

RESEARCH ARTICLE

Suspending the Psychopolitical 'Yeah' in Anne Boyer's *Garments Against Women*Aida Thamer Salloom ^{a,*} Maha Qahtan Sulaiman ^{b,*}^a Al-Muthanna University , College of Education for Human Sciences , English Department , Iraq^b University of Baghdad , College of Education for Women , English Department , Iraq

ABSTRACT

The American poet Anne Boyer has recently emerged as an innovative poetic voice, engaged with a range of socio-political issues, including the challenges of everyday survival, the precarious life in neoliberal capitalism, and most strikingly, the intersections of poetics and politics. The latter is the focus of this study that aims to explore Boyer's *Garments Against Women* as a counter-discourse to the psychopolitical strategies of neoliberal capitalism. As theorized by the German philosopher, Byung-Chul Han, psychopolitics stands for contemporary power that insinuates itself within different social structures to create auto-exploited individuals with open-ended exhortation and self-improvement for capital maximization. Psychopolitics does not impose external power; rather, it reshapes the self with inner drives of endless compulsions of achievements and productions. In this context, Boyer opposes writing that reproduces the narratives of self-empowerment and everyday survival. While literature works independently of the market logic, Boyer interrogates the ways writing is also being commodified, claiming that literary institutions encourage realistic poetics of traditional confessions and memoirs that reproduce the narratives of resilience, personal success, and self-empowerment. Thus, her negativity is a self-aware poetics, reflected in hybrid, fragmented, and meditative texts functions as both an aesthetic and political resistance, beyond the conventional modes of production. Through negativity, she reconsiders literary works freed from commodification and the discourse of the achievement culture.

KEYWORDS: Anne Boyer, Psychopolitics, Poetics of negativity, Anti-commodification, and Achievement culture.

مقالة بحثية

تعليق مقبولة السياسة السايكولوجية في ديوان آن بوير أثواب ضد النساء

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الملخص :

برزت الشاعرة الأمريكية آن بوير مؤخرًا كصوت شعري مبتكر، حيث تناولت قضايا اجتماعية وسياسية تتعلق في تحديات العيش اليومي، والحياة الهشة في ظل الرأسمالية النيولبرالية، والأهم من ذلك، تقاطع الشعر والسياسة. وتركز الدراسة على هذا الجانب الأخير في ديوان بوير "أثواب ضد النساء" كخطاب مضاد لاستراتيجيات السياسة السايكولوجية للرأسمالية النيولبرالية. وكما نظر الفيلسوف الألماني بيونغ تشول هان، فإن السياسة السايكولوجية هي ديناميكيات القوة المعاصرة التي تتسلل إلى مختلف البنى الاجتماعية لخلق أفراد مستغلين ذاتيًا، يتمتعون بدافع مفتوح نحو التحفيز والتطوير الذاتي لتضخيم رأس المال. ويزعم هان أن السياسة السايكولوجية لا تفرض سلطة خارجية، بل تعيد تشكيل الذات بدوافع داخلية لتحقيق إنجازات وإنتاجات لا متناهية. وفي هذا السياق، تعارض بوير الكتابة التي تعيد إنتاج سرديات التمكين الذاتي والعيش اليومي. بينما تعمل الأدبيات بمعزل عن منطق السوق، تتساءل بوير عن الطرق التي تُحوّل الكتابة إلى سلعة، مؤكدة أن المؤسسات الأدبية تشجع الشعرية الواقعية للاعترافات والمذكرات التقليدية التي تُعيد إنتاج حكايات الصمود والنجاح الشخصي وتمكين الذات. إن السلبية عند بوير هي مقاومة جمالية وسياسية في آن واحد، وتتميز بنصوص هجينة ومترددة تتجاوز أنماط الإنتاج التقليدية. وباعتمادها السلبية، تُعيد بوير الاعتبار إلى الأعمال الأدبية المتحررة من خطاب التسليح وثقافة الإنجاز.

الكلمات المفتاحية : آن بوير، السياسة السايكولوجية، شعرية السلب، رفض التسليح وثقافة الإنجاز.

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1. Introduction

With the beginning of the twenty-first century, power dynamics have witnessed a remarkable change, moving away from the traditional disciplinary governmentality into a more functional psycho-power, embedded in social interactions, discourses and media. These psychopolitical strategies foreground the neoliberal logic of free will and self-made entrepreneurship, prompting individuals to be responsible on their own fate. Being illusioned by false-consciousness, people are excessively preoccupied with self-optimization and endless achievements. They positively objectify and present their life for consumer culture. This, in turn, intensifies their physical and psychological exhaustion, while institutions that profit from their labor bear no responsibility of providing them a secure and decent living. Neoliberal capitalism prioritizes commodification over human experience and artistic endeavors. Opposing these policies is well-demonstrated in the literary works of the American poet Anne Boyer (1973-) that will be the focus of this study, exploring Boyer's *Garments Against Women* (2015) as a counter-discourse to the psychopolitical strategies of neoliberal capitalism. *Garments Against Women* is a collection of lyrical essays and prose poems, which underscore Boyer's negativity as a self-aware poetics that interrogates and rejects the commodification of life and of literature, challenging the narratives of self-empowerment and everyday survival.

