

A Hunter May Look and Despair. Joanna Newsom's Divers: A Deconstruction of Human Existence and Time

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Resumen

Durante el cursado en las materias del área de Literatura, y a lo largo del desempeño profesional del profesor de lengua extranjera, se estudia obras del canon literario desde diferentes perspectivas críticas. Este trabajo, hecho en el marco del Seminario de Investigación Literaria, se propone utilizar las mismas herramientas sobre un objeto de estudio poco convencional: las letras de las canciones de un álbum, entendidas como un ciclo de poesías. Este es un ejercicio muy importante para el uso del juicio crítico en general, y en nuestra profesión en particular, en vista de dinamizar la aplicación de los contenidos disciplinares.

La obra de Joanna Newsom ha recibido un tratamiento polarizante: desde los medios, se observa su tendencia al vocabulario complejo y se le tacha de música folk alternativa de carácter caprichoso, mientras que los sus seguidores se han dedicado a desmenuzar exhaustivamente las letras. Siendo que no me había sido posible encontrar respuestas más completas o académicas sobre la obra ni sobre el disco *Divers* específicamente, es que propuse este proyecto. Los objetivos del mismo incluyen: ganar entendimiento más profundo sobre los temas en la obra, revelar el diálogo entre las canciones que la componen y que profundiza sus temas, valorizar el trabajo de la autora a través del análisis serio y completo de la obra y mostrar la productividad de las nociones y teorías elegidas para el análisis de la obra, muy por fuera del canon literario. El marco de análisis más amplio aborda al disco en tanto un ciclo de poemas desde la deconstrucción de los conceptos de existencia y tiempo, en términos de la dicotomía trascendencia/olvido.

Además, cada poema de acuerdo a sus particularidades es tratado desde otras perspectivas críticas como el feminismo, el postcolonialismo y la intertextualidad, apoyándose en análisis crítico del discurso. Dadas las limitaciones del Seminario, este trabajo aborda cinco de las doce piezas del disco, desde lo que he llamado “eje vertical” (cada poema) y el “eje horizontal” (el diálogo entre los poemas).

Escapa a este trabajo agotar los temas en la obra; sin embargo, hay confirmación sobre las hipótesis planteadas sobre su estructura y sus preocupaciones, y la multiplicidad de significados que se pueden encontrar es un aspecto clave de la perspectiva deconstructiva elegida. Asimismo, el hecho de que ninguno de estos significados sea la respuesta última cuadra muy bien con *Divers*, una obra que, en su naturaleza cíclica, se resiste a su cierre y requiere un posicionamiento activo de la audiencia.

Palabras clave: Análisis literario, *Divers*, Joanna Newsom, análisis crítico del discurso, deconstrucción, feminismo, postcolonialismo, intertextualidad

Abstract

During our coursework in Literature, and throughout the professional career of foreign language teachers, works from the literary canon are studied from different critical perspectives. This work, carried out in the context of the Literary Research Seminar, proposes to use the same tools on an unconventional object of study: the lyrics of songs from an album, understood as a poetry cycle. This is a very important exercise in the using of critical thinking in general, and in our profession in particular, in order to mobilise the application of disciplinary content.

Joanna Newsom's work has received polarizing treatment: in the media, her tendency towards complex vocabulary is noted and she is labeled as

whimsical alternative folk musician, while her followers have dedicated themselves to exhaustively dissecting the lyrics. Since I have been unable to find more complete or scholarly answers about her work, or about the album *Divers* specifically, I proposed this project. The objectives of this study include: gaining a deeper understanding of the work's themes; revealing the dialogue between the songs that it comprises, which deepens its themes; valuing the author's work through a serious and comprehensive analysis of the work; and demonstrating the productivity of the notions and theories chosen for the analysis of the work, which are far outside the literary canon.

The broader analytical framework approaches the album as a cycle of poems from the deconstruction of the concepts of existence and time, in terms of the transcendence/forgetting dichotomy. Furthermore, each poem, according to its characteristics, is addressed from other critical perspectives such as feminism, postcolonialism, and intertextuality, supported by critical discourse analysis. Given the limitations of the Seminar, this work addresses five of the twelve pieces on the album, from what I have called the "vertical axis" (each poem) and the "horizontal axis" (the dialogue between the poems).

It is beyond the scope of this study to exhaustively examine the themes in the work; however, there is confirmation of the hypotheses raised about its structure and concerns, and the multiplicity of meanings that can be found is a key aspect of the chosen deconstructive perspective. Likewise, the fact that none of these meanings is the ultimate answer fits well with *Divers*, a work that, in its cyclical nature, resists closure and requires an active positioning from the audience.

Key words: Literary analysis, *Divers*, Joanna Newsom, critical discourse analysis, deconstruction, feminism, postcolonialism, intetextuality.

Introduction

I listened to *Divers*, Joanna Newsom's latest album, for the first time during 2018 winter holidays. And then I listened to it again, and again, and again. As I grew more and more interested in it, I began to wonder at what lies at the heart of this work. I could access some through a feminist lens, other through a post-colonial one, yet others were heavy with intertextuality or philosophical concepts. My intuitions were somewhat confirmed when I read the *Rolling Stone* interview to Joanna Newsom, in which she claims that one of the album's concerns is "the question of what's available to us as part of the human experience that isn't subject to the sovereignty of time".

I grew certain that the driving force behind *Divers* could be explained in terms of a dichotomy regarding the effect of Time on human existence: oblivion/transcendence; and I hurried to write it down on my whiteboard. A pattern seemed to emerge, with songs leaning more heavily on oblivion clustered together and others leaning more heavily on transcendence grouped together as well. But there was more. I could see that, being *Divers* a postmodern work, this dichotomy was unstable—the work was already a deconstruction of Time. There seemed to be a chiasm at the middle of the album, in the song "The Things I Say", which plays its last lyrics backwards. On the first side of the chiasm the privileged term of the dichotomy is oblivion, whereas on the second it is transcendence. However, the initial line I drew was inaccurate: the possibility of looping the record makes time circular rather than linear and subverts both oblivion and transcendence.

To reduce the scope of my analysis I will deal with four songs out of the twelve in *Divers*, which I believe offer clear evidence to my claims. Of course, each song is a different iteration of the same concern, in the author's words: "I will say that there's a thematic core of the album—every song on the record is

asking some version of the same question.” A line of analysis, then, is what I call the vertical axis; that is, each song individually with its own set of meanings, references, theoretical concerns and alignment in the Oblivion/Transcendence axis. There is also a horizontal axis: the one that considers what happens with the binary pair in *Divers*, all the songs together. I will be dealing with this at the end of each song analysis and finally bring it together in the conclusion.

This investigation relies heavily on discourse analysis and interdiscursivity, to analyse the textual evidence. The work includes plenty of reference and the interaction with it enriches our understanding of the ideas at play. Additionally, other sets of critical theory will be used within the vertical axis when they are necessary.

