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"My Body, My Poetry": Ai-lin Yen's and Taiwanese Women Poets' Poetics of the Body

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ABSTRACT

With the tenet of "my body, my poetry," this paper argues that poetry written by women claims the right to articulate the female body and champions the validity of their poems about the female body. Rather than being denominated in literary history as an alternative school of carnality, women's poetry about the body should be judged by its aesthetic value. A pioneer among Taiwanese women poets on the subject of the body, Ai-lin Yen in *Bone, Skin, and Flesh* (1997) advances a personal feminism which is frank and honest about female desire as well as the female body, and about the exploitation of the female body. Yen's poems expand on the motility and stases of the drives and abjection, and sketch what Elaine Showalter calls a "double-voiced discourse" in dialectical relationships with both male and female traditions.

KEYWORDS: Ai-lin Yen, Taiwanese women's poetry, body, personal feminism, Julia Kristeva, Elaine Showalter

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吾身，吾詩：顏艾琳與台灣女詩人之身體詩學

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摘　要

本文論點為女性創作的詩歌從「吾身，吾詩」的宗旨出發，爭取對女性身體的發言權，為女性身體詩作之效力辯護。本文也主張以身體入詩的女性詩歌在文學史中不應歸為另類肉慾詩派，應就其審美價值論斷。在台灣女詩人中，以身體為詩的題材顏艾琳是先驅者之一，《骨皮肉》（1997）詩集中展現的個人女性主義坦率誠實面對女性慾望與身體，同時關注對女性身體的剝削。顏艾琳之相關詩作詳繪驅力的自發性移動、停滯與賤斥，亦描寫艾蓮・修娃特所稱的「雙聲論述」，在顏艾琳的詩中此論述與男性及女性傳統維持辯證關係。

關鍵字：顏艾琳、台灣女性詩歌、身體、個人女性主義、茱莉亞・克里斯蒂娃，艾蓮・修娃特

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With the tenet of "my body, my poetry," this paper argues that poetry written by women claims the right to articulate the female body and champions the validity of their poems about the female body. Rather than being denominated in literary history as an alternative school of carnality, women's poetry about the body should be judged as other literary canons are—by its aesthetic value. The poems in Taiwanese poet Ai-lin Yen's *Bone, Skin, and Flesh* (1997) advance one of the salient features of third wave feminism that has been rising since the early 1990s, a personal feminism promoting feminist agendas in life.[1] Yen's poetry engages in an exploration of her gender by a self-reflexive and rebellious poet reaching toward the self through the Other in language—a space she calls "yonder" or, as she describes it, "'her side' beyond the reality of I" (*Yonder* 217).[2] Yen's poems in her poetry collection *Bone, Skin, and Flesh* evince a personal feminism about the indispensableness of frankness in confronting the female desire and the body as well as about the exploitation of the female body. Yen interprets the three words in her title "bone," "skin," and "flesh" as "backbone" or a woman's "confidence," men's "skin-deep" understanding of a woman's mind, and the "voluptuousness" of the "heart," another word for "wisdom" (*Yijing* 105-6). Yen's work taps into the *chora*, Julia Kristeva's term denoting the drives' "articulation" (*Revolution* 25). Kristeva describes the *chora* as "a nonexpressive totality formed by the drives and their stases in a motility that is as full of movement as it is regulated" (*Revolution* 25). The manifestations of the *chora* in literature can encompass "vocal or kinetic rhythm," and one example of the former, "musicalization," "pluralizes meanings" and enriches the interpretive possibilities of the text rather than impedes our ability to read it (*Revolution* 26, 65). Yen's poems, which are often about the body and Eros, sketch what Elaine Showalter calls a "double-voiced discourse" in dialectical relationships with both male and female "social, literary, and cultural heritages" (201).

[1] Like third wave American and British feminisms that surged in the early 1990s, the third wave of Taiwanese feminism also started in the same decade, in 1993 according to the periodization of Yenlin Ku (260). Most of Yen's poems examined in this paper were published during that decade, and her work will be treated as part of third wave Taiwanese women's literature.

[2] All translations of Chinese sources and Yen's poems are my own unless otherwise noted.

I. A Poet of Eros and of the Body

Ai-lin Yen was born in 1968 and grew up in Tainan City and Taipei County (Yen and Pan 210; *Chouxiang* 177-78). She joined the China Torch Poetry Society and the Mandala Poetry Society, and is now a member of the Female Whale Poetry Society (*Chouxiang* 179; Nüjing shishe). Yen started to write poetry at the age of ten and composed over 200 poems at the age of sixteen, one of which, entitled "Morning," was on display on Taipei's MRT trains in 2015, and many of which are anthologized (Hsin-erh Ch'en 139; Yen "Wo haoxiang"). Yen has published many books of poetry: *Abstract Map* (1994), consisting of lyrical poems on the themes of love and single womanhood; *Bone, Skin, and Flesh* (1997), about the female gender; *Dark Hot Spring* (1998), a volume of selected poems; *Name the Multitudinous* (2001), containing poems about the world; *Yonder* (2004), a retrospective on her life; and *Yen Ai Lin's 30 Years Optional Poetry* (2015), a book of poems she selected on nature, romance, and life (Yen, *Dian*; "Yen Ai-lin"; *Shi yue* 216-7; *Yen Ai*). Moreover, Yen composed poems for a photo collection, *The Lin Garden in Focus through Poetry and Photos—the Encounter of the Lin Garden with Poetry and Photography* (2008), and has also published a few essay collections.

