



PROJECT MUSE®

---

Writing/Not Writing: Anne Boyer, Paralipsis, and Literary  
Work

Lindsay Turner

ASAP/Journal, Volume 3, Number 1, January 2018, pp. 121-142 (Article)

Published by Johns Hopkins University Press

DOI: <https://doi.org/10.1353/asa.2018.0005>



➔ *For additional information about this article*

<https://muse.jhu.edu/article/686305>

Lindsay Turner

# WRITING/NOT WRITING: ANNE BOYER, PARALIPSIS, AND LITERARY WORK

*The contemporary American poet ANNE BOYER (b. 1973) investigates the affects and textures of life and work under the pressures of today's neoliberal capitalism. Boyer, who lives and writes in Kansas City, Kansas, joins contemporary writers such as BHANU KAPIL, CHRISTOPHER NEALON, SANDRA SIMONDS, and CATHERINE WAGNER in plumbing ordinary experience with an ear constantly attuned to the political structures that underpin it. In this respect, these writers follow in the line of earlier U.S. poets such as DIANE DI PRIMA, JUNE JORDAN, BERNADETTE MAYER, ALICE NOTLEY, or even the New York School's FRANK O'HARA, for whom poetic production necessarily occurs alongside other types of work. For these writers, both poetry writing and the array of other labor they perform (from university teaching to domestic labor to museum work) are indelibly shaped by the changing configurations of political power, U.S.-led globalization, and gender, race, and local and global economic inequality that mark the past half-century. Boyer's third book, *Garments Against Women* (2015), was written in 2010, during a time Boyer has characterized as one of personal precariousness and concern. As she states in a 2015 conversation with poet AMY KING, which appeared on the Poetry Foundation's blog: "My daughter*

---

*LINDSAY TURNER is a poet and translator. She holds a PhD in English from the University of Virginia and currently teaches at Clemson University.*

*and I were struggling, then, in the kind of poverty in which you are always getting sick from stress and overwork and shitty food then having no insurance or money or time to treat the problems caused by having no insurance or money or time.*"<sup>1</sup>

Beyond the immediate conditions of its creation, the book spins out an expansive set of reflections on work and the refusal of work in the contemporary moment. Boyer's poems—which are primarily prose poems—unfold through and beyond the speaker's everyday life as a mother and writer: dramatizing ordinary dilemmas of thought and work (including daily domestic and reproductive work, the process of writing or being unable to write, and, as its title suggests, sewing and other forms of garment manufacture), *Garments Against Women* encompasses linked problems of reproduction, globalization, knowledge, resistance, creativity, transformation, and even, finally, the future of work. A key premise in Boyer's poetry, though, is that she writes about such matters largely by *not* writing about them. She does so, in other words, by deploying or riffing on the rhetorical figure of paralipsis: stating something through the claim not to be stating it. Through her recourse to this figure, I argue, Boyer articulates the complex interrelationships between types and problems of labor, precisely insofar as they tend to remain unspoken under conditions of late capitalism. *Garments Against Women* stitches together a poetic discourse that discloses its continuity with and as labor—rather than standing apart from it as sublimated art. For Boyer, poetic labor, frequently expressed *as* paralipsis (that is, as the work of not-saying), stands beside other forms and practices of working and not working.

In Boyer's hands, paralipsis thus opens up onto some of the practical and epistemological contradictions of life under contemporary global capital, as well as questions of gender and subjectivity that (often silently) undergird one's experience of such contradictions. Troping on the paralytic movement of her poetry, what Boyer calls "not writing" is, in fact, *working*—working in a sense that extends to the entire sphere of the biopolitical insofar as it accounts for the saturation of all human life by capital, including work and nonwork. In the poem "What is Not Writing," for example, Boyer states: "Not writing is working, and when not working at paid work working at unpaid work like caring for others, and when not at unpaid work like caring, caring also for a human body,

and when not caring for a human body . . . caring for the mind.”<sup>2</sup> There is a sense of limitlessness to this list. At stake generally is a form of precarity in the contemporary neoliberal economy: an alienation distributed unevenly but pervasively across the material realities of almost all forms of contemporary life and labor, which renders them ungraspable, difficult, or impossible to comprehend fully, and which lends an aura of wrongness or incompleteness to their perceived or experienced texture. Or as Boyer writes in “No World But the World”:

[T]here is a brute in these rooms and apartments and duplexes and trailers and shared houses and single-family houses and estates. . . . This brute like a shadow and a bear not a human is named *survival-life*. The brute is always saying something, is saying give me the labor of your body, not the work of your hands. We fall asleep in that bear’s arms.<sup>3</sup>

This condition of paralyzing embrace resembles what Bruce Robbins has called the “sweatshop sublime,” or the perception that one’s daily existence is tied into a whole web of precarious existences (via the mechanisms of multinational corporations or the networks of global supply chains) in a way that is not commensurate with understanding or action.<sup>4</sup> Boyer’s poetry raises the problem of its own foregrounding of one sort of garment work—performed by a white American woman in a household context, sewing for herself and her daughter or in some cases re-making the garments made by others—over a globalized labor sector whose exploitation seems, from the book’s perspective, dire but distant. In this, paralipsis reminds us of the problems of knowing and understanding across the economic and spatial inequalities that are created by and have come to characterize almost all work in today’s version of globalization, as thinkers such as Anthony Giddens, David Harvey, Fredric Jameson, and Carolyn Lesjak have pointed out.

Above and beyond this role in conceptualizing labor, paralipsis in *Garments Against Women* captures a central tension of life and literature today: the simultaneous exigency and near-impossibility of living in and working through this

“

***At stake [in Boyer’s poetry] is a form of precarity in the contemporary neoliberal economy: an alienation distributed unevenly but pervasively across the material realities of almost all forms of contemporary life and labor, which renders them ungraspable, difficult, or impossible to comprehend fully [...]***

”

“

***It is through the performance of not writing that poetry comes to be about other types of work, including garment work; this negative mode registers the conditions of neoliberal precarity that turn writing into non-writing and threaten other forms of life and work as well.***

”

inequality and shared precarity.<sup>5</sup> Paralipsis is a mode of both doing work and critiquing the work done. That is, Boyer’s formulation “I am not writing,” a paralyptic refrain throughout the book, performs writing even while it expresses resistance to its own specifically literary performance. On account of its capacity to address *itself* paralyptically, therefore, it distinguishes itself from other forms of work, even as it shares and reveals some of their qualities. Marking out its own difference as writing, this poetic mode not only diagnoses the dilemmas of work under contemporary neoliberal capitalism but, as we will see in what follows, it also points toward the transformative possibilities of its own performance of and expressed resistance to labor. It is through the performance of *not writing* that poetry comes to be about other types of work, including garment work; this negative mode registers the conditions of neoliberal precarity that turn writing into non-writing and threaten other forms of life and work as well. This mode is also the particularly anxious site of literary difference, whose double character of performance and resistance is possible for the work of writing in a way that it is not for all types of labor.

A second function of the paralyptic mode is thus that what appears as an opposition to literary form in fact reveals a crucial aspect of literary form: the extent to which form is (to use Caroline Levine’s term) “portable,”<sup>6</sup> and to which literary form functions flexibly and multiply across contexts, helping us think across distances and differences. Whereas the language of “flexibility” has been appropriated and utilized by neoliberal capitalism as a criterion for workplace success—today’s worker must be adaptable, willing to think and move in different contexts—poetic form models a different sort of flexibility. Poetic form, I maintain, asks us to imagine possible similarities and channels of communication between the different spaces through which it moves, while also serving

as a material reminder of difference.<sup>7</sup> I want to emphasize here this capacity for manifesting and maintaining difference. It is clear that the “not-writing” that happens while one is caretaking is not the same as the “not writing” that happens while one is ill, although these are linked as forms of “not writing.”