Background

Joanna Newsome was born in Nevada City, California on January 18, 1982. Having been classically trained as a harpist in her youth, Newsom is a multi-instrumentalist, singer-songwriter and actress. After high school, she studied composition and creative writing at Mills College. She dropped out in order to focus on her music, and returned to live with family in Nevada City. Newsom recorded and released many albums with the independent label Drag City. She has claimed that she is fortunate that the label gives her complete creative freedom and does not constrain her work. Her latest album to date, *Divers* (2015), will be our object of analysis.

Despite her talents as a musician, songwriter, and performer, Joanna Newsome has inspired divided reactions. On the one hand, she has always been acclaimed by the critics. The “delvers” — the name Newsom gives to her most ardent fans, owing to their obsessive practice of “delving” into her work in search of meaning — are many, as are the listeners who, for instance,

cannot get past Newsom's singing voice, or are intimidated by Newsom's immense vocabulary and wordplay.

Additionally, there seems to be a gender bias concerning the criticism of Newsom's work. She has routinely been described using gender-coded and dismissive adjectives, such as "whimsical"; "childlike" or "precious." Newsom herself has noted this: In 2010, she recalled to *The New York Times* the press' descriptions of one of her male colleagues within the so-called "freak folk" scene. Newsom said, "When people would put me and Devendra Banhart in the same sentence, they were coding his eccentricities as world-weary and 'witchy' and coding my eccentricities as childlike and naïve. I felt like it minimized my intelligence."

In an interview with *The Guardian* she described her relief upon discovering Blessing All The Birds, a blog devoted to feminist interpretations of her work, which also identifies examples of gender bias against Newsom on the part of critics. "It was kind of a tonic to read it and know I'm not an insane person," Newsom told the Guardian. "It was rounding up examples and pointing out the sexist shit people continuously write." This blog, by doctor and teacher of ancient Greek and Latin literature Melissa Marturano and English Teacher Rachel Parenthas guided some of the queries that were later reconverted into my analyses.

This work is, then, first and foremost, a "delver"'s tackle on *Divers*. But also, it is a feminist attempt to give Joanna Newsom's work the serious analysis it has been denied by many critics, and as such, it is deeply indebted in the spirit and the work of the *Blessing All the Birds* blog.

Analysis

Sapokanikan

1 The cause is Ozymandian The map of Sappokanikan Issanded and bevelled The land lone and levelled 5 By some unrecorded and powerful hand Which plays along the monument And drums upon a plastic bag The brave-men-and-women-so-dear-to-God- And-famous-to-all-of-the-ages rag 10 Sing: Do you love me? Will you remember? The snow falls above me The renderer renders: The event is in the hand of God 15 Beneath a patch of grass, her Bones the old Dutch master hid While elsewhere Tobias And the angel disguise What the scholars surmise was a mother and kid 20 Interred with other daughters In dirt in other potter's fields Above them, parades Mark the passing of days Through parks where pale colonnade arch in marble and Steel Where all of the twenty-thousand 25 attending your footfall And the cause that they died for are lost in the idling bird calls And the records they left are cryptic & best Lost in obsolescence The text will not yield, nor x-ray reveal 30 With any fluorescence Where the hand of the master begins an ends	I fell, I tried to do well but I won't be Will you tell the one that I loved to remember and hold me I call and call for the doctor But the snow swallows me whole with ol' Florry 35 Walker And the event lives only in print He said: It's alright, and it's all over now And boarded the plane 40 His belt unfastened The boy was known to show unusual daring And, called a "boy" This alderman, confounding Tammany Hall In whose employ King Tammany himself preceded John's fall 45 So we all raise a standard To which the wise and honest soul may repair To which a hunter A hundred years from now, may look and despair And see with wonder 50 The tributes we have left to rust in the park Swearing that our hair stood on end To see John Purroy Mitchel depart For the Western Front Where work might count 55 All exeunt! All go out! Await the hunter, to decipher the stone (and what lies under, now) The city is gone Look and despair 60 Look and despair
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What *Sapokanikan* presents us with is a palimpsest of New York city. Varying images corresponding to different times in history, with apparently not much in common save geography, are superimposed onto one another. It has been pointed out that this particular piece was the result of Newsom's readings around on subjects from American history to the Romantics. (Lewis, 2015)

I believe that there is a fruitful analysis of this song to be done in the light of a deconstructive approach and with the aid of discourse analysis. Let us bear in mind that in the introduction to this work I have proposed an analysis based on the BINARY OPPOSITION: Oblivion / Transcendence. Then, we shall tackle the question: *What has transcended the passing of time, and what has been erased, especially from the history of New York City?*

I would like to start by analysing the instantial antonymy of two sets of lexical chains—"oblivion" and "transcendence"—in the verses which correspond to the binary pair that, I consider, organises the work. The people referred by name, and those whose remains may still be clearly found today, are grouped into the semantic field "Transcendence". This is so because their existence has surpassed the time-frame of their own lives by either being remembered or leaving traces behind. The people that are not mentioned by name, and the places and remains connected to them, or the people of whom there are no remains left are grouped into the semantic field "Oblivion".

When instances of constitutive intertextuality are recognised, the elements emerging will be taken into consideration within these chains. It is interesting to notice that intertextuality to other works, be their titles or quotations, are not marked with punctuation or fonts in the booklet—and are impossible to mark in the performative aspect of music—and therefore are lost to those who do not know about them, or do not remember them. This works well within the themes of OBLIVION in the song and the album.

“Oblivion”:

- “all of the twenty-thousand (line 25)”: this phrase refers to the estimated dead through the first decades of the 1800s in the outbreaks of cholera and yellow fever, who may be about as much as 20,000. They are buried in a...

- “potter's field (line 20)”: this phrase refers to a burial ground, now Washington Square Park.

- “records... cryptic... lost in obsolescence” (line 27-28).

There is a sub-chain connected to the oblivion of the Lenape people, who lived in what we now call New York:

- “Sapokanikan” (line 2): this refers to the Lenape settlement of which there are no remains because it’s “sanded and bevelled, the land lone and levelled” (lines 3, 4)

- The owner of “her bones” (line 16), “daughters” (line 20), “a mother and kid” (line 19): These may allude to the Lenape people, Lenape *women* in fact, who have been killed by the European settlers.

Through heteroglossia, there are other possible interpretations of these items, in a sub-set connected with subjects of art later obliterated from it:

RELATED to Vincent Van Gogh's PATCH of GRASS:

- “her bones” (line 16), may be a Dutch peasant woman's, subject of a portrait by...

- “the old Dutch master” (line 16): Vincent Van Gogh, who repainted—“the hand of the master” (line 31)—the canvas into..

- “patch of grass” (line 15): a painting.