Yen experiments with several styles including the amusing style of *Abstract Map*, the sensuous style of *Bone, Skin, and Flesh*, the calm style of *Name the Multitudinous* and *Yonder*, and the relaxed style of *The Lin Garden in Focus through Poetry and Photos*. Her first three styles germinate as early as *Abstract Map*, which already demonstrates her exceptional comparison ("Her hair is a / lengthy rain season"), her ability to connect the abstract and the concrete ("missing" someone is like the "swirls" on a disc that "skipped when playing"), and her adroit use of personification (*Chouxiang* 15, 17). In Ling Chung's view, three styles used by modern Taiwanese women poets—the "untrammeled and magnificent style," the "passionate confessional style," and the "gloomy and cold or satirical style"—successfully break the molds of the tradition, since most Taiwanese women poets write in the style of "restrained elegance" (396). Yen's work falls under the rubric of the second and third styles due to her poetry's forthrightness and playfulness, respectively.

Yen's work possesses its own *sui generis* beauty and merit within

modern Taiwanese women's poetry. Like Hsia Yü, Yen still retains a dreaminess about love and the naiveté of a young woman, yet her poetry possesses an additional coyness in tone. Yen is not purposefully political in the way Li-hua Wang and Wen-yu Chiang sometimes are. Rather than enacting dramas about inexorable cruelty, her poems on politics teem with humor and affection, and spring from idealism. When writing about the land Yen treats it as the font of her inspiration, yet her imagination is boundless and does not subscribe to nationalism, nor is it dedicated to nativism like some of the fervent poems produced by members of the Li Poetry Society. Moreover, Yen is more firmly grounded than Yu-Hong Ch'en and draws her material from life. Finally, Yen is best known as a poet of Eros and, I would add, of the body, one who writes with a clairvoyant directness and achieves a height in art for reasons markedly different from one of her literary forerunners, Jung Tzu—Jung Tzu has mastered nuanced dreaminess in her poems on women's self-identity.

The main demarcation between Yen's work and that of other Taiwanese poets who focus on the subjects of eroticism and the body rests on the fact that Yen's attention gravitates toward the body metaphorically, toward the mechanism of carnality, as well as toward the emotional traces of the mystery of love. Her work is unusual in that, although her poetry challenges morality by breaking taboos, it is neither motivated by an iconoclasm to the point of deploying shock techniques of a new diction or expressive *enargeia*, nor is it born of a wish to seek a balance of power via a linguistic insurrection against patriarchy. Indeed, the former approach is one of the reasons a few contemporary Taiwanese poets are criticized for their treatments of the body, while the Taiwanese poet Hsia Yü successfully takes the latter approach in her poetry.

In Yen's poetry, the erotic is an ineluctable element: "I wonder why people focus so much on affection yet dare not confront the erotic, which so greatly influences us?" (*Minuscule* 22). "In my view, Eros must be spontaneous," Yen said ("Shiren" 11). "My poetry about Eros . . . could be said to be a watershed in Taiwanese poetry. I've put an end to the roundabout style of women poets preceding me" ("Shiren" 10).

For Yen, female self-awareness implicates honesty in confronting the body. In 2013, while acting as a poetry judge of the 11th Religious Literature Prizes in Taiwan, Yen stated that works which move the reader are those that

"live life" (Wan-ch'ien Ch'en). For example, in her poem "To the God-like Ai Loves to Speak Out," Yen voices her concern about Ai Weiwei's detainment by the Chinese government in 2011 and affirms his view that one cannot equate nudity with pornography: "I would rather go naked with you / and confess to freedom about our hardiness / and the visage of the ugly Chinese" (91-92). This is an allusion to Bo Yang's book *The Ugly Chinese* (1985), which reflects on the drawbacks of Chinese culture, including circumlocution (28-29). Ai was charged with the crime of pornography owing to a nude photo he had posted on the Internet, which he said was "a celebration of free communication" and "of the body" (qtd. in Jocks 38). Chiang's poems and her preface to *The Moment the Female Whales Breach and Make Waves* buttress Yen's contention. Chiang claims that the Taiwanese women poets of the Female Whale Poetry Society, the first Taiwanese poetry club for women founded in 1998, write not only to win the attention of their male readers but also to "position themselves" in "poetry that belongs to the female inner world" ("Shi" 3, 5).

Most of Yen's critics, including Ya Hsien and Wu Fong, agree that she writes poems about desire in addition to female awareness, yet there is no lust in the poems (Ya Hsien 70; Wu Fong 102). In my interview with her conducted in 2012, Yen said that she likes her poetry to "have space for the reader's rumination and for the reader to feel the poem." On these grounds, it would be more appropriate to read poems such as "DARK HOT SPRING," "Beasts of Affects in Winter," and "Waterlike—a Woman's Proviso" in the manner Hsu-Hui Ting suggests, as love poems and poems on the body written by a woman rather than as erotic literature, a term loaded with innuendoes (185).

Moreover, Yen proposes a criterion for poetry about the body and eroticism—it has to convey the beauty that first agitates the poet's heart and then reverberates in the mind of the reader. A vivid example of this beauty is the feeling of mystery and awe Yen felt when she stood alone as a child confronting the immense sky on the vast Jianan plain of Tainan City, in the South of Taiwan, her unwritten poetry first stirring within her (*Yonder* 2). Yen maintains that concrete landscapes instruct her about abstract concepts, and that the mystery of nature teaches her about Eros (qtd. in Wang 104; *A ying* 113-14). For Yen, the purpose of writing poetry is "to return to life, that is, to actually move oneself as well as intend to share the original situation with

others" (*Shi yue* 126). Furthermore, this beauty can be expressed in descriptive language, and it can also reside in the links between ideas and perceptions via our imagination. An example of the latter is found in Wu Fong's remark that Yen's poem "The Moon at a Prurient Time" "through anthropomorphism . . . contemplates this world in serenity . . . via the self" (103). As a middle-aged poet, Yen is becoming ever more famous and gaining more prestige. She won the Excellence Prize in Poetry from the ROC's Council for Cultural Affairs, the National Outstanding Poet Award, the 2010 First Prize of Wu Cho-liu New Poetry Award, Taiwan's Chinese Writers' & Artists' Association's 2011 Poetry Prize, one of the Poet Laureate Prizes at the 2012 Two-Shore Poetry Festival held in Haikou, Hainan Island, and other awards (Yen and Pan 211; Li). After this overview of Yen's work, style, and poetics of the body, I will contextualize her poetry within the larger history of the body as a subject in Taiwanese poetry.