2. Theoretical Framework

Neoliberal capitalism works in an oxymoronic technique, where freedom is turned into absolute control that subordinates individuals to endless compulsions of self-optimization. The imperatives to achieve, perform, and affirm the self, alter an individual "eager-ever achiever" who works for social acceptance and capital maximization. People engage profoundly in exhortation and self-exploitation, measuring their worth through visibility, productivity, and self-branding [1: pp. 7-8]. The German philosopher and cultural theorist of Korean origins, Byung-Chul Han (1959-), diagnoses the contemporary power dynamics as the psych political

tools of neoliberalism that "carefully protocols desires, needs and wishes instead of 'depatterning' them" [2: p. 34]. He argues that the prevailing system stabilizes its power "by means of psychological programming and steering," where people interiorize the neoliberal mantra of self-improvement and interpret submission as freedom [2, p. 63].

Discovering the psyche as a productive force, psychopolitics propagates the virulent agendas of capitalism "not just on working time but on the person him-or herself: all the attention, the individual commands and, indeed, his or her very life" [2: p. 29].

In his book *The Burnout Society* (2015), Han describes individuals as "achievement-subjects," who willingly exploit themselves in infinite and open-ended accomplishments [3: p. 12]. They are disillusioned by positive messages, such as "the best has yet to come," "you can do it," and "be the best version of you" [1: p. 8].

Unlike old versions of capitalism, Han describes neoliberalism as a class-free system that replaces the conflicting class struggle with a struggle of humankind against itself. This capitalist's "ceaseless self-reinvention is systemically violent; it grinds habit, destroys existential territories and deracinates stability" [4]. The philosophy of doing your best, hitting further goals, and achieving more aims has a deep psychopolitical effect that renders the individual responsible of his/her own success and failure, disregarding broader social or economic forces that may take the leading role in shaping the general structure of behavior. Han, however, outlines the terms "Achievement Society" and "Burnout Society" to blame the social and cultural institutions that constantly overwhelm people with positive violence and unfillable bareness, rendering them always tired [3].

Therefore, the contemporary world is turned into an eerie working place, where the achievement-subjects operate as multitaskers and entrepreneurs to meet the social expectations. All social institutions, participate in creating workplace cultures, consumer habits, and hyper-transparency, making life consistently visible and marketable. Han identifies the consequences of this achievement culture and its

conformist institutions as “neurological illnesses such as depression, attention deficit hyperactivity disorder (ADHD), borderline personality disorder (BPD), and burnout syndrome [that] mark the landscape of pathology at the beginning of the twenty-first century” [3: p. 1]. These diseases exhaust people and restrict their freedom out of their positive responses to the endless demands of neoliberal capitalism. Han warns against violent positivity, which creates homogenous models, set merely for achievement and consumption. The opposite is true, negativity, a willingness refusal of the overwhelming demands, is what enables individuals to free themselves from self-centered inspiration. It mobilizes people, enlightens the soul and opens spaces for discussion and disagreements against the neoliberal precarity. In *Topology of Violence* (2018), he claims that “forms of negativity such as hesitation, pausing, boredom, waiting, or rage prove constructive. [...] Negativity enlivens life and endows it with meaning, without negativity, thought would just be calculation” [5: p. 117].

Significantly, Han acknowledges the critical responses of artists and writers to the exhausting lifestyle of the achievement societies and their attendant maladies. Citing the Austrian novelist Peter Handke’s “Essay on Tiredness” (1994), Han expresses how Handke determines a collective tiredness, “we-tiredness,” addressing tiredness as an existential pursuit that transcends the capitalist logic of endless engagements and constant deadlines [3]. Handke’s “we-tiredness” is an alternative redemption, in which “the soul opens, speech returns, and the eye sees again” [6]. Han further confirms that in a society where physical exhaustion is turned into burnout and fatigue, an individual does not even confess it without an accompanied sense of shame and regret. Thus, resistance to psychopolitics must begin in the human psyche, and individuals should develop innate drives of negativity and abstention [1].

While Handke early examined the malaises and tiredness of the achievement society in the 1980s, Boyer more profoundly opposes these strategies in

the contemporary era. She is not a mere observer, rather, she writes from within the same threshold of agony and pain, adopting poetics of negativity to expose and counter the commodification of suffering.