“Transcendence”:

- Ozymandias— a Greek name for Ramesses II, the third pharaoh of the XIXth Dynasty of Egypt, and often regarded as the greatest pharaoh of the Egyptian Empire. This element is referenced multiple times, although obliquely through the word...

-“Ozymandian”(line 1);

-through intertextuality:

-“Look and despair” (x2) (lines 59, 60)—Percy Bysshe Shelley’s 1818 poem Ozymandias: ‘My name is Ozymandias, king of kings:

Look on my works, ye Mighty, and despair!’

-“unrecorded and powerful hand” (line 5), “a hunter... with wonder” (lines 47-49), “The city is gone (line 58)” —Horace Smith’s 1818 poem Ozymandias.

- “King Tammaned” (line 44): referring to the chief of the Lenape who, according to tradition, received William Penn to America in 1682 and was an ally to him.

It will be later analysed how this antonymy works on the subversion of the binary pair oblivion/transcendence within the frame of Postcolonial criticism.

Other items in the “transcendence” sematic field:

- “brave-men-and-women-so-dear-to-God-and-famous-to-all-of-the-ages” (lines 8-9)—refers to John Milton through intertextuality with his *Tractate of Education* (1644), This item is placed within the “transcendence” chain because Milton’s words continue to play its “rag” (line 9) today, which is underlined by the use of present tenses “plays”(line 6) and “drums”(line 7)

- “pale colonnades arch in marble and steel” (line 24), “So we all raise a standard to which the wise and honest soul may repair” (lines 45, 46), “The

event is in the hand of God" (line 14)- These elements refer to George Washington. Washington Square Arch, the marble triumphal arch built in Washington Square Park in 1892 to mark the centennial of George Washington's inauguration as US President, bears the inscription 'Let us raise a standard to which the wise and the honest can repair. The event is in the hand of God.' – words from a speech Washington gave at the opening of the Constitutional Convention of 1787.

- "He" (line 37), "his" (line 40), "a boy" (line 41), "a "boy" " (line 42), "alderman" (line 43), "John" (line 44), all co-referential to "John Purroy Mitchel" (line 52): politician, mayor of New York, died in WWI, has a...
- "monument (line 5)" in Central Park.

Deconstruction

No sooner have we reached this point in our analysis that the binary pair starts to deconstruct itself. The aim of deconstruction is to show how hierarchies are ideological and unstable. At this point in *Sapokanikan* we can see how those holding a privileged position of TRANSCENDANCE promptly lose it. Let us look at this last term:

- "The tributes we have left to rust in the park" (line 50): a superordinate term to George Washington's "pale colonnades arch in marble and steel" (line 24), and John Purroy Mitchel's "monument (line 5)". Both George "Washington" and "Mitchel" are co-hyponyms to "patriots" (in Milton's text), or ""brave-men-and-women-so-dear-to-God-and-famous-to-all-of-the-ages" (lines 8-9) in *Sapokanikan*.

However, "The tributes we have left to rust in the park" (line 50) stands in a relation of instantial synonymy with the Ozymandian city. Both are subject to decay and ultimately, oblivion, as the monuments "rust" and the Egyptian

empire has become an “annihilated place” in Smith’s poem. From a metaperspective, even the intertextuality that clarifies these meanings is probably, eventually, lost and the text becomes “cryptic at best, lost in obsolescence” (lines 27-28). Ramses II himself, renamed Ozymandias, survives only in broken stones in museums, the word “Ozymandian” in the English language and some poems about his downfall and disappearance.

It emerges then that it is impossible to conquer a lasting existence that transcends time through power, fame or status, i.e, through patriotism as Milton stated it in the quotation referenced, in short. Therefore, it seems no coincidence that the “transcendental” term most prominently featured (with 7 instances) is “John Purroy Mitchel”. The real life person’s biography, and his metaphorical and literal fall illustrates the futility of such pursuit.

John Purroy Mitchel, the “boy Mayor”, was a reformist politician. He worked as an alderman and then city’s Mayor but, after failing to be reelected as mayor of New York in 1917, trained as a flying cadet and went on to fight in WWI. He died in training, as he fell from his plane because of an unfastened seatbelt. These events are referenced in *Sapokanikan* in the following lines:

- “It’s all over now / and boarded the plane/ his belt unfastened / the boy was known to show unusual daring” (lines 37-41): this can either refer to the moment when Mitchel started the fatal training or when he left the USA. This is also referenced in the next point,

- “to see John Purroy Mitchel depart / for Western Front / where our work might count” (lines 52-54): It’s interesting to notice that the element of seeking transcendence is present here in line 54; “work might count” because it furthers the patriotic campaign, but also on a personal level, because of the personal honour and glory of the war adventure. Both ideas are present in Western ideology and are very much present in media.

To sum up, John Purroy Mitchel metaphorically falls, first from his tenure as a Mayor, and then as a war hero, because he could not come home victorious and did not valiantly die in battle either, but ludicrously out of his own folly in training. That is his literal fall, of course. And then, as his deeds become more distant in time and more obscure, he will fade from memory and fall from his transcendental patriot status as well.

Postcolonial and feminist approach

If we go back to “King Tammend”, the postcolonial perspective will shed some more light on the deconstruction of the binary pair oblivion/transcendence. How come *he*, the Other, the *Lenape* leader, is in the “Transcendence” chain and how does it interact with the subversion we have pointed out so far?

One of the concerns of postcolonial criticism points to the erasure of the native, non-white subjects. This is the case of the unnamed *Lenape* women, but also the social inferiors buried in common grounds, and even the Dutch peasant women portrayed by Van Gogh, all of them listed in the lexical chain “oblivion”, who can be grouped together as Spivak’s *subalterns*. We should not fail to notice the overlapping between the action of erasing and the concept of gender. By far most of the subjects erased are female.

Similarly, we could consider the interplay between class and gender. The 20,000—probably both men and women—buried in the potter’s field are members of a low social class, and their burial grounds are unceremoniously repurposed and the fact that they are there, barely acknowledged. We can think that, whereas Titian’s daughter and grandchild and Florry Walker are erased because they are women, the subject of Van Gogh’s portrait suffers a double erasure.

And even if Van Gogh is well-known now, he died in poverty and his work was not valued, or purchased, during his lifetime. The fact that he repainted around a third of his canvases out of economic duress can be understood as the erasure of his authorial intent and personal pursuits and interests, the erasure of his identity, as well as that of the subject portrayed.

