default; as shown in Notley’s poems, the “I” is not inherently unitary and can take multiple forms.

Disobedience is also interested in how mass culture, as it reflects and promotes certain societal attitudes, has an effect on the individual. Notley’s references to *River of No Return* are in the third person and therefore not used to describe the speaker, but at other sites, the speaker uses encounters with mass culture as a means of building and differentiating her identity. The references do not always appear as one-to-one correlations, as Notley’s poetics reconfigures the references into their material form. In “Have Made Earth as the Mirror of Heaven,” the speaker makes small changes to both the film she mentions and its main actress, reimagining their names as playful language rather than set signifiers. She inquires, “my name is Alice Elizabeth, so am I / Allie Sheedy of the movie *Short Circuits* thus angry / or Elizabeth McGovern self-controlled?”

(49). *Short Circuit*, as the movie is actually titled, stars “Ally” Sheedy, whose character befriends a robot who has recently gained human-like consciousness and therefore an identity of its own. We should note that this parallels the speaker’s own desires for recognition; later in the poem, the speaker describes herself as having “new consciousness” after “being Hardwood” again (50-51). This consciousness arises from her encounter with media as well as words themselves. The change from “Ally” to “Allie” allows the speaker to call to mind the real actress and her name’s similarity, before then positing an identity of her own through difference; Ally Sheedy exists but Allie Sheedy does not, meaning that Alice as “Allie” can make her own decisions. Furthermore, the speaker’s mention of “Elizabeth McGovern” functions not only as the name of the existing renowned actress but also a pun; “to govern” is to control, and therefore, “Elizabeth McGovern” exemplifies self-control, the control of one’s own identity (49).

Moreover, Notley makes explicit reference to the clothing adorning her featured actors and actresses—that is, the material itself—shifting the reader’s focus to another form of mediation, one that shapes others’ views of the individual as well as the individual’s sense of a core identity. Actors are hyper-visible and are judged by their performance as well as their style, often becoming known for those clothing choices. Though these choices seem to be made at the individual level, they usually arise from or conform to an outer dictation. In film noir, the trench coat represents a literal unflappability; the male is immune to threats as far ranging as beautiful women and the windy and watery weather elements that the trench coat was designed to protect against.

For Notley, the image of a trench coat signifies the noir detective and, implicitly, functions as a form of power. In “...I Thought She Was Going to Be a Ghost Story,” the speaker declares that “I’m Hardwood himself now / filling a great coat” (43). In the earlier poem “What’s

Suppressed,” the speaker also found herself as the male detective, but there she had been only “dream[ing]” this identity to be the case (5). The dreaming-speaker was also “a man with a coat and a gun,” only carrying these items as accessories as opposed to wearing them (5). In “Ghost Story,” the speaker upgrades to a definitive “I’m” (I am) in reference to the detective, and is “filling a great coat” (43). The description of “filling” the coat calls to mind a liquid; pour water into a heart-shaped glass and it will fill and take the shape of a heart. Pour the water into a cylinder next and it takes the shape of a cylinder. The water itself, however, is unchanged and unharmed; it only changes its outwardly-appearing shape. The speaker “filling” the prominent coat thus implies that the speaker has flexible power in the new identity as the male detective “himself,” as she still maintains a separation between herself and the garment, and only her outer shape is altered (43). In this way, Notley illustrates how a coat is “outerwear” in the literal sense. The coat adorns the outside of a person and appears to represent what is contained inside, but the wearer can take on other forms; they are not fixed beings.

Clothing, in its role of hiding, advertising, or shaping the body, is also associated with change; one “changes” clothes in order to change appearance and, perhaps, identity. Notley’s poem “Rita, A Red Rose, Hates Her Clothes” depicts the irony of clothing as it is used for artifice in mass media, writing:

“Naked”
consists of a flesh-colored garment.
Like the flesh-colored bathing suits movie actresses
wore for nude scenes in the 50’s.