3. Anne Boyer’s Anti-Commodified Poetics

Neoliberal capitalism reshapes art and literature within its cultural institutions by diluting them in the logic of profit accumulation. This deviates literature from its critical and human roles into dedicated patterns and consumer products. In their *Neoliberalism and Contemporary Literary Culture* (2017), Mitchum Huehls and Rachel Greenwald Smith examine literary developments and argue that literary works have witnessed a remarkable interest in realism, the rise of memoir, and the hunt of aesthetic autonomy. They describe the current phase of neoliberalism as being ontological, where “literature and other forms of art” have departed from their moral and ethical pursuits and subjected to “economic calculus committed to efficient profit maximization” [7: p. 10]. Moreover, while holding the means of production, cultural and literary institutions orient writers towards an economic space represented by social media market and TV programs, creating “pseudo-producers out of authors” [8]. Turning into proponents of these new neoliberal arts, certain writers have responded to the achievement culture and necessarily become entrepreneurs who cannot make art without regard to social receptions. Worth mentioning, Theodore Adorno and Max Horkheimer (1947) have predicted culture industrialization that produces standardized cultural goods, used to disseminate the capitalist’s ideology and manipulate mass society into passivity, sameness, and false enlightenment. They recommend that powerful art should not reflect real life profoundly, but rather, only allude to, advocating artistic and critical detachment of art as the source of its strength against conformity to social norms [9]. In his *Aesthetic Theory* (1970), Theodore Adorno further confirms that art is a “noncommodity par excellence,” rather, it is a “congealed process” between “impulse” and “form,” hence, it should not sacrifice its allure in precise dependence on “truth

content” [10: p. 129].

Against literary conformity, Boyer is suspending the already standardized writings that fit in the prevailing principles of commodity and market logic: “as if the language of poets is the language of property owners” [11: p. 14]. She interrogates the ways literature is commodified, and writers are shaped by the achievement-driven logic of neoliberal capitalism. She exposes how literary production becomes entangled with expectations of productivity and market value, directly portraying literature as the world of beasts or as she states: “literature is like the world of monsters is the production of culture is [...] the world of wealthy women and of men” [11: p. 46]. This is the central theme of her book, *Garments Against Women*, a unique avant-garde collection of philosophical lyrics and prose poems that establish and secure her reputation as a compelling literary voice. Written in 2010, the book investigates the effects and textures of precarious life under the pressures of contemporary neoliberal capitalism. Although the title suggests feminist connotations, this study restricts itself to explore certain poems, which interrogate and reject the commodification of literature.

In an epigraphic mode, *Garments Against Women* begins with two black pages contrasting a large, fully capitalized, white text; “WHO EATS IN A CAGE? OR WITH A CAGED MOUTH?” This metaphor foregrounds the book’s restless concern with the predetermined restrictions imposed on the very act of writing, anticipating Boyer’s negativity to participate in the achievement culture. She ironically exposes the neoliberal claim of freedom and argues that writing under suffocating conditions can neither express the human struggle, nor satisfy the artistic creativity.

Significantly, “blankness and blackness of the text” prompt a meditative process and open spaces for creative thinking on the part of the readers, attracting their awareness to the authorial intentionality [12: p. 1582]. While well-appointed by the lyrical I, *Garments against Women* diverges between the long philosophical paragraphs, the

silences, the meditative blank, and dark pages on one hand and the breaks, the ruptures and unfinished, twisted sentences on the other. The book demonstrates a key premise in Boyer’s poetry, i.e., how to reflect upon such critical social realities by “not” writing about them in a commodified and self-branded style. In her (2018) article “Writing/Not writing: Anne Boyer, Paralipsis and Literary Work,” Lindsay Turner proposes paralipses as a rhetoric device of “the work of not-saying or not-writing” to speak the unspeakable [13: p. 122] to attract the attention to something by pretending to pass it over. Similarly, Fredrica Bueti (2020) confirms that Boyer’s poetics of refusal is a kind of “an apophatic form, a way of unsaying what has been said and undoing what has been done” [14: p. 147].

Nevertheless, reading through Han’s criticism of the psychopolitical achievement culture, this study explores Boyer’s refusal of the mandates of constant self-production and survival of neoliberalism. She crafts her autobiographical writings with poetic dexterity to keep them twisted and unconsumable, highlighting the value of opacity, slowness, and the inward reflection as forms of negativity. In “*Ma Vie en Bling: A Memoir*,” the longest poem in the book, Boyer writes “I am now finishing a book: it is called ‘the innocent question’ or it is called ‘garments against women’ or it is called ‘this champion: life.’” [11: p. 83]. Her hesitation to give her book an exact title is part of her strategy to counter the commodification of writings, i.e. not to write on behalf of, or according to any social institutions. Magdalena Zurawski (2017) states that “for Boyer, literature, [...] universalizes the forms of bourgeois experience as a ruse for democratic inclusion” [15: p. 360]. Zurawski emphasizes that the word ‘garments’ keeps mutated throughout the book to include all institutions, whether political, social, economic, and even literary, which are grounded in abstract assumptions and unable to adjust people’s life-long struggle. Therefore, Boyer’s poetics of negativity is a positive withdrawal from the fastmoving achievement culture into innovative lyrical essays that prioritize slowness, reflection, and

contemplation, transcending genres taxonomies towards a potential wholeness. In this sense, she is demonstrating Han's words: "a purely hectic rush produces nothing new. It reproduces and accelerates what is already available" [3: p.13]. Han keeps recommending the needs to cultivate thoughts and worlds beyond what is already curated by the controlling dynamics. Thus, Boyer's meditative style grants her poetry a new zone to be dramatically analytical and playfully poetic.