So far we have accounted for all of those obliterated, yet still one question remains: *being male and powerful, why is King Tammaned not erased as well?*

The answer, as Lois Tyson (2006) puts it, is probably in the problem of “finding ways to think, speak, and create that are not dominated by the ideology of the oppressor.” The figure of King Tammaned has been appropriated and re-imagined by the American patriots and distorted to help maintain the colonial ideology. He has been made to say that the settlers are friends and has acquired mythical proportions to the point of being made patron saint of America. As such, he has been used to name the Tammany Hall, an anti-British patriotic group, (which, it turns out, was opposed by reformist John Purroy Mitchel). There is not a shred of anticolonialist resistance to be summoned from this powerful figure. A Joanna Newsom puts it in *Sapokanikan*: “Tammany Hall, in whose employ King Tammaned himself preceded John’s fall” (lines 43-44). The existence of such a society is Tammaned’s fall. As a leader of the Lenape people, being used to promote their oppressors erases his identity and allegiance--erases his Self, completely. The historical real-life Tammaned is probably buried as deep as the unnamed woman whose hidden bones are the only feature we know of. But, what is more, even the colonialist construct has disappeared: The Tammaned society has effectively ceased to exist in the XXth century, and as all the other patriots and their artifacts, King Tammaned will eventually also fall victim of Time.

Overview

Because of its pre-eminence in the text, I suggest that in this song “oblivion” is the predominant element of the binary pair oblivion/transcendence. Considering various power struggles, some subjects are swiftly erased: women, low class individuals and native peoples. Male, usually white, powerful figures manage to transcend the passing of time because of the power and status they have acquired, especially in colonial, patriotic pursuits. However, this is subverted insofar as the passing of time will annihilate them eventually as well, as their legacy becomes obscure and obsolete.

I am left wonder at what the role of personal relations is, and if the love between people has a chance to transcend time or if it will be erased as well. Is there a point to the plea to the loved one “Will you remember?”? What has happened, for instance, to the “mother and kid”—whoever they might be—, or the devotion of Van Gogh to the working-class people? If time is indeed an arrow that only moves forward, they will surely fall victims to it as well. However, if time has a different structure, as I would like to argue within the larger context of *Divers*, there might be more to say about this.

3.2 WALTZ OF THE 101ST LIGHTBORNE

I believed they had got what they	3	(But I saw the Bering Strait and the Golden
came for;	0	Gate
I believed our peril was done		In silent suspension of their golden age!
On the eve of the last of the Great		And you can barely tell, if I guard it well
Wars		Where I have been, and seen
After three we had narrowly won		Pristine, unfelled.)
5 (But the fourth		
It was carelessly done.)		
	3	
	5	I had a dream that I walked in the garden
I saw his ship in its whistling		Of Chabot, and those telescope ruins
ascension		It was there that I called to my true love
As they launched from the Capitol		Who was pale as millennial moons
seat—		Honey, where did you come by that wound?
Swear I saw our mistake		
1		
0 When the clouds draped like a flag		
Across the backs of the fleet		

	4		
Of the Hundred-First Lightborne Elite	0	When I woke, he was gone	
As the day is long		And the War had begun	
So the well runs dry		In eternal return and repeat	
		Calling, Where in the hell are the rest of	
		your fellow	
1		One Hundred-One Lightborne Elite?	
5			
And we came to see Time is taller			
	4	Stormed in the New Highland Light	
ThanSpaceiswide	5	Infantry	
And we bade goodbye			
Tothe Great Divide:		Make it stop, my love!	
Found		We were wrong to try	
unlimited simulacreage to colonize!		Never saw what we could unravel	
2			
But there was a time we were lashed		In traveling light	
0			
to the prow			
	5	Nor how the trip debrides–	
Of a ship you may board, but not steer	0	Like a stack of slides!	
Before You and I ceased to mean Now		All we saw was that Time is taller than	
		Space is wide	
And began to mean only Right Here			
(to mean Inches and Miles, but not			
Years);			
2			
5			
Before Space has a taste of its limits		That's why we are bound to a round desert	
		island	
And a new sort of coordinate awoke		'neath the sky where our sailors have gone	
Making Time just another poor tenant:		Have they drowned, in those windy	
Bearing weight, taking fire, trading	5	highlands?	
smokes	5		
In the war between us and our ghosts		Highlandsaway, my John	

Waltz of the 101st Lingtborn

A genre consideration

I would like to start the analysis of this song with some interdiscursive considerations as regards genre. It is worthwhile to point out that “Waltz of the 101st Lightborne” contains elements of science fiction, and it is probably the only instance in Newsom’s oeuvre presenting such characteristics. I think there are interesting conclusions to be drawn from pondering over the significance of this choice.

Science fiction is generally defined as a form of fiction that deals with the impact of actual or imagined science upon society or individuals. At this point we may draw the reader's attention to some features that allow us to state that "Waltz.." is science fiction: (a) It is set in a distant future, after or during World War IV (lines 3-6); (b) It involves a socio-political phenomenon—a colonization effort; (c) the colonisation enterprise is conducted through the widespread, weaponized use of time-travelling technology (lines 20-28).

Why should Joanna Newsom write a science fiction piece? How does interdiscursivity enrich this particular piece? To answer that question, I would like to bring into the discussion the acclaimed science fiction author Ursula K. Le Guin and her preface to *The Left Hand of Darkness*. According to her, science fiction encompasses thought experiments:

(...) If you like you can read it, and a lot of other science fiction, as a thought-experiment. Let's say (says Mary Shelley) that a young doctor creates a human being in his laboratory; let's say (says Philip K. Dick) that the Allies lost the second world war; let's say this or that is such and so, and see what happens (...) The purpose of a thought-experiment, as the term was used by Schrodinger and other physicists, is not to predict the future—indeed Schrodinger's most famous thought-experiment goes to show that the "future," on the quantum level, cannot be predicted—but to describe reality, the present world. Science fiction is not predictive; it is descriptive.

In our case, we might wonder what the thought experiment at work in "Waltz..." is. The core idea in "Sapokanikan" may be put as: *No matter how powerful or rich you become, ultimately time will conquer you and obliterate any trace of your existence*. I would like to analyse "Waltz" in terms of the following thought experiment: *Let us say we become powerful enough to conquer Time itself*.

Of course, the task of manipulating Time at will goes beyond the capabilities of present –time technology and has been a popular topic in science fiction for a long time. In our case, any conclusions we may draw from the analysis of the futuristic society depicted in “Waltz...” will stand in a metaphoric relation to our present society. So in exploring the proposition *Let us say we become powerful enough to conquer Time itself*, Joanna Newsom raises the stakes and seeks to answer the question: *Is it possible to achieve a transcendent existence by means of becoming ever more powerful? Is it that those who came before us were obliterated because they were not powerful enough?*

Textual analysis: Transcendence / Oblivion

It is interesting to notice that the time-travelling colonization enterprise is spoken of in terms of *shipwreck*. There is a lexical chain related to “sea exploration”, comprised of the elements “ship” x2 (lines 7, 21), “fleet” (line 11), “prow” (line 21), “sailors” (line 54) and “island” (line 53). What is more, the enterprise has resulted in the demise of those taking part of it:

- “clouds draped like a flag” (line 10) across “his ship” (line 7) and the rest of “the fleet / of the Hundred-First Lightborne Elite” (lines 11-12), evoking a similar image to that of the soldiers coffins covered by flags, which foretells the negative outcome of the enterprise.