Similarly, in the case of the garment work Boyer raises as a homology for poetic work, as I will discuss later in this essay, it is through an exploration of the formal parallels of these activities that the vast chasms of inequality that separate them come into view. In “No World But the World,” Boyer concludes: “There is no superiority in making things or in re-making things.”

“It’s like everything else,” she writes, launching into a list that takes up almost a full page, starting with “old men who go fishing, hair extensions, nail art,” and ending with “the stateless state of contract labor, the invisible iv also the invisible catheter, everyone hugging the duct tape replica like starving little rhesus monkeys.”<sup>8</sup> The point of the catalog or the litany—a second form that Boyer frequently

employs—is that these things are *not* like anything or everything else, although they all partake in the realm of neoliberal precarity, undergirded and linked by structures such as gender and economic inequality. Aesthetic and poetic labor, as well as the forms they create, are not exempt from pressures of race, ethnicity, gender, sexuality, class, and nationality, as critics such as Dorothy Wang and Anthony Reed have argued.<sup>9</sup> To this list of conditions Boyer’s work adds the pressures of an economic precarity that seems to infiltrate everywhere, albeit unequally. The formal similarity of repeated and expanded paralipsis does not serve to point out interchangeability or flatness but rather to insist on irreducibility, incompatibility, multiplicity, and specificity. While the presence of formal congruence reveals new similarities, the same form or poetic mode functions variously across Boyer’s work, according to the differences it serves to address.

“

***Preferring not to, working anyway: this is how we live under capitalism.***

”

\*\*\*

Preferring not to, working anyway: this is how we live under capitalism. Resistance to work is a particular problem for creative labor today, and it is worth exploring before turning to Boyer’s exemplary text in greater depth. Speaking very generally, creativity in work has long been seen as inherently resistant to capitalist values, as the mark of a resistant kernel or trace of unalienated labor.

For Marx, for example, creativity is what gets lost in the division of labor and the conversion of labor to the form of the commodified object.<sup>10</sup> Two standard channels for workers' resistance have, correspondingly, involved outright disobedience and the more subtle recourse to creative labor: the stoppage of work altogether, as well as the subversive creativity of doing it differently. For several decades now, however, creativity and even disobedience have become traits more likely to be prized by capitalism than anathema to it. It is not difficult to recognize how, at least rhetorically, the contemporary workplace has come to rely on values such as "creativity," "flexibility," "thinking outside the box," "doing what you're not supposed to do," "innovation," "daring," and "disruption," particularly in information-based, corporate environments, as well as in contemporary politics. Of course, performing one's work more creatively hardly provides a clear path toward the revolutionary transformation of labor. Resistance is expected—or rather, it is foreclosed. This dynamic, theorized by Autonomist Marxists such as Paolo Virno and Maurizio Lazzarato, is summarized by Sarah Brouillette in her recent study of creative economies: today, she writes, "capital is busily orchestrating the incorporation of creativity into itself."<sup>11</sup> As production requires elements "loaded with ethos, culture, linguistic interaction"—as work tends to be based on the exercise of components such as affect, communication, and "people skills"—capital requires new subjectivity and ideas for its own expansion, continuation, and transformation.<sup>12</sup> It thus relies on the mental energy expended in the struggle to think beyond it. "In short," Brouillette writes,

workers disobey command, but disobedience is a prerequisite for productivity. . . . Postfactory labor, especially in its tendency towards valorization of the enterprising self, finds its legitimacy in the struggle against work. Hence, in a structuring tension, the struggle against work becomes something that the best work entails.<sup>13</sup>

Certainly there still exist forms of creativity that strive to operate outside of economic subsumption and that resist it head-on, just as there are possibilities for effective strategies of disobedience, sabotage, strike, and the outright refusal of work. But even before addressing the foreclosure of resistant creativity, we might be justified in asking about the feasibility of refusing to work in the first place, given the pervasive conditions of precarity that leave Boyer's speaker—and the many others who are not Boyer's speaker—in the constant embrace of the bear of *survival-life*. In any case, as standard models of resistance, creative

disobedience, and poetic innovation seem either impossible or less and less feasible, the tricky form of paralipsis begins to seem more and more practically important. For in addition to setting up channels and pathways for new ways of thinking about the relationships between categories of labor—new categories, new connections—in Boyer’s hands this literary mode indicates both the problems of precarized creative labor and the potential utility of this labor, attesting to a different version of creativity than the one so-called and used by capital.