“Clothes” consists of dress designs,
fake necklines and outlines
delineated on a flesh-colored garment

Who’s ever been naked? (76)

Notley utilizes whitespace in the first stanza to give the appearance of a naked word—a word standing vulnerably on its own without immediate surrounding verbal context. The word is not, however, devoid of meaning, or truly naked at all. She explains how in early decades of film, on-screen nakedness actually required clothing in imitation of skin; this clothing was meant to blend in as natural, but was in fact imitation. In opposition to this so-called “nakedness” is red carpet stylization, which *is* meant to be noticed. Notley’s speaker, having morphed into the form of an actress as the poem continues, recognizes with an undelighted “oh no” that she is now “dressed as Rita the rose / with redpetal cloth bunched up over my breasts....I look like Geena Davis / on Academy Awards night” (77). This transformation elevates the speaker and her lowercase “i” to fame, leading “A Multitude of Men” to approach her, simultaneously interested and threatened (77). For Notley, this is not an ideal transformation. Film scholar Adrienne McLean, addressing the work of historian Lois Banner, writes that “popular discourse has always been used to tell American women that one of their primary duties is to transform themselves, to work not only to make the most of the physical assets they possess but to alter or minimize features that do not fit the dominant (white) paradigm” (McLean 10). This observation is particularly startling in reference to names; the title of Notley’s poem and mention of “Rita the rose” might refer to Rita Hayworth, one of many examples of actresses referenced in *Disobedience* whose names were changed in real-life so as to minimize their obvious “ethnicity.” Hayworth, born Margarita Carmen Cansino, a “Latin starlet” and daughter of a prominent Spanish dancer, was “transformed” into an “all-American glamour girl” through her name change as well as extreme physical alterations ranging from body reshaping, voice “homogenizing,” hair color change, and electrolysis to raise her hairline (McLean 8-9). Clothing and appearance go hand-in-hand with

identity in mass culture, and, even as it makes one seem to stand out, it may cloak processes of erasure and conformity.

The Language of Identity

Notley invokes *River of No Return*'s theme of undressing and redressing the character of Kay in order to animate the image of the doll, a recurring motif and substitute for women in *Disobedience*. Whereas in the material world a doll is a child's toy meant to be dressed and styled according to the child's wishes, the denotation of the word reveals a more complicated meaning. The Oxford English Dictionary defines "doll" as "an image of a human being used as a plaything" (*Oxford English Dictionary Online*). If we place the image of a "human being" in a social and historical context, we can read the doll as a mere imitation of personhood that must conform to societal standards of beauty. In colloquial speech, "doll" also refers to a woman who is dressed up, visually appealing, sexually desirable, and brainless; valued for the absence of intellect, a doll is necessarily subordinate to others. The doll, whether in the form of a toy or a human, depends on exterior persons for its value and self-image. In the case of the human doll (or "living doll"), a male determines whether it is beautiful in order for it to be classified as a doll in the first place. Furthermore, a doll is utterly fragile and can shatter, literally or emotionally, when handled. In a poem titled "Particle Doll," Notley resists the control and exactness demanded by others through her speaker's characterization as a doll. In one instance she writes:

The bitterest part of being a doll
is how to tell you
I hate how you make me this doll-
sitting propped up at dinner party or poetry panel.
'You're such a hostile doll.' (62)

Notley appears to use transparent language in the first four lines of the stanza; with the mention of “poetry panel,” she seems to write about herself, the poet Alice Notley, who is made to appear at particular events. As a doll, she is “propped up,” physically manipulated by others according to their wishes instead of her own. At the moment she attempts to assert a perspective of her own, she is called “such a hostile doll” (62). Most interesting is how Notley repeats the word “doll” three times in the stanza, each time inflecting a different element of the word. In the final line, for instance, the sound of the final syllable in hostile (*hahs-duhl*) nearly mimics the word “doll,” as if the image of a doll is contained within the idea of hostility. Notley treats words as sound and material in this way, shoring up their qualities and meanings beyond or in conjunction with a word’s technical, denotative meaning. With this repetition of the “duhl” syllable with “doll,” Notley ties the image of a doll to violation, bringing out a quality we may not otherwise recognize in our quotidian use of the word in language. The speaker’s disturbance leads her to distinguish between her outward role determined by others and her self-identity in subsequent stanzas:

I am composed of particles which are
different from me
though you categorize me as Particle Doll.
If you fuck with my brain, change my particles, chemicals
you’ll perceive a different me
as far as you’re
concerned, but you’ve never
really perceived *me* anyway.