- The “sailors” (line 54) that crew “the fleet / of the Hundred-First Lightborne Elite” (lines 11-12), including the narrator’s “true love” (line 37) are depicted as either: (a) mortally wounded: “pale as millennial moons/ Honey, where did you come by that wound?” (lines 38-39); (b) missing in action: Where in the hell are the rest of your fellow / One Hundred-One Lightborne Elite? (lines 43-44); (c) or dead: “Have they drowned” (line 55)

Interestingly, the latter term, “drowned”, alongside with “stormed” (line 45) both evoke tragedy at sea. “Stormed” is probably used in this context mainly

as “(of troops) suddenly attack and capture”, although it is ambiguous whether the 101st Lightborne are the attacked or the attackers; however, the reflected meaning of bad weather is activated as well.

Additionally, those who were left behind are stranded: “bound to a round desert island” (line 53), that is, planet Earth. What is more, the time-travelling colonization enterprise is qualified by negative terms in several instances: “carelessly done” (line 6), “our mistake” (line 9) “wrong” (line 47).

And yet there is another layer to the shipwreck: The intertextuality with the sea shanty (probably a remanent of an older, forgotten ballad) “Lowlands Away”, in which the narrator sings about their lover drowned at sea. As well as aligning this song with the maritime location because of the sea shanty genre, the connection with “Lowlands Away” in particular reinforces the theme of lost love and tragic death.

Therefore, to the questions we posed before—*Is it possible to achieve a transcendental existence by means of becoming ever more powerful? Is it that those who came before us have been obliterated because they were not powerful enough?*—we can say that the answer in “Waltz” is a forceful “no”. This shows that the position of “Waltz” within the wider frame of *Divers* as regards the binary opposition oblivion/transcendence privileges heavily the Oblivion term. However, not only did we arrive at this conclusion through a fairly superficial analysis. We may have to delve deeper and think of what “Waltz” incorporates to the wider frame of *Divers*. I would like to argue that those contributions pertain: (a) why the quest for power fails; and (b) hint at the role of intimate interpersonal dimension.

Why the quest for power fails: they are biting their own tails

One important first point to delve into is the identity of the colonisers and that of those colonized. The limits are blurred: The narrator’s use of first and

third person pronouns are not consistently used with neither colonisers or colonized, for instance:

- “I believed they had got what they came for / I believed our peril was done” (lines 1-2). The firstperson in-group seems to be the colonised, put at peril because “they” are the colonizers who come to extract resources.
- “And we (...) / Found unlimited simulacra to colonize!” (lines 15-19). The first person in-group develops time-travelling technology, discovers the possibility of colonising different points in time, and sets out to do so.
- Another instance of first person reference is in “the war between us and our ghosts” (line 29). In which the first person is found in both colonisers and colonised. By referring to the other group as “our ghosts”, the narrator implies that they share a striking resemblance or that their identity is the same, either a past or future form of themselves. There is further evidence for this notion: “the War had begun / in eternal return and repeat” (lines 41-42).

Eternal return or eternal recurrence is a conception of the universe that many ancient civilizations held, as well as the modern philosopher Friedrich Nietzsche. Its premise is that the cosmos, all existence, repeats itself an infinite number of times. Within this frame, colonisers and colonised are but one and the same. The narrator’s society found itself fighting a WW IV against other instances of themselves from other timelines or universes. The tragedy of the time-travelling colonization enterprise, as well as its failure, lies in the unity of the universe, all existence is one, and all violence directed towards others is ultimately directed against the self.

Affection and time

The narrative is framed from the point of view of a lover left behind on Earth addressing their long-lost partner, as we have pointed out above, in a sea

shanty fashion. At this point we may notice that towards the end of the song, the narrator refers to their lover as “my John” (line 56), which interacts dialogically in an interesting way with “John Purroy Mitchel”, from “Sapokanikan”, to the point that we may read them as co-referential: they are soldiers, who die in foreign lands, in Great War conflicts. Additionally, WWI, as well as the fictional WW IV, arise from the conflicting colonial expansionist interests of imperialist powers.

However, unlike his “Sapokanikan” counterpart, the John in “Waltz...” has not left memorials behind, but a lover mourning for him. There seems to be the argument that the only thing that transcends is the love between the narrator and their lover, an idea that may gain more evidence as we tackle other songs from the album. At any rate, the narrator remembers their lover and dreams of him and keeps the link between them alive.

Overview

“Waltz of the 101st Lightborne” privileges heavily Oblivion, as it seeks to illustrate how the pursuit of power is ultimately fruitless, time-travel notwithstanding. However, there is a possible deconstructive reversal of this in another form of time-subversion: loving memory. It is also worth noting that there are hints at a cosmovision that asserts the unity of all existence as it cycles or repeats itself, which will resurface in other songs in this album.

1	My life comes and goes	15	Each enclosed, anelectric and alone
	My life comes and goes		In our lives is a common sense
	Short flight, free rows:		That relies on the common fence
	I lie down and doze		That divides, and attends
5	My life came and went		Butprovidesscant defense
	My life came and went	20	From the Great Light that shine through a pin-hole

1 My life comes and goes Short flight; free descent Poor flight attendant But the sky, over the ocean! 1 0 And the ocean, skirting the city! And the city, bright as a garden (when the garden woke to meet me) From that height was a honeycomb Made of light from those funny homes, intersected:	15 Each enclosed, an electric and alone When the pin-light calls itself Selfhood And the Selfhood inverts on a mirror In an Amora Obscura 25 But it's mine. Or, at least, it's lent And my life, until the time is spent Is a pin-light, bent It's a pin-light, bent
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A pin-light, bent

Textual analysis

I would like to start the analysis of "A Pin-Light, Bent" bearing in mind the vertical intertextuality with Françoise Moreire's case. I will deal with it later, but first let it inform our textual analysis. On October 19 1962, Miss Moreire, a stewardess, was sucked out of the plane after an emergency door malfunctioned and she fell to her death. We can consider the narrator of "A Pin-Light, bent" to be the flight attendant, and this song to chronicle her inner monologue during the descent. There is a lexical chain connected to aviation that supports this idea ["flight" (lines 3, 7), "rows" (line 3), "descent" (line 7), "flight attendant" (line 8), "height" (line 13)].

The inner monologue starts accepting the narrator's imminent death in stanzas 1 and 2: "my life comes and goes" (lines 1, 2); "my life came and went" (lines 5, 6). Her life is short and will cease to be soon or has ceased to be. In the next lines, and because of its length, the narrator's life is likened to the literal domestic, short flight she's working in, but also likened to the literal free-falling descent she is experiencing, because of the speed with which her life meets its end. It is interesting to notice that the use of present simple in the first stanza conveys the idea of repeated action, indicating that living and

dying happens repeatedly, which falls in line with the ideas of eternal recurrence we have explored.

