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Ai and The Other

Poet, Ai, born Florence Anthony, explores the lives and minds of her characters, which often fall into the category of Other. In a published interview with Ai she claims, “It’s transcendence—that’s what I’m striving for in all these poems: no matter what the characters go through, no matter what their end, they mean to live” (qtd. in Wilson 11). Ironically, Ai writes about death and violence often. For example, in her work “Cuba, 1962,” Ai depicts a Cuban couple, both sugarcane workers, under the regime of communist Russia and the political power of the United States. A husband finds his wife dead in the field and proceeds to cut off her feet as a message to the powers at hand. This symbolizes the cost at which sugarcane is being produced and Juanita becomes a symbol for the people of Cuba in an elaborate conceit. Excessive pride or fear may be to blame when seeking answers to why the phenomenon of Other exists. The Other is any individual or group that is marginalized from the majority with the perception that because there is some difference, they are lacking in some way. Often regarded as less intelligent, immoral, and possibly treated as sub-human, the Other is perceived by the group as not belonging (“The Other” 1). In the poems “Cuba, 1962,” “Disregard,” and “Conversation,” Ai uses apostrophe and conceit to suggest that in order to make peace with and shed light on the experience as Other, one may need to transcend the struggles of daily living by becoming something more than oneself.

While the speakers of Ai's poems are diverse, Ai is no stranger to the concept of Other. Ai was adamant that her identity was separate from her racial background. Identifying as black, Japanese, Irish, and Choctaw Indian, this Otherness with which Ai identified with drew criticism from black and feminist communities (Flamm 1). Still, through Ai's unique lens, Ai strives to bring attention to the stories of her characters which come by way of killers, women and other marginalized communities. Ai comes from a poor background, and grew up during the Civil Rights movement, which she would argue doesn't influence her writing, but instead inspires it (Flamm 4). The phenomenon of the Other was an integral reason behind the fight for equal rights. It wasn't until age 26 that Ai discovered her Japanese heritage came from an affair her mother had with a Japanese man (Flamm 1). As a woman, Ai is familiar with the constraints female writers are often subject to including being written as Other in literature throughout history ("The Other" 6). Similarities in the themes of transcendence in Ai's writing and the transcendentalist ideas present in 19th century poet Emily Dickinson's works are a testament to this regrettable tradition.

Christianity and womanhood played a large part in the writing and lives of both Ai and Dickinson and could be why the theme of transcendence is a shared commonality between the two authors. While Ai grew up attending parochial schools of the Catholic faith, Dickinson rejected the Puritan faith of those around her though she displayed a prominent religious background and spiritual orientation (Hughes 288). Dickinson was Other as a woman in her small community where she didn't accept the common notions of Christianity, while it is possible that Ai's experience with religion may have been the catalyst that encouraged her to write about transcendence in her poetry. Dickinson questions the ideas of those around her and strives to explore the concepts present in Transcendentalism and 19th century scientific thought

(Hughes 286), while Ai used violence as a way to represent the “perversion of the human desire for transcendence” (Flamm 1). Based on these observations, a clear theme of transcendence regarding the human condition is present, especially while considering the backdrop of religion and women in society. Both Ai and Dickinson’s work depict pain, terror, and existential isolation (Hughes 285). Transcendence of the human condition as Othered from a woman’s perspective align these two authors in a way that is apparent in their writing styles.