II. The Body in Modern Taiwanese Poetry

In the evolution of modern Taiwanese literature, erotic poetry boomed in an atmosphere of democracy after martial law was lifted in 1987, and again in the decade following the first presidential election in 1996. Pai Chiu published his *Chanson* on the subject of Eros and the body in 1972 (*Pai* 134-35). Kuang Chung Yang wrote two poetry collections, *The Perfumed Garden* (1974) and *On Horniness* (1978), containing poems deifying the female body and lauding feminine beauty (*Perfumed* 45, 90, 118, 139, 182; *On Hominess* 61, 91). Du Ye's book of poems, *Glove & Love*, was published in 1980 (4). In the 1990s, owing to the rise of gender consciousness among people, the body gained plural interpretations in poetry (Hsiu-Fang Yen 96). Yen's *Abstract Map* (1994) and *Bone, Skin, and Flesh* (1997), Ko-hua Ch'en's *Head Hunting Poems* (1995), *The Moment the Female Whales Breach and Make Waves* (1998)—an anthology edited by Chiang—and Chiang's own *Men's Nipples* (1998) were all published in the 1990s. A special issue of *The Taiwan Poetry Quarterly*, entitled "Erotic Poetry," was published in 1994, assembling criticisms and poems on eroticism. Other poets writing on the subjects of the body and Eros include Hsia Yü, Jiao Tong, and Hsiao-yang Chi. In the criticisms of erotic poetry, a few poems from the older generation, composed by Kwang-chung Yu, Lo Fu, and others, are occasionally cited as evidence that these topics

were not completely suppressed. Then, what is the significance of Yen's poetry about the body within this tradition?

III. Yen and Taiwanese Women Poets on the Body

My Body, My Poetry

As one brings these discussions to bear on the crucial issue of "my body, my poetry"—what I call women's takes on the subject of their own bodies—it is of vital importance first to distinguish between women's writing, feminine writing, and a *yin* style in order to clarify and claim women's linguistic rights to their bodies. Yen, as well as critics like Meng Fan, I-chih Ch'en, and Hsien-hao Liao, advocate using the terms "women's poetry" and "female poetry" (I-chih Ch'en, *Taiwan Contemporary* 197). In my 2012 interview with her, Yen agreed with Meng Fan's definition and with my own view that "women's poetry" is a better term than erotic poetry. Meng Fan prefers Showalter's term "feminist" or "female" poetry to "feminine" poetry (136). Meng Fan's argument originates from the view that to him, female bodies constitute a world men cannot feel (136, 139). Like Meng Fan, I-chih Ch'en suggests that "female poetry" or "poetry with feminist thoughts" refers to poetry that ponders females' "disadvantaged situation, heralds their anxiety born of the resistance" to dominant cultural forms, "and reflects on female self-awareness" (*Taiwan Contemporary* 197). Commenting on Yen's poetry, I-chih Ch'en says that "this is a real female's voice . . . combining female biology and psychology" (*Taiwan Contemporary* 225). Interpreting Hsia Yü's poetry, Hsien-hao Liao comments on the "feminine (*yin*)" quality of her poetry and views women's writing and feminine writing as interchangeable terms (263-64). Citing Hélène Cixous's theory on women's writing, Yi-fen Ch'en and some other critics suggest replacing the term "women's writing" with the neutral "feminine writing" to connote a style employed by both male and female writers, yet this view weakens women's social and political struggles in gaining equality (102).

This paper will examine Yen's work on the body within the wider context of Taiwanese women's poetry on this subject. Yen has composed a far greater number of poems on the body than most other Taiwanese women poets, threading her lines to weave an intricate tapestry of images and figures about

desire and the riddles of love. Other Taiwanese women poets also set the body to meter, yet without the ardor or craft of Yen. Hsiu-hsi Ch'en's "Tears and I" anthropomorphizes tears as the speaker's friend, a friend who helps her realize the darkness of the human heart and "a wife's right to strive for equality" (2: 123). Unlike Yen's poems, in which liquids like milk and blood flow and are extensions of the body, the tears in Hsiu-hsi Ch'en's poems are static and suggest depth, volume, and beauty:

> Tears squeezed out are
> shields that could not defend themselves.
> Tears, nonetheless, are the good friends of women.
> . . . . . .
> The wife's tears
> once raised the water level of Orchid Lake. (2: 123-24)

A lyrical poet writing in the "wild and untethered" form, Lin Ling employs metaphors of fire and warmth in love poems such as "A Wisp of Epiphany—for a Gambler" and "On the Snow" (30). However, descriptions of the body are sparse in Lin Ling's poetry; these are often ensconced at the end of stanzas rather than throughout the poem as in Yen's work. "A Wisp of Epiphany—for a Gambler" likens a woman's body to firewood:

> In your chest, O the night of Monte Carlo
> the person I love was roasting himself before a fire
>
> Gathered pine branches were insufficient for burning, the night of Monte Carlo
> He impetrated my hair
> my spine . . . (Lin Ling 60)

"On the Snow" compares snow to what is left of a departed love:

> I lie quietly supine, on the snow.
> On the snow
> the white silver color is the white bone of love.

. . . . . .
The burying from time immemorial,
some passion sealed in ice and coldness—some
white bones of love. (Lin Ling 86-87)

Unlike Yen's and Lin Ling's poems, wherein the body, in its metamorphosis, turns into a beast or fuel, Hsiung Hung's poems take the body more literally. "The End of Poetry" suggests that, as if this were preordained, people forgive their loved ones for the love wounds they inflict:

Love is poetry composed in blood.
The blood of joy and of masochism is both sincere.
. . . . . .
As fate is domineering to the absolute degree, and
as in love
nicks of a knife and hickeys are identic,
forgive you must. (Hsiung Hung 131-32)

A minimalist in language, writing poetry teeming with *non sequiturs* in a contemplative tone, Yu-Hong Ch'en does not treat the body in the sensuous way that Yen does. The speaker of Yu-Hong Ch'en's poem "I Told You," concerned with the indivisibility of the mind and body, claims to miss the other person with her whole body: "I told you my forehead and my hair missed you / because clouds were combing each other in the sky" (296). The speaker says that her longing can be felt through her "neck," "ear lobes," "eyes," "pores," "ribs," "arms," "lips," as well as "finger tips" (Yu-Hong Ch'en 296).