As the narrator turns her attention to the city, she begins to ponder on human existence. There is an extended metaphor connecting light and life. The first item in it is the simile “the city bright as a garden” (line 11). In the following line “garden” is giving the properties of “woke” and “meet” (+animate). This leads us to think that what the garden is full of is of living beings, which would be its “light”. The metaphor of life as light has many instances that support this claim. “The city” in turn, is not only full of electric lights that make it visible from above, but also it is full of humans, also living beings. Therefore, the city’s “brightness” would also be the amount of living beings in it, following the simile with the garden.

Then comes the idea of isolation, as each home is “alone” and “anelectric”, that is, unable to be electrically charged through friction with other objects. It is interesting to notice that if “light” is equated to life, then something “anelectric” is dead. The idea of isolation is expanded in the next stanza (lines 16, 17, 18) with the idea that the fence divides individuals. In this case, the literal meaning is of course at work, as the text has been addressing physical separation of homes. However, it also works as a metaphor for a metaphysical concept: the sense of self. Continuing with the extended metaphor of light as life, there is an interesting metaphor with a camera obscura in stanzas 5 and 6.

A camera obscura, or pin-hole image, is an optical phenomenon in which an image on the other side of a screen with a small opening is projected reversed and inverted on a surface opposite the opening. There is a play on words which blends the words “camera” and “amor” in “amora”, pointing to the role of love in the creating of subjectivity. It is a well-known fact that others have a key role in this process. I would like to mention Kristeva’s ideas on the topic as

expressed in the chapter "In Praise of Love", in *Tales of Love* (1987). We must consider that Lacan proposes the mirror stage of development in babies; at some point they come in front of a mirror or similar artifact and they see their full body and start to understand themselves as a unit separated from the rest. In an analogy with this, Kristeva posits that the object of our love acts like a mirror that allows us to grasp our Self: "(...) the Ego projects and glorifies itself, or else shatters into pieces and is engulfed, when it admires itself in the mirror of an idealized Other(...)" (1987:6). Newsom's "Amora Obscura" seems to bring these ideas together and into her metaphor of life as light, and identity as connected to love.

Memory and metatext: the feminist approach

As I have stated above, there is a vertical intertextual relation between "A Pin-Light, Bent" and "Falling" by James L. Dickey, as they both deal with the fate of Françoise Moreire. They both help her transcend through memory... or do they? The feminist lens shows that the treatment given to the flight attendant in the pieces is vastly different (objectifying/subjectifying), and this affects memory and consequently, the Transcendence of the real person Françoise Moreire, and the inclination in the Oblivion/ Transcendence axis of "A Pin-Light, Bent".

One first point of contrast between both poems is, precisely, point of view. In Newsom's work, the stewardess is the first person narrator, who in the harrowing moments prior to her death has a rich inner life and ponders on philosophical ideas, as we have just analysed. On the other hand, Dickey relegates her in his poem to a 3rd person position and is focused on her body, clothes (or lack of them) and effectively sexualizes her death.

Some instances to illustrate Dickey's treatment of the stewardess: "Still neat lipsticked stockinged girdled by regulation her hat", "and now, still

thousands of feet from her death she seems / To slow she develops interest she turns in her maneuverable body", "(...) lying in one after another of all the positions for love / Making dancing sleeping and now cloud wisps at her", "(...) then feet first her skirt stripped beautifully / Up her face in fear-scented cloths her legs deliriously bare then / Arms out she slow-rolls over steadies out waits for something great / To take control of her trembles near feathers", "and have enough time to kick off her one remaining / Shoe with the toes of the other foot to unhook her stockings / With calm fingers, noting how fatally easy it is to undress in midair / Near death when the body will assume without effort any position"

Dickey invites the reader to fantasise about the body of the beautiful stewardess, "lipsticked" and "stockinged" through many mentions of body parts. Additionally, he includes many instances describing her clothes falling off, and even she taking them off willingly, likening the free-fall towards her death to a strip-tease. There is also a lexical chain connected to "sex", including: "in bed", "all the positions of love making", "passing her hands all over her (...) body", "desired", "their loins filled with heart's blood", "hands (...) to find themselves", "she passes / Her palms over her long legs her small breasts and deeply between / Her thighs", "let her come".

We cannot help but refer to the concept of "male gaze". As outlined by Luce Irigaray in Tyson:

Patriarchal power is (...) in what many thinkers refer to as the male gaze: the man looks; the woman is looked at. And it is the one who looks who is in control, who holds the power to name things, the power to explain the world and so to rule the world. The one looked at—the woman—is merely an object to be seen. Thus, in a patriarchy, women are merely tokens, markers, commodities in a

male economy. (...) In short, patriarchy is a man's world: men invent the rules of the game, they play it only with one another, and women are merely to be found among the prizes. (p. 101-102)

In Dickey's work, the depiction of the stewardess is clearly shaped by men's concerns: she is a doll or a fantasy, she is put in the position of 3rd person non-subject, sexualized and made to sexily move, unfeasibly, while she free-falls, thus she is in a passive position as "something takes control of her"...More importantly, she is sexualized so that men can masturbate to her [with masculine referents for both "their loins filled with heart's blood" (line 135) and "hands (...) to find themselves" (line 136)]. Dickey's imaging of the stewardess is pornographic.

And, pornography is generally deeply misogynistic. As Kate Manne (2018) goes on to explain in *Down Girl: The Logic of Misogyny*, in women's sexual oppression:

(...) "sexual solipsism" plays a central role. Whereas solipsism in the classic sense consists in skepticism about (or perhaps the sheer denial of) the existence of other minds of any kind, sexual solipsism regards the only human minds as male ones. Women are viewed and treated as "mere things," or objects, in contrast. (...) this is closely connected with the moral ills of pornography. (2009, p. 2)

The treatment given to the stewardess in "Falling" and "A Pin-Light, Bent" is markedly different. While Dickey's poems are oblivious or impervious to the possibility of the stewardess having a subjectivity of her own, Newsom sets out to explore what full inner life she might have had.

Overview

Neither poem mentions Françoise Moreira by name; nevertheless, I would argue that this is because, in “Falling”, she, as a person, is irrelevant, whereas in “A Pin-Light, Bent” she is the narrator and is not compelled to name herself. Consequently, while Dickey’s work erases Françoise Moreira, Newsome rescues her and helps her transcend.

So yes, even though it is a poem about her death, her ultimate erasure, Oblivion is subverted, through the very existence of this piece. I am inclined to think that, as a meta-commentary, this song may be stating that memory, especially loving, sympathetic memory (as Joanna Newsom professes for the stewardess) may help a person transcend their death. Looking back at the other poems we have analysed in *Divers*, it echoes what the narrator in “Waltz of the 101st Lightborne” does for their lover, and even, what Vincent Van Gogh tried to do for the peasant woman, and Titian for his daughter and grandchild (mentioned in “Sapokanikan”). To remember them lovingly, so that they keep on existing beyond the bounds of their mortal existence.