4. On the Poetics of Negativity

Han's psychopolitical theory focuses on the absence of negativity, by which he means the critical thinking that is repressed to exclude any opposing ideas. Boyer foreground negativity as a hallmark of her literary and nonliterary works. She initiates her 2017 article "No" with a thoughtful statement, saying that "History is full of people who just didn't," proclaiming that people in contemporary era are subjects to the "capitalist yes." She recalls historical examples to support her claim that "*nos* and *won'ts*" are existential modes against the hellish yes, arguing that "You can put your thing down, flip it, and reverse." She adopts "no" as new modes of writings represented by blankness, spaces, silences, pauses, and even refusal [16]. Thus, she proposes negativity as promising tropes of critical thinking, artistic achievements, and ethical engagements, rejecting writings that reproduce the desire of the structural profits. Reflecting upon her own conditions during the writing of *Garments Against Women*, she states that she was facing difficult personal and economic conditions—overwork, lack of house insurance, daughter to care for, and limited resources of food and health. These exhaustively demanding conditions are sufficient to make her always sick, and pursuing writings could be another burden that might take a toll on her well-being. She starts suspecting the adequacy of writings in changing humans' conditions or bringing them happiness, assuring that she "would be a lot happier and healthier if [she] could give it" up [Boyer as cited in 17]. She realizes that literature is already absorbed in the neoliberal machine it seeks to critique in the

sense that capitalism turns critical writings into marketable productions that serve its purposes of capital accumulation. Thus, she disputes writings, which ideologically reproduces the values of "the rich and powerful and those who serve or have served them," sharing the psychopolitical theories that the neoliberal economy "gives the wrong form to desire," and assuring that people fulfill the desire of the "bookkeeper" [11: p. 34].

Through and beyond the persona's everyday insecure life, Boyer's prose poems dramatize the mundane dilemmas of work and thought, documenting interconnected problems of procreation, creativity and most importantly the challenge of writings. In "What is Not Writing," she states that:

There is illness and injury which has produced a great deal of not writing. There is cynicism, disappointment, political outrage, heartbreak, resentment, and realistic thinking which has produced a great deal of not writing. There is reproduction which has been like illness and injury and taken up many hours with not writing. There is being anxious or depressed which takes up many hours [...] There is trauma which is fantastic in the way it is brief and clear and also the way it lingers around and emerges unpredictably as if it will forever [11: p. 44].

Boyer argues that exhaustion, overwork, and even physical diseases are directly exerted by the agonizing power of neoliberal ideologies. This is notably reflected in the grammatical mistakes, incoherent rhythms, and fragmented sentences, which give a flexible semantic expression that the standardized language would not fully express. The repetition of "there is" depicts the psychological burden of the unspeakable feelings. She further speculates that social systems objectify people in the service of the wealthy and powerful, realizing that these conditions make literature almost impossible because its conventional structures are insufficient to articulate feelings, labors, and artistic creativity.

For Boyer, literature is not a site for transmitting information or relying on straightforward referential language; it is a space where language resists utility,

disrupts expectations, and refuses to serve as mere data or disclosure. She captures a specific debate of “what-to-do-with-the-information-that-is-feeling,” contemplating on the way feelings, such as sobbing can be processed or translated. In her poem, “The Innocent Question,” Boyer mocks “(a poet) [who] writes poems with many words in parentheses,” [11: p. 3] alluding that the parentheses symbolize social confinements of people’s feelings.

While acknowledging these feelings, the poet dares not to craft them in the mainstream of his poem, but presents them as secondary, parenthetical statements to soften their irritating impacts on the public taste. In doing so, he treats poetry as a public commodity that awaits public acceptance and consumption, rather than an artful expression of people’s struggle. Boyer emphasizes that the poet does not achieve an artistic authority but upholds a performative agency of neoliberal capitalism that emulates social expectations, in terms of visibility, transparency, and consumerism. She ironically places his official label between parentheses, enacting an artistic and political critique of the literary conventionality. Boyer’s main concern is to craft a “form to the formlessness of emotions such as anguish and anger,” [14: p. 138] realizing that “the toxicity of the neoliberal rhetoric of happiness and individual responsibility...exhaust[s] the individual’s ability to respond” [14, p. 127]. Thus, she refuses to reproduce these social, cultural, and even literary structures, which stand as the direct causes of human struggle.