While Emily Dickinson and Ai’s writing both share an element of transcendence, they are also known for their use of apostrophe and conceit as the literary devices that work as the vehicle that allows their characters to go beyond their state of being and circumstances. In the poem “Conversation,” Ai uses apostrophe in the opening lines writing, “We smile at each other / and I lean back against the wicker couch. / How does it feel to be dead? I say” (lines 1-3). Similarly, Dickinson uses apostrophe to address her absent lover in “Wild nights!—Wild nights!” (“Glossary of Poetic Terms” 19). The speaker in “Conversation” speaks with deceased poet, Robert Lowell, with some allusion to a conversation with God. In a sense, she is just speaking to a dead man, but by the end of the poem it is apparent that the speaker has a desire to transcend the human condition to include death itself. In the journal *Contemporary Literary Criticism*, scholars acknowledge this theme of transcendence writing that Ai’s work chartered new territory in American literature, describing her work as “bloody and rapturous, scarifying and transcendent” (Flamm 8). The poem at large is a conceit that compares death to getting a tear in a dress, sudden and unforeseen. The language used throughout the poem “Conversation” also gives the reader the feeling of transcendence. Imagery to include “young girls... beginning to rise heavenward... like white helium balloons” (lines 21-24) and the line, “and above all that, / that’s where I’m floating” (lines 26-27) solidifies the case for Ai’s use of transcendence to escape the

human condition or state of being Other. Young girls, at least Othered by gender, are rising to overcome their predestined fates. The poem ends with the line “Could anyone alone survive it?” (line 31) admitting that death is inevitable, a sentiment that is present in many of Ai’s other works centered around speakers who were oppressed, disenfranchised, and abused (“Ai” 1). Apostrophe and conceit are both appropriately used by Ai in “Conversation” to allow the speaker a flight from their existence as Other or otherwise.

In comparison to “Conversation,” Ai more specifically addresses marginalized people in her poem “Cuba, 1962” in which its subjects are a Cuban couple who like many other Cuban natives were exploited for sugarcane production by Russia and the U.S. during the 20th century. Ai makes it explicit that transcendence and Other coincide, and again, Ai uses apostrophe and conceit to convey her message. Within the first five lines, the speaker calls for his dead wife. Ai writes, “I wake, thinking it is the sun / and call Juanita, hearing her answer, / but only in my mind” (lines 3-5). The longing to transcend his approaching grief and their life’s circumstances can be observed in those opening lines. When the speaker cuts off his wife’s feet, he loads her body into the wagon with the sugarcane to sell in their village. Ai writes, “Juanita, dead in the morning like this. / I raise the machete— / what I take from the earth, I give back— / and cut off her feet” (lines 11-14). Scholar Rob Wilson points out the conceit, writing, the metaphor is Juanita who has become one with the cane she picked (11). Juanita becomes a symbol, larger than her own life, to ultimately transcend her circumstances, albeit through her death. Additionally, scholar Duane Ackerson writes that this is poetry about people seeking transformation and salvation through violent acts (Ackerson 1). Ai has spoken in interviews about her poem “Cuba, 1962,” and connects the idea of transcendence to the Other becoming more than oneself, describing the speaker of “Cuba, 1962” as a “character with heart, a character

larger than life, no matter how insignificant his own life is.” (qtd. In Wilson 11). Ai’s interpretation of her work provides strong evidence that her work aims to provide a transcendental experience for her speakers who are marginalized and Other.

Like her poem “Cuba, 1962,” Ai’s poem “Disregard” focuses on a couple that are likely poor and live in a small town. Following the theme of transcendence in her work, Ai makes use of conceit to compare a complex interpersonal relationship to the work of making ice cream. Juxtaposition of hot and cold sensations throughout the poem simulate the turbulent and passionate nature of the relationship. The opening lines, “Overhead the match burns out, / but the chunk of ice in the back seat / keeps melting from the imagined heat...” (lines 1-3) is a good example of such juxtapositions. Readers can infer that Ai is addressing marginalized people through the lines, “I’ll get back to the house, the dirt yard, the cesspool, / to you out back, digging a well / you could fill with your sweat...” (lines 10-12), as her writing often depicted poor men and women, isolated by poverty in small towns and desolate places, according to the Poetry Foundation (“Ai” 2). The speaker expresses her desire for transcendence in the following line “though there is not one reason I should want to” (line 13). The speaker doesn’t wish to return to her current set of circumstances and instead is looking for a way to transcend her daily struggles. In a critical essay written by scholar Duane Ackerson, he writes that Ai’s power to suggest “erotic entrapment” in relationships lacking affection is displayed within her first collection of works (Ackerson 1). This observation sheds light on the reason for the speaker’s desire to transcend her conflicting circumstances. The search for a means to an end is what unites those who feel or are casted away as Other in society and throughout literature and Ai has devoted her work to telling these distinct stories.