Time, as a symptom

1	Time passedhard And the task was the hardest thing she'd ever do Butsheforgot	(and the nullifying, defeating, negating, repeating Joyoflife; The nullifying, defeating, negating, repeating
	The moment she saw you	3 0 Joyoflife)
5	So it would seem to be true: When cruel birth debases, we forget When cruel deathdebases We believe it erases all the rest	Hardlyseen, hardlyfelt– Deep down where your fight is waiting Down 'till the light in your eyes is fading: Joyoflife Where I know that you can yield, when it comes
	That precedes	35 down to it; Bow like the field when the wind combs through it:
10	But stand brave, life-liver Bleedingoutyourdays	Joyoflife And every little gust that chances through

	In the river of time Stand brave: Time moves both ways	40	Will dance in the dust of me and you With joy-of-life And in our perfect secret-keeping: One ear of corn
15	In the nullifying, defeating, negating, repeating Joy of life; The nullifying, defeating, negating, repeating Joy of life	45	In silent reaping Joy of life Joy! Again, around—a pause, a sound—a song: A way a lone a last a loved a long
20	The moment of your greatest joy sustains: Not a xenorhammer Tumor, tremor Can take it away, and it remains It remains	50	A cave, a grave, a day: arise, ascend (Areion, Rharian, go free and graze. Amen.) A shore, a tide, unmoored—a sight, abroad: A dawn, unmarked, undone, undarked (a god) No time. No flock. No chime, no clock. No end White star, white ship—Nightjar, transmit: transcend! White star, white ship—Nightjar, transmit: transcend! White star, white ship—Nightjar, transmit: transcend!
25	And it pains me to say, I was wrong Love is not a symptom of time Time is just a symptom of love	55	White star, white ship—Nightjar, transmit: trans-

Textual analysis

“Time as a Symptom” deals with the topic of rebirth, and through intertextuality, it nods to different metanarratives, such as the resurrection of Jesus and the myth of Demeter, Persephone and the seasons, as worshipped in the Eleusinian mysteries. Rebirth implies cycles of birth and death, so, accordingly, this song starts considering the semantic fields of birth and death.

In the first stanza the author seems to address a person (presumably envisioning them as a baby) to describe their childbirth: “the task was the hardest thing she'd ever do” (line 2). There is an emphasis on the negative aspects of birth; Not only is it the hardest task for the mother, but also, it is later said “cruel birth debases” (line 6). We may think of how both new mothers and new-born babies are strained by the delivery and in general look

stressed and worn out immediately afterwards. We may also think of how right-wing religious movements that are against abortion claim to protect life from the moment of conception, but do not seem to care much about the baby and mother's fate after birth, especially if they belong to a minority or marginalised group. Cruel birth certainly debases them. But on a more philosophical note, let us say that our birth, the beginning of our life, points to our death, as we are to march relentlessly closer to death from there on. In Joanna's words: "the day we are born / we commence our dying" ("Kingfisher", *Have One on me*)

However, this sufferening is nullified in the context of a loving family who wants the baby: "she forgot [it was the hardest thing] moment she saw you" (lines 3-4). The new mother's pain is eclipsed by meeting her baby. This idea is restated in line 6, as "When cruel birth debases, we forget".

There is a parallel drawn between life and death, as they are described in similar terms through parallel sentences: "cruel birth debases" (line 6) and "cruel death debases" (line 7). Both are transitions from, presumably, a state of grace to a new, different, unknown one. Additionally, they are both connected to forgetting: as we have pointed out before, the arrival of the new person, in the context of a loving family who wants them, comes about in pain which is soon forgotten. In the case of death, "We believe it erases all the rest that precedes" (line 8). Death would mark the ending point of a life and as such the inner life of that person disappears, and the body will follow suit promptly as it decays. But also, hard feelings and grudges held tend to be forgiven when a person dies.

The concept of rebirth denies the ideas that nothing exist before birth and that nothingness comes after death, because a life is just a link in an infinite chain. This is reflected in the third stanza: the "life-liver", who "bleeds their

days in the river of time", is exhorted to "stand brave" (possibly in bearing cruel birth and death). In "Waltz of the 101st Lightborne", Time was likened to "a ship you may board but not steer", putting emphasis in the one-directionality of time we normally experience and our inability to alter the time dimension. Here, time is compared to a river, which brings to mind Heraclitus cosmogony of ever-present change: "No man ever steps in the same river twice": we give a certain body of water an identity, but as time goes by, it is actually composed of different materiality always. The reassurance for this life-liveris that "Time moves both ways" (line 14), calling to mind the non-linearity of Time that has been explored in other songs.

The idea is completed in lines 15-16: "Time moves both ways / in the nullifying, defeating, negating, repeating / Joy of Life". The non-linearity of time is emphasised in the subjective sphere of the "joy of life". It is interesting to notice the four terms that qualify it. The first three, "nullifying", "negating" and "defeating" have to do with oblivion and death as erasure, but the last one subverts it—"repeating" stresses the cyclical nature of existence, as we have outlined when we discussed the cosmology of eternal recurrence (for "Waltz...")

The notion that what subverts erasure, the "joy of life", is within the subjective, intimate sphere is made more explicit in the fourth stanza, as evidenced in the lines "The moment of your greatest joy sustains" (line 19), "it remains" (lines 22-23), in which the verbs "sustain" and "remain" should be associated to the semantic field of. In Melissa Marturano's (2018) words: "although we die, our relationships with others, the joy from those relationships, and the effects we have on others are in fact immortal, they cycle and ricochet through time itself, transcending physical mortality."

This core idea is, again, elaborated in the next stanzas; this time, in the form of a chiasmus, which gives the name to this piece: "Love is not a symptom of time / Time is just a symptom of love / (and the(...) joy of life" (lines 25-28). The chiasmus could be paraphrased as follows:

- On the one hand, to understand the line "love as a symptom of time" we could think of its intertextuality with "Make Hay", a song that did not make it to the final cut of *Divers*, but that informs our analysis. In it the death of a friend is considered; the exact lines go "And how was I to know / seeing my seconds pass in line / if there was a way to reckon love / except as a symptom of time?" We could interpret that, given our dread of our own mortality, we strike relations with others seeking comfort. Or also, that merely spending time together results in a bond.

- The second half posits a contrasting idea: that we notice the passing of time, the ever-changing nature of the world, because of the attachment we feel to ephemeral things (and people, who are all ephemeral). The notion of time comes to be, precisely, *because* we care and therefore, notice and dread the changes.