Furthermore, Boyer criticizes the structural strategies that encourage writers to confess personal traumas in terms of empowerment, positivity, and visibility. She argues that narratives, memoirs, and other forms of confession composed in conventional formats are created for public consumption; to mesmerize the recipients, without being able to dislodge the existing power dynamics: She assures that “aspects of human experience [...] provide the materials of a seemingly endless production of low-paid, high-click writing of lurid confessions of victimization in which a gloss of ‘empowered telling’

decorates the stubborn operations of someone else’s profit” [Boyer as cited in18]. Driven by the consumer appetite, writers are only meant to “fill the blanks,” to romanticize suffering and commodify personal destitute. She argues that the poem that expresses man’s ever-lasting labor would not be crafted in a plain, direct, and conventional style because it simplifies the complexity of the world. Han also maintains that “confession” converts the individual’s inner struggle into “voluntary disclosure,” articulating their experiences with disarming frankness to prove emotional transparency and readiness for productivity [2: p. 36]. Boyer, rather, prefers writings, which philosophize and poeticize personal stories, echoing the Slovenian philosopher Slavoj Žižek who describes poetry as the “enabling impossibility” that “is always, by definition, ‘about’ something that cannot be addressed directly, only alluded to” [19: p. 160]. Boyer further proclaims that “if telling is the only talent I have, then I will tell,” but also be a kind of poet who writes with poisonous words, and crafts “a literary form that can repel” against utilizing of the suffering of the mass “for the profit of a few” [Boyer as cited in18]. She echoes Emily Dickinson’s “tell the truth but tell it slant,” pointing to the distinction between confession and critical negativity of poets who “wore their laurels like a crown of thorns” [16]. Boyer subverts the systems that exploit people and transforms the subject into a tireless achievement-machine. She embraces slowness, opacity, and deliberate blankness to interrupt the accelerative demands of psychopolitical neoliberalism and to open the possibility for something new to emerge, namely, her reflective poetry. For instance, she repeatedly exposes how survival under capitalism scripts the subject into compulsory clarity: “the brute... a bear not a human is named survival-life... is always saying give me the labor of your body, not the work of your hands. We fall asleep in that bear’s arms” [11: p. 19]. She metaphorically portrays neoliberal capitalism as an imminent beast to emphasize its lived violence, assuring that it occupies homes, workplaces, and even the psyche.

Boyer's attention and appreciation of the minutiae of daily life—its interruptions, failures, and moments of withdrawal—become acts of resistance. Maureen McLane, a poet, and critic describes *Garments Against Women* as “a sad, beautiful, passionate book that registers the political economy of literature and of life itself” [20]. Boyer, however, accelerates a space of twisted poetics and critical thinking to say what deserves to be said and indirectly communicate the in-communicable or what she calls the “inadmissible information [that] provokes a kind of social discomfort.” In her poem “the Innocent Question,” Boyer defines the inadmissible information that involves “(poverty) or violence (how money and bodies meet). [...] being defanged by power [...] or to feel deeply, or to admit to feeling deeply, [...] or to admit to having been un-free” [11: p. 9]. She playfully reflects feelings and facts represented by resentment, bitterness, and exhaustion, making visible what social structures would consider daily survivals.

In his book, *The Disappearance of Rituals* (2020), Han regrets the loss of the playful charm of language, stating that: “because of the compulsion of work and production, we are losing the capacity to *play*. We only rarely make playful use of language; [...] It is obliged to communicate information.” He further acknowledges the playful nature of poetry, stating that “poems are *magic ceremonies of language*. The *poetic principle* returns pleasure to language through a radical break with the economy of the production, [italics is original] [21: p. 60]. Thus, Boyer's playful poetics regains the power of poetry in a way she is not merely offering information about the desperate life, but also, portraying the hopeful potentials of literature to work apart from the neoliberal demands.

5. Between Healing and Wreathing Havoc

In his book, *The Psycho-political Muse* (1987), Paul Breslin argues that poets are prompted by a collective goal of liberating the psyche from “the false consciousness imposed by society” [22: p. 4]. Breslin acknowledges Carl Jung's psychological theorization in giving due importance to the poets' active imagination that enables them to navigate the

unconscious part of their psyche. Similarly, Boyer is deeply engaged with her shadow self, the creative force that arises from the repressed contradiction and exhaustion. Thus, she has achieved the Jungian individuated persona, “the process of psychological development, in which the innate qualities are carried out,” creating a unified personality by integrating its conscious and subconscious poles [23: p. 99].

Significantly, Boyer's poetics of negativity is neither passive nor nihilistic, rather, she offers spaces of renewal and the possibility to dissent the psychopolitical norms of visibility and productivity. Against the full-time obsessions of the neoliberal commandments, Boyer's main concern is to search for the remainders, the free time, which elude capturing, such as the daydreams. In her poem “Sewing” she states that:

Every morning I wake up with a renewed commitment to learning to be what I am not. This is the day in which I will sew a straight seam, cut a piece of fabric precisely, follow the directions written by the pattern maker: stay stitch, clip notches. I will not presume to know more than the experts. ... No more jumping ahead, rebellion, daydreaming [11: p. 26].