Unlike these poets, Hsia Yü writes chiefly love poems, though she also composes poems about carnal desire, such as "Jiang Yuan" in *Memoranda* (1984) and "Fauvism" in *Ventriloquism* (1991) (*Memoranda* 118-19; *Ventriloquism* 22). Yet in her poems, the body is like a touchstone of the imagination; the imagination and not the subject of the body is the focus of her poems. For example, using animal imagery, "Fauvism" portrays the growth of a young woman: "like two animals, the twenty-year-old breasts after a long slumber / woke up and showed their pink nose tips" (*Ventriloquism* 22). Another poem, "Mozart in E-Flat Major," describes a

magical moment when a man's shaved face touches a woman's shoulder:

> I turned around.
> I felt the newly shaved Monday cheek slightly, ever slightly
> graze my left shoulder
>
> The dear, dearest part
> The most, most important present (*Ventriloquism* 49)

The accidental brush with a man's cheek interconnects with, and gives new meaning to, the ritual of shaving every Monday.

Both Yen and Chiang challenge the notion that the body is taboo in their poetry. However, while the bulk of Yen's poems about the body focus on the relationship between men and women, Chiang's poems almost always touch on the distressing issues of "history, Eros, and politics," and Chiang lashes out against the cultural phenomenon that girls and women do not fully control their own bodies (Chiang, *Grandmother's* 204). In Chiang's poem "Sticky Rice Dumpling & Longan Sticky Rice Cake," Ali's mother offers dumplings and rice cakes to the deities and prays that they "give Ali: / a life that obliges further explanation at all times" (*Grandmother's* 69). The poem scrutinizes the bias of patriarchal culture that, as a woman, Ali's body alone cannot have a complete significance and must gain meaning from the bodies of her progeny, since having no offspring is the worst offense to the tradition of filial piety. The poetry of Wan-yu Lin and Yu-Hong Ch'en will also be examined in later sections.

Personal Feminism in Poetry Anthologies

The concept of "my body, my poetry" concerns women writers claiming their right to write about their bodies, sometimes about the male body, and about the life around these subjects. This ownership by Taiwanese women writers of the intimate knowledge of embodiment is a form of personal feminism that developed, I argue, across the oceans in the third wave feminisms in the United States and the United Kingdom as well as in Taiwan. One of the arresting hallmarks of Anglo-American third wave feminism is its

personal feminism. In this paper, personal feminism refers to the narration of personal feminist experiences in life that often consists of anecdotes, and that is mostly narrated in the first person. The concept of personal feminism is contained in the slogan "the personal is the political," which began to circulate at least as early as second wave American feminism. Owing to its attention to difference, third wave American feminism brings the personal facet of feminism to the fore more than the second wave did by collapsing the distinction between theory and life and taking accounts of personal feminist experience seriously (Moraga xi). Anthologies such as *To Be Real: Telling the Truth and Changing the Face* of *Feminism* (1995), *Listen Up: Voices from the Next Feminist Generation* (1995), *Colonize This! Young Women of Color on Today's Feminism* (2002), and *Catching a Wave: Reclaiming Feminism for the 21st Century* (2003) display a rich array of essays written by young feminists about their feminist experience in life.

The idea of personal feminism could be used to analyze Yen's poetry compared with that of other Taiwanese women poets, given that it is a marked trend in Yen's and a few other women poets' works. In order to examine the role of personal feminism in Taiwanese women's poetry, I will discuss four recent anthologies—*Modern Women Poets, 1952-2011* (2011), *Purplish Red: Modern Taiwanese Women's Poetry* (2000), *Images on the Lake of Poetry* (1999), and *The Moment the Female Whales Breach and Make Waves* (1998). The latter two anthologies collect works of the members of the Female Whale Poetry Society. To be consistent with the focus of this paper, my discussion excludes poems not directly concerned with gender. In addition to Yen's work, six of the 73 poems in *The Moment the Female Whales Breach and Make Waves* as well as eight of the 45 poems in *Images on the Lake of Poetry* are concerned explicitly with the concept of personal feminism. Other than Yen's poems, thirteen others among the 198 in *Purplish Red* champion the notion of personal feminism. Two poems by Yüan-chen Lee and one poem by Chiang are also selected from the first and second anthologies of the Female Whale Poetry Society, respectively. In *Modern Women Poets, 1952-2011*, in addition to Yen's poems, four of its 280 poems are redolent with personal feminism; Jung Tzu's poem in this volume is also published in *Purplish Red*. In these four anthologies, the paucity of poems about personal feminist experiences, of which a scant few concern the body or Eros, suggests that Yen and a few Taiwanese women poets occupy a unique position in their writing about such

experiences. And Yen's poetry has broken new ground for women writers in Taiwan as it especially focuses its attention on the body and Eros as relevant to feminism. I will explore Yen's innovations in her poetry on the body in the next two sections, using Kristeva's concept of the *chora* and abjection and Showalter's theory on the dual literary tradition that a woman poet inherits.