Although there is a standing tradition of writing minorities and other marginalized communities off as Other, within the real world and literature, poets like Ai provide an escape for both the speakers of many of her works and the readers of her poems by elucidating that a state of transcendence is possible overcoming the often unfortunate and unique experience of being Othered. Ai is one of many women working to change the discourse around women in literature, women of color and multiracial women. Author, poet, activist, teaching assistant at Swansea University and fellow woman of color, Kamand Kojouri, wrote, “They want us to be afraid. / They want us to be afraid of leaving our homes. / They want us to barricade our doors / and hide our children. / Their aim is to make us fear life itself! / They want us to hate. / They want us to hate the other...” (lines 1-7) in response to the social climate of today’s times. This isolating experience of being Other is precisely what Ai’s work encapsulated and what she was accustomed to. In a published interview, Ai admits that she had to “step back into [her] own heart’s cathedral and bow down before [she] could rise up” (qtd. in Flamm 10). Ai’s life’s work was to express the truth, struggles and freedom that come considering marginalization or oppression. She states, “if this transcendence were less complex, less individual, it would lose its holiness” (qtd. in Flamm 10). Channeling her sensibility, spirituality and sensuality, and through her use of apostrophes and conceits, Ai creates new worlds with new rules for her marginalized and abused speakers. In overcoming fear while reading some of the discomfiting topics of Ai’s poetry, readers may be able to transcend their state of Other or otherwise, rising as more compassionate beings and illuminators of some of the darkest corners of humanity.

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Conversation

By Ai

For Robert Lowell

We smile at each other

and I lean back against the wicker couch.

How does it feel to be dead? I say.

You touch my knees with your blue fingers.

And when you open your mouth,

a ball of yellow light falls to the floor

and burns a hole through it.

Don't tell me, I say. I don't want to hear.

Did you ever, you start,

wear a certain kind of silk dress

and just by accident,

so inconsequential you barely notice it,

your fingers graze that dress

and you hear the sound of a knife cutting paper,

you see it too

and you realize how that image
is simply the extension of another image,
that your own life
is a chain of words
that one day will snap.

Words, you say, young girls in a circle, holding hands,
and beginning to rise heavenward
in their confirmation dresses,
like white helium balloons,
the wreaths of flowers on their heads spinning,
and above all that,
that's where I'm floating,
and that's what it's like
only ten times clearer,
ten times more horrible.

Could anyone alive survive it?

Cuba, 1962

By Ai

When the rooster jumps up on the windowsill

and spreads his red-gold wings,

I wake, thinking it is the sun

and call Juanita, hearing her answer,

but only in my mind.

I know she is already outside,

breaking the cane off at ground level,

using only her big hands.

I get the machete and walk among the cane,

until I see her, lying face-down in the dirt.

Juanita, dead in the morning like this.

I raise the machete—

what I take from the earth, I give back—

and cut off her feet.

I lift the body and carry it to the wagon,

where I load the cane to sell in the village.

Whoever tastes my woman in his candy, his cake,

tastes something sweeter than this sugar cane;

it is grief.

If you eat too much of it, you want more,

you can never get enough.

Disregard

By Ai

Overhead, the match burns out,

but the chunk of ice in the back seat

keeps melting from imagined heat,

while the old Hudson tiptoes up the slope.

My voile blouse, so wet it is transparent,

like one frightened hand, clutches my chest.

The bag of rock salt sprawled beside me wakes, thirsty

and stretches a shaky tongue toward the ice.

I press the gas pedal hard.

I'll get back to the house, the dirt yard, the cesspool,

to you out back, digging a well

you could fill with your sweat,

though there is not one reason I should want to.

You never notice me until the end of the day,

when your hand is on my knee

and the ice cream, cooked to broth,

is hot enough to burn the skin off my touch.