She ironically claims that she strives to follow the conditional demands of the “pattern maker,” imitating the imperative discourse of the neoliberal officials, “stay stich” and “clip notes,” and claiming that she abandons the unorthodoxy of her conduct. However, she is playfully underscoring her inner liberating desires and attachment to the remnants of daydreams and rebellious impulses. For Jung, daydreams are essential tools to the poet's active imagination that permits a purposeful dialogue between the conscious and subconscious parts of the psyche, rendering the subject fully aware [23]. While Boyer ironically pretends to be self-disciplined and loyal to the “pattern maker,” she breaks away from rigorous obedience and behaves differently.

Boyer is interrogating a life that is troubled between “conditions” that exploit humans and the modes of writings that idealize this life in the service of power. These contradictions are sufficient to

dramatize a poetics of negativity and appeal to imagination to expose the underlying structures. In “*Ma Vie en Bling: A Memoir*,” she states that:

Dreams were the highest order of my experience. Then they were what I imagined was at best an entertaining fiction or sometimes a profitable product.

I wanted to keep unfashionable experience alive. And there was, I thought, a reasonably justifiable distinction between she who was captivated by the imagination and she who was captivated by the world. [11: p. 72]

Apart from the ugly reality of the world, dreams activate her imagination and enable her to demonstrate an awareness that gathers sincere engagement and ironic playfulness. To speak the unspeakable, she keeps a creative movement between vocalization and silence. This ambivalence is not simply thematic but structural: she carves her prose poems with fragments, interruption that refuse closure, and ironically mimic the very instability that neoliberal systems impose on the self. These experiments in form have endowed her with a mode of survival—both a critique of the demands for ceaseless productivity and a refusal to offer the required coherence of the institutionalized literary culture.

Reflecting upon the politics of labor, care and psychologization under neoliberal precarious conditions, Boyer captures a contrastive logic, in which every negation mentions a type of writing that is deeply generic for more and more labor in a culture that devalues artistic creativity. Boyer adds “I am not writing a memoir [...] Facebook status updates. I am not writing thank-you notes or apologies. [...] conference papers. [...] book reviews. [...] blurbs” [11: p. 42]. The term “not” has become a recurring motif or a refrain that incarnates Boyer’s refusal to write for capital and defines her independent poetic persona that refuses to replicate the capitalist’s false ideals of survival. While imitating the monotonical nature of these structures, repetition exhausts them and pushes them to their limits, exposing “the merciless and circulatory conditions of all the

capitalist yes” [16]. Thus, beyond the psychopolitical demands of visibility and production, Boyer’s “no” enacts the poet’s hope in the possibility of change and transformation.

In “The Innocent Question,” Boyer’s inaction stems from the danger of tying creativity and self-worth to the public and media validation:

I believe this prize-winning novelist believed that the mind had two places, the conscious and subconscious, and that literature could only come out of the subconscious mind, but that language preferred to live in the conscious one. This is wrong. Language prefers to live on the Internet [11: p. 16].

She is lamenting prize-harvesting writers who compete to present their intimate details and confessions to be material for the internet and public consumption. Rather, they reduce writings to a mere performance of the neoliberal profits. Media platforms are used to lure its readers/consumers to cooperate with the codes, accumulating more data for extraction and surveillance. Ironically, rather than benefiting the consumers themselves, these platforms improve marketing sales and advertisements [24]. Boyer confirms that writing, which replicates the discourse of media platforms, does not stem from the unconscious; rather it responds well to the rewards, such as digital likes, signs of appreciation, and compliments.

In *The Transparency Society* (2015), Han states that “the general consensus of the society of positivity is ‘Like.’ It is telling that Facebook has consistently refused to introduce a ‘Dislike’ button. The society of positivity avoids negativity in all forms because negativity makes communication stall” [25: p. 7]. Boyer confirms that writers, such as “the prize-winning novelist” strive to follow the neoliberal logic of daily works, claiming that he maintains experimenting the unconscious, however, he keeps daily writings so as not to be forgotten or left behind. In his eighth lecture as Oxford Professor of Poetry, Geoffery Hill ironically states that artists respond to “the habit of thought” that claims “in order to survive an age of commodity, the art of

poetry must itself become a form of commodity.” He warns against the “standardizing” poetics and describes such a commodified poetry as “a vehicle of entertainment,” recommending that poets should concentrate on creating intensely crafted poems [26].

Contrary to that media-driven poet, Boyer’s “The Innocent Question” rightly demonstrates daydreaming as hallmark of individuation—the poets’ potentials of active imagination as Jung emphasized. Criticizing the digitalization of creativity, she recalls the emails with that “(a poet) friend” who asks for “a survey requesting information.” She portrays her way of response to that survey in dream-like poetics, imagining that the information she fills are turned into “three dimensional topographical map,” which then turned into a bowl with many colors. She realizes that the information she presents is her feelings, such as grief, sadness, and anger, and from which “a cluster of mountains [are] rising” [11: p. 3]. While she is trying to respond to a digital activity, the survey, Boyer’s active imagination takes her into another territory, dramatizing the performance of the productive psyche, where it can give forms to the invisible, assuring that feelings and emotions cannot be digitalized; rather, they have larger spatiotemporal dimensions. In this sense, Boyer confirms that the conventional literature written by the market-driven poet is more likely to be complicit, rather than an attitude of thoughtful and creative writings.