I dream I’m in Rapallo though it’s Collobrières
two contemporary poets are constructing
a huge eye: they climb up on the scaffolding
with an enormous cannon shape
it’s mascara—they brush it on

The new eye is both cosmeticized and sexed. (62)

Here Notley differentiates between three layers of a person in *Disobedience*: one has a biological makeup, an inner sense of self, and an external, mediated, public appearance. These layers are often conflated by outside persons, who demand the “I” have singularity for the purpose of their control. In “Particle Doll,” biological makeup pertains to “chemicals” and “particles,” supposedly-exact pieces of a self that signify an individual person and their characteristics (62). These particles are “different from me,” the speaker affirms, as the speaker’s sense of self is distinct from the version indicated by her apparent particle composition (62). The “you,” meanwhile unaware or unaccepting of this distinction, continues to label the speaker as a “Particle Doll,” an identity they can manipulate according to their expectations. Thus, to make the supposed biology of a subject match its separate, external appearance, contemporary poets apply mascara to an eye using an “enormous cannon shape”—the everyday cosmetic tool becomes a destructive weapon, emphasizing the violence of such demands to conform (62). “Cosmeticize” literally means to improve, but the speaker finds no improvement in the eye’s makeover—only an exercise of power (62).

When Notley describes an “eye,” she speaks not only of the sight organ, but its homophone the “I,” also a perspective, which functions as a writer’s material presence in a material body of work. This paper has thus far touched upon the heightened visibility of the female subject; for instance, Marilyn Monroe’s hyper-presence in promotions for *River of No Return*, or classic Hollywood’s favoring of starkly bright light on female faces. Gaze also functions in the opposite direction: what the “I” sees, and how it sees itself. Reference to the “eye” appears twenty times across *Disobedience*, and most often in the sense of a perspective, looking outwards or inwards.

The word “makeup,” too, beyond its immediate referent to cosmetics like mascara, often signifies the obstruction of free will in *Disobedience*. Makeup can be self-affirming when the person in question performs or prescribes the making-up for themselves, whether the term refers to the application of cosmetics or to ‘making up’ in the sense of telling or writing a narrative. “Makeup” can also be weaponized, however, as we saw with the mascara-wand-turned-cannon in “Particle Doll,” which prescribed a sexualized and feminized identity. Ideologies that insist upon supposed genetic absolutes or societal expectations disrupt not only the “eye” made to wear the mascara, but also its homophone the “I,” the self beneath, as in *Disobedience*’s concluding poem “The Usual and the Most Tenuous of Goodbyes:”

... we’re told we behave in accordance with
our bodies, our so-called genes. Well, we’re not
trapped by our ‘makeup’
we’re trapped by Your supposed naming and mastery of it.
You then make us wear Your makeup. (283-284)

The stanza presents a clear argument about the various senses of makeup; the problem is not one’s particles themselves, but a lack of recognition that this layer of information differs from what the speaker often refers to as a “soul-core,” the innermost aspect of self which evades mediation. The “You,” taking an other-ing stance to its perceived subjects, “nam[es] and master[s]” each “I” and insists upon the “wear[ing]” of its conclusions like an exact science (283). Yet, these formulaic conclusions lack the understanding that only an “I” themselves can attempt to master. Notley’s speaker thus mocks this quasi-scientific rhetoric and performs the titular idea of disobedience:

The behavior of certain elementary particles seems rather humor-filled;
Certainly unpredictable. There are equations that ‘cover’ this
unpredictability.

The relation of I, soul, to particle: I think I am its field of familiar
The non-niggling corpus
Playing, like a photon, myself: watch me I'll behave another way
from usual.
Deeper, under the fox costume. (19)

Whereas equations exist to quantify, categorize, and control particles and elements, no such calculation can reach the “deeper” aspects of the speaker’s self-identity (19). Practicing her desired unpredictability, the speaker first references “fox” as a verb—one page earlier, “I outfoxed some others” (18). Outfoxing or outwitting others is precisely the speaker-as-an-I’s aim, as “fox” morphs into “Michael J. Fox,” a different person, before appearing a third time in the form of a “fox costume,” in which the speaker can be found (19). Put differently, the speaker’s aspiration to practice unpredictability by “behav[ing] another way from usual” seeps even into her use of language, which itself evolves through different contexts and the characters she inhabits (19).