The Stases, Flow, and Musicalization of Desire and a Return to a Pre-Thetic State

Chueh-chien Ch'en comments on "the marginal power of 'refusal' and 'negativity' of the *chora*" in Yen's poetry and describes the flow of desire in this poetry with her coined term "libidinal femininity" (167, 164). Kuei-Yun Lee proposes another term, "fluid poetic," to describe women's language in modern Taiwanese women's poetry: "their language teems with fluidity, restlessness, and commotion" (216). Like Kuei-Yun Lee, Zheng Zhong Liu suggests that over the last two decades, as poets broke through the taboos about the female body by versifying it, more poems about the body and fluids have been composed (300). My contribution to scholarship about Yen is to examine the *chora* in her poetry as the stases as well as the flow of linguistic elements such as descriptions of liquids and musical rhythms, and to relate these to a woman's recognition of her own desire, her feminine self, and her body. Moreover, my analysis will explore the return to the state before significance, the crescent, abjection, and "double-voiced discourse" in poetry through Kristeva's and Showalter's theories (Showalter 201).

The flow of the drives in Yen's poems in *Bone, Skin, and Flesh* can be explained through the operation of the *chora*, defined by Kristeva as "an essentially mobile and extremely provisional articulation [of the drives] constituted by movements and their ephemeral stases" (*Revolution* 25). According to Kristeva, the *chora* "can never be definitively posited," and represents the working of the drives before and during the engendering of significance, such as that of a text or an object (*Revolution* 26). Kristeva names the "two modalities of the signifying process" "*the semiotic*" to designate the "drives and their articulations" and "*the symbolic*" to indicate the "attribute of meaning, sign, and the signified object" (*Revolution* 23-24, 43; *Desire* 134).

Drawing from Sigmund Freud's concepts of the unconscious and the

drives of the mind, Kristeva advances a "theory of signification based on the subject" in order to explicate "the signifying process as it is practiced within texts" as well as the subject's "relation to the body, to others, and to objects" (*Revolution* 15). Furthermore, Edmund Husserl's phenomenological "transcendental ego" informs Kristeva's postulation that the ego presides over the signifying process (*Revolution* 44). However, Kristeva's ego is more closely related to other people and objects and is therefore less isolated and bracketed than Husserl's ego. Significance is predicated by "the *identification* of the subject and its object" through a separation or "break" in what Kristeva calls the "*thetic* phase" in which the symbolic prevails, as the semiotic had prevailed prior to this phase (*Revolution* 43). In Kristeva's construction of these two modalities, even after the first thetic phase, "the semiotic, which also precedes" the thetic phase, "constantly tears it open, and this transgression brings about all the various transformations of the signifying practice" (*Revolution* 62). For Kristeva, signification is a dialectical and "heterogeneous process," "a structuring and de-structuring *practice*, a passage to the outer *boundaries* of the subject and society" (*Revolution* 17). Like Kristeva's explanation of the motility of the *chora*, Yen intuits that the world is something "dynamic," which a poet interprets through poetic language: "The world is dynamic. Everything is flowing. Strong intuition can capture the direction of the flow" (*Yen Ai*).

Yen's personal feminism is revealed in a female consciousness which is frank and honest about female desire and the female body, and about the exploitation of the female body, which she explores in *Bone, Skin, and Flesh*, focusing on her life and experiences as a teenage girl and a young woman. *Bone, Skin, and Flesh* comprises Yen's poems composed between the ages of seventeen and twenty-seven and published between 1988 and 2001 (*Bone* 29, 65; qtd. in Ying-Ju Ch'en 124). The bulk of her poems about the body, including some of her best work on this subject, are presented in *Bone, Skin, and Flesh*. In my interview with her in 2012, Yen reflected that "starting from *Bone, Skin, and Flesh* my poetry has a style of hard rock—hardcore, 'a school of rock' with solid contents that are screamed out in a more personal style."

In Yen's poems, "Waterlike—a Woman's Proviso," "Sapling," "Summer Rain," and "Downpour," desire is described as a liquid or an object associated with liquid, and the *chora*—"as rupture and articulations (rhythm)"—generates connotations as it disrupts the denotations of these

poems' subjects—chastity, menstruation, desire, the male gaze, and the affection between mother and child (*Revolution* 26). Visual, "kinetic," and color "units and differences" illustrate the "stases" of the *chora* in these poems (*Revolution* 28). "Waterlike—a Woman's Proviso" suggests that one must discard moral concerns in order to truly engage the topic of desire: "morals are an undergarment that can be easily shed, / being but merely a piece of cloth worn close to one's skin" (*Bone* 35). Yen thus maintains that with regard to Eros there should be "no feelings of guilt," and that one should be natural and "free" (qtd. in I-chih Ch'en, *Cong* 9). Agreeing with Yen, Kuei-Yun Lee suggests that writing about women's long-term suppressed Eros is an essential way for women to recognize their subjectivity (144).

In "Bath" and "Tides," the first two sections of "Waterlike—a Woman's Proviso," the motility of the erotic drives is interlinked with liquidity. "Bath" conceptualizes desire as being damp like a saturating liquid: "the body drenched in desire even when young, / like a plant so bashful, / evolved age in itself through and through, / reluctant as late to yield some fruits" (*Bone* 35). "Tides" explores menstruation as blood's periodic motion in the body: "The days just passed. / The womb flushed with menstrual blood / is now nihilistically undergoing a turmoil of hunger," and now "what is left is only an / empty nest hung below the abdominal cavity" (*Bone* 36). In Chinese "nest" is a homonym of "tide," and through the pun in the section's title nest acts as the space where the fluids rhythmically suffuse the womb; an "empty nest" portends the stage of life when grown children leave home, leaving the mother in a vacant nest (*Bone* 36). In "Ferrying," the final section of "Waterlike—a Woman's Proviso," desire is likened to a ferry, and this section registers the stases of desire:

> The very early early morning
> is
> a very late late sable night.
>
> Stranded amidst the two breasts, desire
> pendulated in great ennui;
> from a very distant morning
> it ferried to a time extremely near night
> to and fro

early and late. (*Bone* 36-37)

The flow of the energy of the drives is dramatically rendered in the poem "Sapling" when men's eyeballs melt into a yellow liquid, implying the lewdness of their gaze at the teenage dancer:

> Do not with your sharp glare exploit
> my self-esteem grown thinner and more wispy every day
> While you looked—
> merely looked—with black eyeballs at
> my body
> astoundingly they transformed into a nasty yellow overflowing
> the scarcely visible stage. (*Bone* 115)

The Chinese title of "Sapling" is composed of two words, "chick" or "child" and "tree." Notably, the first word "child" immediately invokes for the speaker of Chinese an overtone of child exploitation since it is used in the phrase "child prostitute." "Sapling" is based on Yen's own experience of staying at an inn in a tourist district where she was shocked to watch a nude child prostitute on TV, revealing to her the dark side of Taiwan's affluent society ("Shiren" 13-14). Child prostitution was one of the main causes that united and launched Taiwanese second wave feminism in the late 1980s.[3] The poem "Sapling" criticizes the persistent, though residual, exploitation of young girls by the sex industry.