This different creativity offered through literary work ultimately diverges from any sort of vision of or toward a “postwork” or “antiwork” society, to use Kathi Weeks’s terms.<sup>14</sup> Instead, it points toward the transformation of work in its own image, a “horizon of utopian potential,”<sup>15</sup> while still grappling with the problems of

and pressures on creativity itself in the present. Even as it acknowledges the crucial sphere of literary difference, this version of literary creativity blurs the boundaries between creative work and labor more generally. This blurring does not mean that creative work is compromised, cheapened, or further utilized by capital. Instead, it requires that we admit new similarities between creative work and activities often thought to contain little or no creative potential: the “work of the hands” as a resistant element *in* “the labor of the body.” As a writer struggling to raise her daughter, Boyer must keep writing; she must also struggle to keep that writing from becoming homogenous with every other

activity that counts as work; she must, finally, write in such a way as to maintain literary difference while not renouncing literary continuity with other forms of life and work. This version of creativity diverges from any “pure” sort of creativity championed as “outside” labor—which is also the sort of creativity that is simultaneously valued by contemporary capitalism in the form of a “model” of innovative and original form of work. Creativity comes about in and through (alienated) labor, not beyond or outside it. It reveals itself not as a trait, a set of innovations, or a particular originality, but as a paradox. Without declaring itself as an autonomous good, or ignoring its own complicity with the forces of capital, creativity in the work of poets such as Boyer takes the form of a productive self-awareness, or a performative contradiction, neither disavowing the work that it does for capital, nor acquiescing to this work. The usefulness of this

“

***Creativity comes about in and through (alienated) labor, not beyond or outside it. It reveals itself not as a trait, a set of innovations, or a particular originality, but as a paradox.***

”



paralyptic stance is its unsteady position between “not writing” and “writing,” undertaken in a combination slippery enough to allow for the maintenance of necessary difference, the potential for critique, and the continuation of survival.

\*\*\*

One of two long prose poems in *Garments Against Women* devoted explicitly to the contradictions of literary labor, “Not Writing” opens with a catalog of all the things that the poet is not writing. Its litany of refusal links poetry to a history of literary production and non-production, as well as to a broader sphere of cultural production that includes a range of genres and media characteristic of the literary profession. As Boyer writes,

I am not writing Facebook status updates. I am not writing thank-you notes or apologies. I am not writing conference papers. I am not writing book reviews. I am not writing blurbs.

I am not writing about contemporary art. I am not writing accounts of my travels. I am not writing reviews for *The New Inquiry* and not writing pieces for *Triple Canopy* and not writing anything for *Fence*. . . . I am not writing stories based on Nathaniel Hawthorne’s unwritten story ideas. I am not writing online dating profiles. I am not writing anonymous communiqués. I am not writing textbooks.<sup>16</sup>

On one level, this poem is about paralipsis generally: it evokes paralipsis simply through the repetition of the phrase “I am not writing,” a declaration that makes up the bulk of the poem. Yet this part of Boyer’s project is also about poetry: it functions as a negative approach to poetry, making poetry out of descriptions of what poetry is *not*. The distinction between “writing” and “writing poetry” seems to hinge on poetry’s difference from other genres. But this is an especially slippery distinction in a book of prose poems—as well as in the context of a literary career in which such other forms of writing are part of the job (“being a poet”) and the means of survival. What we sense in this poem is less poetic exceptionality than poetry’s continuity with other sorts of writing work: joining the insistence on “not writing” in constituting the poem is the catalog of “other things.” These are not supposed to be poetry, and yet they are what is given to read. In the second prose poem to address “not writing” explicitly, “What Is Not Writing,” Boyer inverts the premise, providing an extensive list of all