Throughout *Disobedience*, Notley foregrounds the ties between the slipperiness of language and the instability of self-identification. A key element of one’s identity is that of self-naming in given name as well as pronouns: how a self is referred to in language. To be misnamed is to be misrecognized, an experience tantamount to loss of one’s sense of self. In her own process of self-naming in *Disobedience*, Notley’s speaker continually refuses the letter “E” that haunts her dreaming and waking life, as her surroundings insist that this “E” constitutes her identity. It should be noted that Notley’s new residence in France means that she is surrounded by—named by others—in the sound of a new language. This means that the speaker’s tools for constructing her “I” are necessarily complicated in translation and perhaps unavailable when she attempts to assert that perspective in the French language. While looking for her expression of an “I,” the speaker continually encounters the letter E; at one site, she laments how “an E has

fallen on my cheek like an insect,” imprinting her with the rejected letter (32). In another poem, she states that “E” is “for suppression,” prompting her to seek “Left Side Liberation From E,” the title of the subsequent poem (50; 52). These two vowels, E and I, are common in English and French, but differ in pronunciation in each context. Notley’s speaker, seeking recognition as an “I” in France, will never hear “I” (“eye”); show a French speaker this letter and they will pronounce a sound akin to the English “e,” as this is the appropriate vowel sound in the French language. Not only is this a different sound, it is precisely that—a sound. Whereas “I” functions as both a vowel sound and the first-person pronoun in English, “e” is solely a vowel in French. Coincidentally, Notley’s own last name is pronounced “Not-lee” or perhaps “Not-le-e,” which would translate in French as “Not the E.” With her embrace of the “I,” the speaker is thus left to wonder if she can authentically exist in a context that insists she be an “E.”

Whereas the “I” in the Language poets’ conception has meant inflation of an ego-full self, Notley’s “I” constantly seeks a downward trajectory. Moving towards and into underground caverns and caves, or climbing down ladders, Notley’s speaker finds that moving down is a way of moving up, insofar as recognition as an “I” is seen as an upward motion to those in positions of power, who feel threatened by the invasion of autonomous persons. In “Echoes the Past Fucks Me Over and Over,” Notley plays with the idea of direction and power with her images of a ladder and a tall building. In the second section of her poem, she describes how she is on top of a skyline with several male writers, but finds the height discomfoting:

Come down on ladder dream
come down
from the top of the building dream

have climbed up twice to the top at night
counting to a hundred; we’re on top of the skyline, Chicago or Paris
myself and a couple of men writing; but I have fear of heights
and say, I’m sorry, I can’t stay. I’m climbing back down.

So I climb back down the ladder, counting to a hundred. (191)

This section stands out as among Notley's most rhythmically-regular in *Disobedience*; though it does not have a rhyme scheme or meter that can be named or neatly classified (such as an ABAB pattern), it begins and ends with coming "down," repeats the phrase "counting to a hundred," and has continual assonance. "Counting to a hundred" implies linear, upward "progress," but the speaker troubles this image by climbing "down" as she recites. Most notable, though, is how this prosody illustrates the process of the speaker's "I" emergence. The pronoun "I" does not appear until the latter half of line 6; until then, assonance of the vowel "i" sound resounds in Notley's successive choices of the words climb, twice, night, skyline, writing, and heights (lines 4-6). The "I", capitalized and used as a pronoun, makes appearance only once the speaker recognizes her high position and relinquishes it, moving down. Notley's "I" is meant to be what is left after mediation, or what existed before it—a small position rather than a large one.

Lest we believe the speaker's emphasis on downward motion in relation to her "I" is an accident, Notley dedicates an additional section to the image of literal high and low status in section 4 of the same poem:

I'm still on top of a building
another dream says so

the umpteenth the top
floor of a Columbia dorm . . .

then I can't get my top
I mean blouse on just can't

nor can the other women
from my college year, we'll never get
to be where the men are on top

I don't even approve of the top

so how can I get permanently down
and still be equal to the men? (192, *original punctuation*)

“Top” changes association throughout Notley’s couplets; the first and third lines continue the poem’s earlier reference to being “on top” or at “the top” in terms of a building—standing or looking out from its highest height. With “on top” of the building, the speaker seemingly has authority and a lack of limitation. Standing at “the top” floor of the dorm, however, emphasizes the ceiling—she can go no higher (192). In the third couplet, “top” becomes personal; the speaker refers to it as “my top,” and it is now “top” in the form of a woman’s blouse, which she and the other women in her class cannot put on (192). This leads the speaker to state that she does not “approve of the top” and would rather “get permanently down / and still be equal to the men” (192). In addition to the sexual innuendo at play here, the speaker wants to go “down” in the sense of direction, as she does to enter the underground, the métro, and caverns. Heights, Notley reminds us, are generally tied to economic, social, sexual, and gender power structures. Notley thus argues that going or being down often does, but should not, denote a lesser status.