In "Summer Rain," the drives are epitomized by the mother's effusive milk; to render the semiotic affection between the mother and child, the poem connects the mother's body and the child through the mother's milk:

> It abounded brimfully in milk
> as if all of a sudden it would spout and sprinkle.

[3] In 1987, a number of women's rights, human rights, and indigenous people's organizations in Taiwan, "more men than women," held a demonstration protesting child prostitution (Doris T. Chang 120; Yüan-chen Lee, "Bozhong" 125). This event recruited more supporters for the second wave Taiwanese women's movement and made the movement known to the general public (Doris T. Chang 122; Yüan-chen Lee, "Women's" 6, "Bozhong" 125-26).

> Abruptly, the empyrean turned into an enormous breast
> The abundant maternal love
> nourished every soul whimpering to be fed.
> The surplus milk
> interleaved with excessively ingested junk food
> like a nest of snakes
> scampered into the city's invisible veins,
> and gushed toward cardia. (*Bone* 106)

"Summer Rain" illuminates the relationship between the sky and the earth as a mythic connection, likening the mother's love to the nourishing rain that is her milk. The poem reinterprets the phenomenon of precipitation by establishing a connection between the mother, the child, and external objects shared between the two, such as the milk. As Kristeva maintains, "the *semiotic*" is "a psychosomatic modality of the signifying process, . . . one articulating (in the largest sense of the word) a continuum" (*Revolution* 28). Explaining this continuum further, Kristeva suggests that "we must also add to these processes the relations . . . that connect the zones of the fragmented body to each other and also to 'external' 'objects' and 'subjects'" (*Revolution* 28).

In "Downpour," a poem wrought in the imagery of rain, the symbolic wanes, while the semiotic waxes:

> The atramentous breasts
> thronged and occupied the sky.
> So plump they were
> that city's towers
> bashfully retracted at once. (*Yen Ai*)

To Yen, the forces of *yin* and *yang* constitute the universe, and through the concept of this "emotive *taiji*," she conceptualizes "the gender of the multitudinous" in the cosmos (*Yijing* 204-5). Yen dubs poetry about *taiji* a "poetry of alternative colors," of which "Summer Rain" and "Downpour" are two examples (*Yijing* 205).

Wan-yu Lin's poem "Container" also evokes the breast and its milk in order to signify the love between a mother and child, and the idea that a

person's image is preserved in posterity:

> A container of a shape *sui generis*, the breast feeds you
> Staring at you is as much glancing at myself
> Owning you,
> I own myself
>
> Holding you,
> heart, is a gigantic container (*Things* 204-05)

However, while Yen is a poet of the body, Wan-yu Lin is not. Unlike Yen, who writes in a sensuous language using words such as "abounded" and "abundant," Lin employs the neutral and inanimate term "container" to suggest the concept of reproduction by conjuring up the image of a series of Chinese boxes (*Bone* 106; *Things* 204).

In addition to depicting drives as either liquids or objects associated with liquids, poems like "DARK HOT SPRING," "Desire Came Onshore with the Undercurrent of the Night," and the last section, "Ferrying," from "Waterlike—a Woman's Proviso" further conflate fluidity and darkness or night—the time when the force of *chora* is most potent. In "DARK HOT SPRING," for example, darkness is represented by a hot spring reminiscent of fluidity, warmth, and solace. Through a "displacement" of the energy of the drives, the emphasis of this poem intriguingly shifts from dampness and fluidity to a dryness and heat that now suggest the flaring up of concupiscence (*Revolution* 28). The spring is compared to a woman's lovely gentleness in which the speaker invites her lover to indulge:

> IF YOU ARE TIRED OF LIFE
> WITH VERY LITTLE MORALITY
> THEN,
> PUT ALL THINGS DOWN
> AND THROW THEM INTO DARKNESS!
>
> I'M WAITING FOR YOU
> IN THE DEPTH OF DARKNESS
> I WILL RUB AIR

INTO THE DRY SMELL OF AN AUTUMN FOREST
--THE SMELL COULD HELP BURN
OUR BODY WITH LOW POINT[S] OF COMBUSTION
AND IT'S FOR ATTRACTING YOU TO ME.

I WILL LET YOU COME TO ME
TO SUCK MY WARMTH AND SMOOTHNESS
EVEN THOUGH I AM VERY VERY TIRED
IT WILL BE WASHED AWAY COMPLETELY
IN THE DARK HOT SPRING ("DARK" 4)

According to Yen, "DARK HOT SPRING" suggests "an awareness of Eros," of a dark space into which the narrator welcomes her lover ("Shiren" 10). As Yen observes in *Minuscule Beauty*, an intellectual metamorphosis from teenage androgyny to mature femininity accompanies the physical evolution of a woman's body: "I used to have a phallic body in my dreams and steered my desire with force before my language became ever more feminine" (41).