“

***From a catalog of genres that are not poetry [...] Boyer shifts breathtakingly into a lyrical and visionary tone, assuming the position of the vatic poet, gifted with an expanded historical vista (past and present and future), haunted by poetic revelations.***

”

the things that *do* in fact take place while one is not writing: working, loving, driving, worrying, caretaking, seeing friends, and everything else. Across the collection, moreover, Boyer continues to speculate on all the books that this book might have been, which are not necessarily poetry: a memoir, a “long, sad book called *A Woman Shopping*,” and “a novel called *Nero* about the world’s richest art star in space.”<sup>17</sup> Here as well, what the book is “not” gets ineluctably woven into the book itself. In these poems, the action of paralipsis is a hinge outward, a link from poetic production to the production of other texts, to the performance of other sorts of work. In the “not writing” (which is the writing) of poetry is the invocation of a world of other literature and other labor.

What is most remarkable about these two “not writing” poems is how squarely and how sincerely they inhabit the paradoxical space of “writing-not-writing.” In each example, there’s a similar paraliptic move: “I am not writing” becomes, by the end, indisputably *writing*, poetic writing. In the case of “Not Writing,” the first two paragraphs are straightforward enough—none of the things “not written” is what we are reading; but the end of the section flips into an unmistakably heightened poetic mode: “I am not writing a history of these times or of past times or of any future times and not even the history of these visions which are with me all day and all of the night.”<sup>18</sup> From a catalog of genres that are not poetry—and which situate poetry in its necessary proximity to other forms of writing—Boyer shifts breathtakingly into a lyrical and visionary tone, assuming the position of the vatic poet, gifted with an expanded historical vista (past and present and future), haunted by poetic revelations. And in the case of “What is Not Writing,” a catalog of negative thoughts about writing gives way to something else, a markedly emphatic instance on writing:

It is easy to imagine not writing, both accidentally and intentionally.  
It is easy because there have been years and months and days I have

thought . . . “writing steals from my life and gives me nothing but pain and worry and what I can’t have” or “writing steals from my already empty bank account” or “writing gives me ideas I do not need or want” or “writing is the manufacture of impossible desire” or writing is like literature is like the world of monsters is the production of culture is I hate culture is the world of wealthy women and of men.<sup>19</sup>

In the final “or” clause, what follows is not another record of a negative thought about writing, set off by quotation marks, but a negative thought *in* writing.

“

***On a first reading, the title *Garments Against Women* lets us imagine a broad picture of gendered labor on a global scale, one of an alienation so extreme that the products (‘garments’) produced by a certain category of workers (‘women’) are used in some manner of harm or another, ‘against’ them.***

”

This ending marks the emergence of an “I” in oppositional relation to the world at hand, a figure of strong subjective preference set against the domains of wealth and cultural production. Boyer’s paralytic mode cuts both ways: it gives us a poetic speaker and a realm of literary difference. At the same time, it functions negatively to evoke this background of cultural, physical, reproductive, and economically conditioned labor of which writing—even poetic writing, such as the ending of this poem—is undeniably a part.

With these visionary, insistent negative litanies, Boyer’s work takes place at the intersection of a set of dilemmas that constitute the subject/writer/worker who emerges in *Garments Against Women*. It is significant that Boyer focuses her discussion of work around the figure of the woman sewing—herself, first, and also others who sew. By invoking the overdetermined figure of the garment worker, Boyer poses a set of intertwined questions of geography and historicity, gendered subjectivity, creative work, and creative resistance to work. “I sew,” Boyer writes in a long multi-section poem called “Sewing,” “and the historical of sewing becomes a feeling,” “tendrilling out” in her much like the production of “culture,” when she “used to be a poet.”<sup>20</sup> Despite the effortlessness implied in this formulation (“tendrilling”), this “historical of sewing” is a difficult thing. Undertaken in its various and disparate contexts and forms, garment work spans and complicates the domestic and the global, as well as the categories of productive and reproductive, and waged and unwaged labor. Boyer’s knitting-together of domestic/reproductive, poetic, and waged labor on an expanded scale is anything but seamless. On a first