6. Against Transparency

In addition to playfulness, opacity is a hallmark of Boyer’s poetry. She disregards the transparent, straightforward language as being too formal, operational, and having no ambivalence that might open spaces for critical thinking. In her poem, “*Ma Vie en Bling: A Memoir*,” the French title of blinging or flashing is a playful ironic reflection of the traditional autobiographical anecdotes that contain a great deal of confession, proper for public consumption. The title is a conscious aesthetic strategy to create a linguistic distance between the writer and her narrative self, producing fragmentation and instability to deconstruct the presupposition of

transparent confession. The non-linearity of the title reveals Boyer’s theoretical keystone, where she rejects autobiographical writings that reproduce the discourse of power, which makes her “suffer like the tallest building in the world” [11: p. 55]. Instead of repeating the conventional bildungsroman tale, Boyer presents “unconventional memoir [and] improvises a transformation,” which turns her into “many things and people and forms and conditions that form her life” [14: p. 140]. She proposes that her memoir would not be institutionally welcomed and “the sequel should be burned” because they do not present a stable and empowered self. Rejecting to present a redemptive image of herself and her life, she realizes that there is “no joy, perhaps, among brutes and blockheads” [11: p. 55].

Boyer’s refusal of the transparency of writings is also confirmed in her poem “The Open Book,” in which she ridicules turning the poem into “personal account,” where the poet is required to confess personal details as a sign of transparent realism in accordance with public consumption. The writer Jess Cotton (2015) declares that Boyer’s *Garments Against Women* expresses “an implicit refusal of the kinds of transparency on which the contemporary political economy rests” [27]. With the proliferation of social media investments, the autobiographical writings generate more profits by offering juicy material for “Facebook comment.” Boyer confronts digital forms of personal account as a highly demanded commodity on the literary market. Boyer consciously mocks the conventional memoir writings, which redefine the poem as a “personal account” and expose the mechanisms of confession in digital culture. “The Open Book” demonstrates Boyer’s striking theoretical records against the neoliberal demands of transparency, assuring that it has been introduced as a natural social ethics “among humans in human relationships like children to their parents, of a husband to his wife, or a friend to a friend” [11: p. 35]. However, transparency and personal account are increasingly attached to a neoliberal logic that targets individuals in terms of mass-surveillance and public consumption. Moreover, Boyer’s reference to

“accounting, is restricted to its economic meaning,” where the poet tells “a *profitable* story” [14: p. 140], emphasizing that transparency is a declaration of the poet’s loyalty to the literary institution, which demands that the poem becomes a promotional space of the literary economy. Boyer writes:

She is accounting transparently because there is a larger body which claims to know her heart [as] desiring profit, a heart which reflects [...] the fundamental desire of the larger body, too. [...] or perhaps she has been convinced that to keep a clear and open record will be to be her benefit. Or, if she is not convinced this is to her benefit, she has been convinced she has no choice but to act in accord. [...] what one does when one has nothing to hide. Yet this is not “nothing to hide”: it is “something to show”—a performance, for the order of business, [it] is the naturalness of the larger body’s desires. [11: pp. 34-35]

The poem’s long, twisting, and playful sentences mock the transparent mode of writings and interrogate accounting in terms of “a book-keeperly, transparent account” [11: p. 34]. The repeated “or” is a ridiculed representation of free-will, aligned with playful rhetoric of hesitancy and confusion to subvert the neoliberal claim of freedom and personal autonomy, which renders people free among predetermined options. Boyer criticizes the personal account for transforming subjective experience into a standardized confessional formula that demands revelation as transparent structure to be easily categorized, reducing human experience to measurable data. These autobiographical tales are tools of power that demand the self be available and verifiable. For Boyer, the personal narrative strips experience of its ethical complexity. Thus, she rejects “a bookkeeperly transparency ... to protect the multiplicity of what really want,” and instead, endorses poetic opacity of her personal narratives as a form of creative resistance against the estranging effects of the capital. Moreover, Boyer’s emphasis of “nothing to hide” echoes the neoliberal discourse that encourages visibility for more commodification and public consumption. Yet, she argues that this is also

not satisfying for the capitalist plea. The “nothing to hide” entails a performance of “something to show,” where the personal account should be made transparent. The writer, referred to in “The Open Book” is required to perform visibility to prove the passionate dedication to the “larger body.” This is the good role model of Han’s achievement subject, whose account is open and transparent, whose conducts can be traced on social media, and whose desires and preferences are clearly expressed. By virtue of these neoliberal impulses, the subject will be clearly visible, knowable, and eventually programable. However, Boyer’s rhetoric is a counter-discourse to the demands of a system that objectifies people and turns their struggle into accessible data.