Notley’s downward tendencies have a direct correlation to her understanding of the “I.” In an interview on the meaning of “disobedience” in her earlier work *Mysteries of Small Houses*, Notley stated that the “I” she sought to find and represent is one of nakedness:

I was firstly trying to realize the first person singular as fully and nakedly
as possible, saying ‘I’ in such a way as to make myself really nervous, really
blowing away the gauze....I came to the conclusion, in the final poem of the
book, that self means ‘I’ and also means ‘poverty,’ it’s what one strips down to,
who you are when you’re stripped down.’ (2)

As with the speaker’s emphasis on coming “down” and being “permanently down,” Notley explains the “I” as a position of “poverty,” “who you are when you’re stripped down” (2).

Notley's mention of the first person as "naked," her act of removing the I's "gauze," as well the "I" remaining what is left after being "stripped down," conflates the linguistic self or "I" with the physical body. This fusion breaks down the boundary between such entities and, with the mention of clothing and fabric, removes another kind of boundary between what Notley's speaker believes to be her identity's "core" and its outward projection in the world. In her explanation, Notley imagines the "I" as clothed in gauze—the lightest and most transparent of fabrics—which suggests the thin precarity of the boundaries between self and other or self and world.

Notley's conception of selfhood recognizes that the world of encounter is one of mediation and interference; cultural and historical forces are always at work to conform the individual into its set ideals. This marks a stark difference from the "aestheticized surface" bourgeois-I which the Language poets adamantly resisted (Silliman et. al 263). The "I" is indeed subject to mediation, but it need not strive to be a "model of subjectivity and authority" as Lyn Hejinian claims in her essay, "Barbarism" (329). Notley's *Disobedience* is, among many other things, an argument for the fact that although the "I" is grammatically singular, it is not inherently unitary. A successful reworking of forms and traditions requires the "I" not just as an element of language, but as a necessary perspective for engaging with the world. In *Disobedience* in particular, the world is not "outside," which would imply a distinction between self and other, but rather appears in many spaces, including dreams, the material world, and mass culture. This outside/inside, multi-layered world constitutes an integral part of selfhood in *Disobedience*, rendering an "I" that is not necessarily personal, but a perspective, moving through continual encounter.

Works Cited

- Baker, David. "Evident Being: A Conversation with Alice Notley." *Talk Poetry: Poems and Interviews with Nine American Poets*, University of Arkansas Press, 2012, pp. 101- 113. *ProQuest Ebook Central*.
- Benjamin, Walter. "Theses on the Philosophy of History." *Critical Theory and Society: A Reader*, edited by Stephen E. Bronner and Douglas Kellner. Routledge, 1989, pp. 255-263.
- Benshoff, Harry M. "America on Film : Representing Race, Class, Gender, and Sexuality at the Movies, 2nd ed. John Wiley and Sons, 2009. archive.org.
- The Big Sleep*. Directed by Howard Hawks, performances by Humphrey Bogart and Lauren Bacall. Warner Brothers, 1946.
- Blatt, David. "Immigrant Politics in a Republican Nation." *Post-Colonial Cultures in France*, Routledge, 2013, pp. 40-57.
- "doll, n.1." OED Online, Oxford University Press, September 2021, www.oed.com/view/Entry/56597. Accessed 19 September 2021.
- Double Indemnity*. Directed by Billy Wilder, performances by Fred MacMurray and Barbara Stanwyck. Paramount Pictures, 1944
- Foster, Ed. "Interview with Alice Notley." *Postmodern Poets: The Talisman Interviews*, The Talisman House Publishers, 1988, pp. 84-98. *The Internet Archive*. Accessed on 21 May 2020.
- Guiraudon, Virginie. "The Reaffirmation of the Republican Model: Ten Years of Identity Politics in France." *French Politics and Society*, vol. 14, no. 2, 1996, pp. 47–57. *JSOR*.
- Halliwell, Leslie. *Who's Who in the Movies*. Harper Perennial, 1999, *Google Books*.
- Hejinian, Lyn. "Barbarism." *The Language of Inquiry*, University of California Press, 2000, pp. 318-336. *ProQuest Ebook Central*.
- Huk, Romana. "The Progress of the Avant-garde: Reading/Writing Race and Culture According to Universal Systems of Value." *Poetry and Contemporary Culture: The Question of Value*. Edinburgh University Press, 2002, pp. 141-164. Print.