It is interesting to notice that in the next stanzas there is a dramatic shift in term of syntactical complexity. Whereas between lines 31 and 44 there is an important amount of subordination and qualification, lines 45 through 51 are composed mainly of nominal phrases consisting of an determiner and a head. On the one hand, this syntactical shift may be signalling the passage between existence and non-existence (death) or viceversa (birth), which in the context of rebirth, are one and the same. From a biological standpoint, in death, or physical body decomposes in simpler terms, taking with it the physical support of the complexities of our mind. Additionally, the minds of babies have yet to

develop complex structures, both on a physical and on an abstract level. Let us have a closer look at some of the terms thus presented.

There is a first set where terms in the form of “a HEAD” predominate, and there are words beginning with *a-* too.

- “Again, around—a pause, a sound—a song” (line 51): “again” prepares us for the upcoming loop back to the album’s beginning, “around” reflects the circular cyclical nature of existence as discussed in the album and reflected in the looping; “A pause, a sound, a song” describes “Anecdotes”, the album’s opener. That song begins with a three second pause, then the sound of a violin coupled with dove calls, then “Sending...” (in the same E flat as the album’s final syllable “tran-”), making a unit out of the two (“transcending”), as the album begins again.

- “A way a lone a last a loved a long” (line 46): This is the last sentence of James Joyce’s *Finnegans Wake* (1939), which is the same sort of cycle *Divers* constructs; the first sentence of the book is the continuation of the last one

- “A cave, a grave, a day: arise, ascend” (line 47): These terms make reference to the Christian myth of Jesus’s resurrection.

All of these terms deal with the cyclical nature of the cosmos, with rebirth. But, the transcendence of our mortal existence is not only something that happens to special, unique, divine beings, but it is the path everything follows.

As the work is laying bare its fundamental ideas, I would also like to draw attention to another set, that takes as determiner “no” and closes this section: “No time. No flock. No chime, no clock. No end” (line 51). Three of these elements are related to time, “time” (of course), “chime” and “clock”. Negating them implies negating the conception of time as one-directional and

measurable, which, again, lays bare a central idea of *Divers*: there is a subversion of time in connection to the subversion of the binary pair oblivion/transcendence, or in these terms “no end”.

Finally, the last lines repeat “White star, white ship–Nightjar, transmit: transcend!”(lines 52-54), until the last one is cut mid-word, in “tran-” (line 55) and is completed in the “Sending” that opens “Anecdotes”. Another link with “Anecdotes” is ‘Nightjar’ which appears in said song. Various interpretations have been given to this line. For instance, Nightjars are birds that are most active at dawn, when you can hear them sing. It could be simply that the bird’s song is marking the beginning of a new cycle. Another interpretation plays on the possible dialogical intertextuality between the different songs in *Divers*: Roufus ‘Nightjar’ is a soldier (in “Anecdotes”), fighting the trans-time war described in “Waltz of the 101st Lightborne” and the “white ship” is the one mentioned in that song. The line resembles the grammar of a military message, so, from the location of a dying star (white stars are at the end of their lifecycle), from this ship, comes the order to this soldier: transmit the message: “transcend”. And therefore, at the beginning of the album, we find these soldiers fighting in another dimension. Additionally, following the topic of birth, and maternity, “White star” has been read as an ovum, and the “white ship” as sperm, likening this moment to that of conception, the starting point of a new life-cycle.

And consequently, the loop of *Divers* is restarted.

Overview

This song leans heavily in the *transcendence* side of the axis, in the terms that the previous songs have been exploring, that is, as connected to the sphere of intimate, loving relationships. This is connected especially to the musings over “selfhood” found in “A Pin-Light, bent”.

It is interesting to notice lines 38-40: "And every little gust that chances through / will dance in the dust of me and you / with joy-of-life". The "joy of life" that subverts oblivion is in the "wind" and the "dust of me and you", that is, when the limits of the self are obliterated and we have already become one with the rest of the cosmos. That is, no individual being can cheat death, but as part of the cosmos we continue existing physically, and as individuated selves, in the sphere of our personal relations, our interactions and our love will continue ricocheting unmeasurably.

That is how the effect of time on human existence (the binary pair oblivion/transcendence) is subverted, and how time itself is subverted: Time is subjective and because we are really not separated from the rest of the world and from other people, our death and our birth are not definite or final, but simply a sort of transformation. In other words, at a macro level, death is not destruction, because of the unity of the cosmos. At a micro level, in terms of interpersonal relationships, memory and love allow us to continue existing beyond the time-span of our lives. Paraphrasing Bataille (1962), reality of the cosmos is continuity of existence, and as part of the cosmos, our existence is continued; however, the human psychological experience of separatedness and isolation creates a discontinuous experience. But Newsom, even more than Bataille, claims that it is in one another that we can overcome our finitude.

Conclusion

As we have seen throughout this work, the songs that make up *Divers* are linked to one another not only thematically, but also through a continuous dialogue with one another, which is not restricted to any one direction. For clarity's sake, I have chosen to start my work in a certain point in the loop, and to include certain songs in it, but this is totally arbitrary.

I hope that this selection can sketch well enough the skeleton of the very much alive *Divers*, which I am sure has much more to say than what I have managed to pin-point here. In other words, here certain bits of *Divers* have been asked certain questions I had been wondering about, which I hope you have found to be sufficiently well-addressed—This paper reflects, rather than the totality of the themes in *Divers*, my ideas about what that might be and what I have been able to confirm about that. Being open for a myriad of non-final meanings is, of course, supported by the deconstructive approach chosen, that highlights the multiplicity of meanings that each of us create through the lens of our ideologies, which can never be isolated and deactivated. And none of these meanings should be considered as the ultimate understanding of the text.

Such approach fits *Divers* quite well to my mind, as the work itself, in its cyclical nature, refuses to give any final answer. Through the ordering of my analysis, one might think that the work progresses from a pessimistic assertion of oblivion, the destruction of all persons no matter their power, to a more optimistic hope of transcendence through love. This is not so: like in a Ying-Yang symbol, a bit of each is to be found in the assertion of the other. And the shift from one point of view to the other is continuous, as the work links *Time, as a Symptom* with *Anecdotes* seamlessly. The hunter seeking the understand once and for all what *Divers'* position is will certainly despair. Do we transcend? Are we erased? In both cases, yes, and no. What actually happens is that those questions are based on a flawed, limited understanding of Time and Existence itself.

There is not a thematic core from which each song radiates. Rather, as Joanna Newsom pointed out, each song crystalises a different point of view about the topic of relation of our existence, the passing of time, our achievements and our interpersonal relations. As *Divers* cycles and its focus

shifts endlessly, what does seem to permeate the whole of it is the idea of unity, of continuity of being, that everything is linked and that each life has repercussions beyond its lifespan, like drops that create ripples in the water. This defiance of individuality and linearity is what makes the binary opposition oblivion/erasure crumble.

Divers proves to be a deeply engaging work of art, that demands a very active role from its listener. There is, indeed, a tangle of layers of meaning to delve into, which each hunter will be able to navigate with the compass of their own intuition and skill.

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