Similarly, in *The Transparency Society* (2015), Han criticizes transparency, which “flattens out the human being itself, making it a functional element within a system [25: p. 3]. Transparency deprives human from the innate process of thinking and its generative power of negativity that goes against the demands of complicity [25]. Wherever information is available, accessible, and easy to obtain, the social system switches from trust to control. In her nonfiction book, *Undying* (2019), Boyer posits that “visibility does not reliably change the relations of power to who or what is visible, except insofar as visible preys are easier to hurt” [28: p. 159]. She diagnoses people’s obsession with visibility as a personal and social disease, which exhausts individuals and only profits those in power.

However, Boyer’s “The Open Book” is a pun of double meaning. It first scorns transparency that “makes everyone ... an ‘open book,’[inescapable] of the system’s gaze.” Second, the poem’s confused and twisted style opens it for contemplation and interpretation, the kind of writings Boyer advocates [14: p. 140]. In *Non-things* (2022), Han, reflects upon the nature of the poem as an artistic concrete entity, “a thing,” the poem is like the body that needs a “skin” so as not to be pornographic—easily accessed and consumed. He asserts that:

A poem, ... resists the kind of reading that consumes sense and emotion, as in the case of

crime stories or cheap novels. Such reading is looking for something to be uncovered. It is pornographic. A poem, by contrast, resists providing any kind of [...] consumption. Pornographic reading is opposed to an *erotic reading* that *lingers* with the text as a body, as a thing. Poems don't sit well with our pornographic and consumerist age. [italics is original] [29, p. 66]

Han further cites the French theorist Roland Barthes, who differentiates between two kinds of texts. The first is the “text of pleasure” or “plaisir,” which the reader can easily figure out its contents, and it “comes from culture and does not break with it, is linked to a *comfortable* practice of reading.” Whereas the second, is the “text of bliss” or “jouissance,” a writerly text that is open for interpretation and makes the reading process an act of desiring. It reflects “a state of loss, the text that discomforts (perhaps to the point of a certain boredom), unsettles the reader’s historical, cultural, psychological assumptions, the consistency of his tastes, values, memories” [30: p. 14]. Boyer’s writings, as represented in “The Open Book” denotes Barthean “text of bliss” that attracts the attention of the readers and unsettles their preconceived ideologies.

Significantly, Alexander Bell, in her PhD thesis, *Constraint in Contemporary Poetry* (2020), states that the implication Boyer would like to confirm, is the indispensability of constraints in poetic art, specifically with the contemporary neoliberal strategies that give deceptive version of individual’s freedom. Thus, Boyer interacts “the aesthetic value of formal restrictions of poetic form” with “broader social constraints,” believing that poetic constraints would be the only sufficient replication of the social constraints that people undergo. Bell further ensures that Boyer’s innovative poetic constraints are neither to be compared to the conservative formalism against the innate value of traditional poetics, nor holding the fears of the language poets, who claim “that poetry might rescind the ideology of the aesthetic and achieve freedom in the readerly co-production of meaning” [31: p. 8]. Rather, Boyer refuses the

“constrainingly unconstrained literature of Capital,” typified by the neoliberal condition of “abundance.” [11: p. 12]. She counters the abundance of productivity, self-optimization, and mandatory happiness with an alternative abundance, shaped by craftsmanship, calling for more poetic constraints that surpass emotional readability and narrative resolution. Boyer practices the assertion that beyond conventionality, craftsmanship “evokes intellectual stimulation rather than emotional sentiment” [32, p. 314].

Meditating on the very period of writing *Garments Against Women*, Boyer says that “much of this book was written during periods of refusal—refusal of the blogs, times I’d turn off the internet, refusal of poetry’s available socialites and structures. I wanted to figure out some way to live as something more than information” [Boyer as cited in 17]. Her poetics of negativity eludes the capitalist appeals of transparency as she states: “I am writing to you in a long paragraph so that I will not be pornography” [11: p. 12]. By refusing a conventional, unified, and seamless literary productivity and embracing the fragment, the hesitation, and the pause, Boyer emancipates her writings, heals her psyche, and exposes the affective peal demanded by the neoliberal command of self-optimization.

7. Conclusion

A close reading of Anne Boyer’s *Garments Against Women* helps to understand her rejection of writings under the neoliberal logic of literary commodification and the achievement culture. She presents lyrical essays and prose poems as conceptual tools that document the contemporary power dynamics, which overlap freedom with ever-lasting compulsions of production, visibility, and self-glorification. Byung-Chul Han diagnoses these dynamics as the psychopolitical mechanization of power that renders people voluntarily and positively exploit themselves.

In foregrounding the potentials of negativity and suspending writings that follow the neoliberal false consciousness, Boyer emancipates her poetry from the fallacies of neoliberalism. In *Garments Against*

Women, she evokes spaces for imagination, contemplation, and sincere observation to testify the incisive commentary on the human conditions under the unjust strategies of neoliberal capitalism. Boyer's negativity creates a mode of speaking to prove that poetry has the potential 'yes' to a form of writings that remain opaque, open, and shadowy, regardless of the logic of achieving and marketing.

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