Likewise, in "Desire Came Onshore with the Undercurrent of the Night," the speaker compares desire to the night tide:

let my tide
rise and
overspread
your shore

once. (*Bone* 119)

Yi-ping Huang suggests that in a "feminine fluid" writing style, Yen's feminine flow of desire expresses a freedom from the bondage of the masculine shore (73). Moreover, at least two other poems, Yen's "Hungry Night" and "The Castle at Night," connect the night with the subconscious in which the drives dominate. In "Hungry Night," for example, hunger becomes a figure of speech for unrequited desire: "I understand hunger as a strain of hypocrisy— / picking in food, yet fantasizing to be / an ascetic with a heart of no desire" (*Bone* 43). In the section entitled "Curfew" of "The Castle at Night," night is also the time when the subconscious takes the helm (*Bone* 91-92). In

this poem, the speaker's desire breaks the curfew by slipping into another person's dream.

Indeed, Yen says that she has a "special feeling toward darkness" (qtd. in Lin, Ch'en, and Li 166); she confesses that she "is not afraid of darkness and enjoys everything, for instance, the tolerance and vastness, of it" (qtd. in Lin, Ch'en, and Li 166). Moreover, to Yen the color black is positive: "blackness is a state of stillness" as "black engulfs all the colors" (qtd. in Lin, Ch'en, and Li 166); for her, it conveys "a very warm feeling" (qtd. in Lin, Ch'en, and Li 167). This thematic focus on darkness is related to Yen's habits of "sleeping at day, and pondering at night to two or three or even four or five a.m." (qtd. in Lin, Ch'en, and Li 167). As she says, she "is wont to view the city in darkness" from her residence: "at night, darkness obscures the smog, and seeing only the lamps, you evolve a purer feeling" (qtd. in Lin, Ch'en, and Li 167). In my 2012 interview with her, Yen said that in "a maternal love and warmth," the night "hides the filth and salaciousness" that are visible by day.

In addition to darkness, primitivism in poems such as "Prehistoric Memories," "Beast," and "Beast of Affects in Winter" likewise symbolizes a return to a state prior to the thetic phase. In "Prehistoric Memories," for instance, the azure of the sky evokes joy and a pure state untainted by the moods of the narrator who decides to sleep in and, imaginatively, "retrocedes into / a slumberous prehistoric / shell" (*Bone* 47). This atavistic state suggests a wistfulness to reconnect with the primordial mystery of the birth of life in the ocean. Moreover, the "shell" invokes both protection and the generative properties of the sea (*Bone* 47).

In poems like "Beast" and "Beast of Affects in Winter," also permeated with primitivism, humans revert to their primeval condition of beasts. Set in the nighttime, "Beast" likens desire to a beast that is the pet of the lovers in the poem, an interpretation with which Yen concurred in my 2012 interview with her:

> My lover brought a beast with him
> and asked me to stroke its spine.
> . . . . . .
> With a smile of April Fool
> my lover watched me resistless to and
> devoured by

> a pet fed with love. (*Bone* 28)

At the close of the poem, the beast musters such power that even the lover "could not control / the Brobdingnagian, wild, dark and bonhomous / beast" (*Bone* 29).

"Beast of Affects in Winter" portrays the primitive yet changeless love between a mother and her child:

> In winter
> we cuddled in our nest of cotton quilts
> and took warmth from each other like beasts.
> Dear child,
> esuriently you suckled my breasts
> . . . . . .
> Yes, our posture
> is that of people making fires in an age of great antiquity
> . . . . . .
> We built a primordial cave with our bodies
> to burrow and hide away our shy and unspeakable evolution. (*Bone* 30-31)

Yen redefines feminine beauty through a child's eyes in "Beast of Affects in Winter," intermixing maternal love and sensuality—the latter exemplified by the imagery of a cave of flesh (*Bone* 31). Likewise, Wan-yu Lin employs a metaphor of beasts in her poem "Games in Bed," which is also infused with primitivism. The intrigue of a game of hide and seek is the centerpiece of Wan-yu Lin's "Games in Bed": "The center of a fleshy palm branded its heat on my skin / (That is just the cub's paw print hunters desperately sought to track down)" (102).

Moreover, the *chora*'s musical rhythm is created by recurrent phrases and assonance in Yen's poem "The Secrets of Rain Once." "The Secrets of Rain Once" underscores the passing of love through phrases containing the Chinese word "one" such as "once," "some," and "once and again," as well as through the sound of "one" in words and phrases including "secret," "a few," "day," "heart," "flushed," "night," "fear," "hurried," "appeared," "face," "melancholy," "in that condition," and "love" in addition to a humorous pun

on "moldy," a homonym of "plum," referring to the plum rain season, and of "vanishing," alluding to the dissolution of romance (*Yen Ai*). Likewise, the poem "Hug Me into a Deep Ocean Slumber" simulates the rhythm of ocean waves through two-word iambic phrases in Chinese such as "tides," "regularity," and "waves," as well as through the nasals in phrases including "deeply deep," "lightly light," "heard," "surging," "dearly dear," and "capsized" (*Yen Ai*).

The Crescent, Abjection, and Double-Voiced Poetry

Like Kristeva, Showalter advances a dialectical theory of women's literature. Showalter claims that this literature engages in a "double-voiced discourse," which expounds on both women's and mainstream "heritages" of literature, culture, and social practices (201). Yen's oft-cited poem "The Moon at a Prurient Time" portrays a waning crescent flirting with "the clouds" and other symbols of patriarchy—"skyrocketing towers" and "mountains"—while "smiling" (*Bone* 38). Yen portrays the moon as "good-natured and feminine," and she recalled the circumstances of the poem's creation in my 2012 interview with her:

> Tired from reading, . . . I opened the window to the city's night sky and the motherly moon. At the time shaped like a hook, the crescent hooked up distant towers, . . . teasing the masculine buildings like a smile, and it enticed the metropolitan.