- Huyssen, Andreas. "Mass Culture as Woman: Modernism's Other." *After the Great Divide : Modernism, Mass Culture, Postmodernism*. Bloomington: Indiana University Press, 1986. Print.
- The Lady from Shanghai*. Directed by Orson Welles, performances by Orson Welles and Rita Hayworth, Columbia Pictures, 1947. Streamed on The Criterion Channel 03 April 2020.
- McLean, Adrienne L. "'I'm a Cansino': Transformation, Ethnicity, and Authenticity in the Construction of Rita Hayworth, American Love Goddess." *Journal of Film and Video*, vol. 44, no. 3/4, University of Illinois Press, 1992, pp. 8–26. *JSTOR*.
- Notley, Alice. *Disobedience*. Penguin Books, New York, 2001. Print.
- -- -- . "The Poetics of Disobedience." *The Poetry Foundation*, 15 Feb. 2010.
- Out of the Past*. Directed by Jacques Tourneur, performances by Robert Mitchum and Jane Greer, RKO Radio Pictures, 1947.
- Perloff, Marjorie. "Language Poetry and the Lyric Subject: Ron Silliman's *Albany*, Susan Howe's *Buffalo*." *Critical Inquiry*, vol. 25, no. 3, 1999, pp. 405–434. *JSTOR*. Accessed 10 May 2020.
- "Photo Standalone 2 – No Title.—Marilyn Monroe with Crutches on Set of *River of No Return*." *The Washington Post* (1923-1954), Sep 24, 1953, pp. 20. *ProQuest*.
- "Representations of Black Women in Hollywood." See Jane, Geena Davis Institute on Gender in Media, 30 Mar. 2021.
- Riding, Alan. "French Court Sentences 2 for Role in 1995 Bombings That Killed 8." *The New York Times*, 2002, p. A4. Print.
- Ruth, Greg. "Cover Image for *Notorious* (1946)." *The Criterion Collection*, <https://www.criterion.com/films/682-notorious>.
- Sabrina*. Directed by Billy Wilder, performances by Humphrey Bogart and Audrey Hepburn. Paramount Pictures, 1954.
- Schwartz, Vanessa. "France Stirs Up the Melting Pot." *Modern France: A Very Short Introduction*. Oxford University Press, 2011.
- Scrinzi, Francesca. "Gender and Women in the Front National Discourse and Policy: From 'Mothers of the Nation' to 'Working Mothers'?" *New Formations*, Issue 91, 2017, pp. 87-97, *Gale Academic OneFile*.

- Shapiro, Jeremy, and Bénédicte Suzan. "The French Experience of Counter-Terrorism." *Survival: Global Politics and Strategy*, Volume 45, Issue 1, 2003, pp. 67-98, *Taylor and Francis Online*.
- Shohat, Ella, and Robert Stam. *Race in Translation : Culture Wars Around the Postcolonial Atlantic*, New York University Press, 2012. *ProQuest Ebook Central*.
- Silliman, Ron, et al. "Aesthetic Tendency and the Politics of Poetry: A Manifesto." *Social Text*, no. 19/20, 1988, pp. 261–275. *JSTOR*. Accessed 11 May 2020.
- Silver, Alain, and James Ursini. *Film Noir: Light and Shadow*. 2017. Print.
- Stearns, Peter N. "Nationalism." *The Oxford Encyclopedia of the Modern World*. Oxford University Press, 2008. *Oxford Reference Online*.
- Still of Robert Mitchum in *Out of the Past*. "Robert Mitchum in *Out of the Past*," 14 Nov 2020, <https://bamfstyle.com/2020/11/14/out-of-the-past-mitchum/>