Whether or not Yen had read Showalter, the "crescent" is the exact term Showalter uses in her much anthologized essay, "Feminist Criticism in the Wilderness" (*Bone* 38; Showalter 200). Showalter maintains that "a crescent . . . of women's culture spatially, experientially, or metaphysically" stands outside the circle representing male culture (200). Showalter solicits women to articulate this crescent and explore "female consciousness" in "women-centered criticism, theory, and art" (201). Having "absorbed" the male tradition, the crescent moon in the poem reflects the sun's rays (*Bone* 38). It actively challenges the male culture with the female culture that is unknown and hence nostalgic to the male counterpart:

> After absorbing fully the energy, light, gas, and color of the sun,
> a shallow last quarter crescent
>
> smilingly
> . . . . . .
> aroused the nostalgia of all the phallic objects
> with her flirtatious lips. (*Bone* 38)

Showalter's and Kristeva's theories converge in this poem in which the light of the crescent is the light of the absent sun; the crescent symbolizes the *chora* in the phase of the symbolic, to which the semiotic possesses cryptic and alternative energy. The tongue and smile of the moon suggest a dialectic between male and female cultures and between the semiotic and the symbolic. The highly lauded first line of the poem ("the filthy and lustful orange moon arose") portrays the abject as the maternal body that has been excluded from one's identity and from the male culture (*Bone* 38). Kristeva argues that the maternal is "the inseparable obverse of his very being, of the other (sex) that torments and possesses" "a writer (man or woman)" (Kristeva, *Powers* 208). "Abjection appears as a rite of defilement and pollution" and "takes on the form of the *exclusion* of a substance" (*Powers* 17). Kristeva defines the abject as what is excluded from identity ("[t]he abject has only one quality of the object—that of being opposed to *I*") as well as from one's "clean and proper body" (*Powers* 1, 73). For the former, Kristeva explains that "[i]t is thus not lack of cleanliness or health that causes abjection but what disturbs identity, system, order. . . . Abjection, on the other hand, is immoral, sinister, scheming, and shady" (*Powers* 4). In "The Moon at a Prurient Time," "an unveiling of the abject" occurs when the maternal in an extremely corporeal sense almost overwhelms the self as well as men's culture as Kristeva theorizes (*Powers* 208). Kristeva argues further that this dualism between identity and what it excludes, the abject, is intrinsic to literature because to her, literature illuminates the crises of identity and "coenesthesia": "all literature is probably a version of the apocalypse that seems to me rooted . . . on the fragile border (borderline cases) where identities (subject/object, etc.) do not exist or only barely so—double, fuzzy, heterogeneous, animal, metamorphosed, altered, abject" (*Powers* 53, 207). Exclusion is the law that operates in both Showalter's idea of "women's culture" and Kristeva's definition of the abject,

and "The Moon at a Prurient Time" interprets the maternal body as subject matter excluded from both men's culture and a writer's métier (200).

For this poetic portrayal of the moon as the abject body of the mother, Yen is a trailblazer even among women poets adept in witticisms on desire. The moon is tantamount to "desire" in Yu-Hong Ch'en's poem "Number 56 Concealment," though she portrays the moon abstractly as a metaphor for the meaning a poem tries to reach (278):

> The moon rose from within you
> The moon. Desire.
> . . . . . .
> You finally grasped that the moon
> is not the moon
> The moon is another you (278)

This contrast in descriptions of the moon attests to an overall divergence between Yen and most other Taiwanese women poets—Yen adopts a sensuous language in sketching desire and the female principle.

As Kuei-Yun Lee argues, Yen's work stresses "the difference within the self" and engages in "multiple perspectives" (275). While her poetry grapples with women's culture, Yen acknowledges that she has inherited the male literary tradition in her *ars poetica* in which the poet takes a masculine stance while confronting her Muse: "[w]riting poems is like making love with a goddess in your mind" ("On Poetry" 3). Yen admires Pai Chiu's *Chanson* and said that she would like to write a book of sensual poems like it (qtd. in Lin, Ch'en, and Li 169). In Pai Chiu's poem "Endless," wording such as "the womb," and the image of floating in a "stream" remind one of a similar language and images in the poems of Yen's *Bone, Skin, and Flesh* (*Chanson* 92). Moreover, in "That Man Called Xu Zhimo," Yen recounts her affection for this literary predecessor and her grasping of her own identity through his work:

> Owing to your unanticipated demise,
> all of the women
> reasonably fall in love with you.

> And during my journey ferreting for you,
> I found
> my own name. (*Yen Ai)*[4]

Likewise, Yen remembers the late poet Meng-tieh Chou in an elegy, "I Took the Empty Seat":

> On the chair that was now empty, when I came,
> I would certainly sit.
> . . . . . .
> On crossed legs, I sat.
> I visualized you.
> We were still together. (D3)

The title implies that Yen resolves to be an heiress in the pursuit of the art of poetry. The symbolism of the chair brings to the fore her sense of responsibility as a successor and her friendship as a peer of the old poet. Yen acknowledges her poetry as both the continuity of a male heritage of forebears such as Pai Chiu, Xu Zhimo, and Meng-tieh Chou, and also as the inception of newness through voicing the once taboo subjects of the female body and women's culture. I would add that the law operating in women's poetry, as attested by Yen's poems on the body, is ultimately a dialectic of inclusion, a point not yet clearly made in Showalter's or Kristeva's theories.

Finally—lest women again be divested of their voices and rights to their own bodies—in the phrase "my body, my poetry," female poetry attests that its ethos is not vested in a style or any authority but is much more ingrained in women's own bodies as sites of contestation in their daily confrontations with inequalities and inherited cultural biases. Women's literature is inextricable from their bodies and from the conditions and incidents of their daily existence. Yen's *Bone, Skin, and Flesh* evinces a personal feminism that reflects on such matters as the articulation of desire, or the *chora* as Kristeva conceives of it, and on the exploitation of the female body and abjection. Yen's poetry takes on a new resonance by practicing a unique art of poetry

[4] Likewise, Yen's critics espouse Showalter's concept of double traditions in women's poetry (Kuei-Yun Lee 274; Huang 248).

commenting and drawing on a dual tradition of men's and women's literature.

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