reading, the title *Garments Against Women* lets us imagine a broad picture of gendered labor on a global scale, one of an alienation so extreme that the products (“garments”) produced by a certain category of workers (“women”) are used in some manner of harm or another, “against” them. Certainly this picture is not false, as garment workers are and continue to be among capital’s most exploited laborers. Today (although global statistics vary), between 60 and 75 million people are employed in the garment industry worldwide.<sup>21</sup> Around three-fourths of these are women,<sup>22</sup> and according to one recent statistic, “global average wages in the textile and clothing industries are respectively 24 per cent and 35 per cent lower than the manufacturing industry average wage.”<sup>23</sup> Many of these workers are concentrated in the developing world, especially in Latin America and in Southeast Asia, but work in the U.S. is also tied into these dynamics. In Los Angeles, for example, “a vast network of garment factories and sweatshops anchor the fast fashion production end of a global supply chain,” according to a recent report which puts the number of workers in the area at 45,000, many of them “recently arrived Latino and Asian immigrant workers.” The report also notes the prevalence of “wage theft, low wages, and poor working conditions,” including difficulty accessing social support and childcare, for these workers.<sup>24</sup>

But Boyer’s book gives no concrete details of this sort. Instead, the particular garment worker in the book is a different one, making the clothes she will wear herself and mending a daughter’s knitwear, engaged in acts of personal economizing and stylizing as much as aesthetic expression. In “Sewing,” again, Boyer contextualizes this specific activity within the conditions of the book’s writing:

Now I give the hours of my life I don’t sell to my employers to the garments. . . . I save money like this. The fabric still contains the hours of the lives, those of the farmers and shepherds and chemists and factory workers and truckers and salespeople and the first purchasers, the givers-away, who were probably women who sewed.<sup>25</sup>

Sewing is situated in a private and domestic economy: it is what fills the hours “not sold” to an employer. Literally a part of “home economy,” a way to save money in that sphere, the act of sewing Boyer foregrounds occurs in the context of non-productive labor, outside of the time and remuneration of the employment with which it coexists. Simultaneously, however, Boyer acknowledges that this activity is deeply interwoven into the fabric of its “other” economic activity, and that the very materials with which she works have been produced

by other—non-domestic—workers, both male and female. While the clause “who were probably women who sewed” presumably refers to the “first purchasers” of the secondhand clothes purchased and re-made by the poem’s sewer, the phrase contains an important ambiguity: we do not in fact know whether their sewing occurred inside or outside the home, was paid or unpaid, alienated or intended for their own use. Similarly, the “factory workers” slipped quietly into the catalog of laborers here might also be garment workers themselves.

At one level, this configuration of workers points toward one conceptual knot that emerges in much thinking about gendered labor: the fact that the same activity—in this case, the production of garments—can happen both inside and outside the home. Work is differently valenced depending on this context, crossing and re-crossing the Marxist categories of “productive” (market-mediated and directly generative of profit for capital) and “reproductive” (outside of the market, productive only of labor-power) labor.<sup>26</sup> This distinction—and the fact of this frequent crossing—has often led and contributes still to the “invisibility,” naturalization, and non-remuneration of such work inside the home, as well as its devaluation outside it. But beyond this, we must still reckon with the deep discrepancy between the foregrounded poet/sewer, whose work is present and linked to aesthetic production via the poems, and the vaguer presence of the vast majority of garment workers in the contemporary globalized economy. In “Sewing,” Boyer conjures the figure of one Louise Jones, a woman whose name has been sewn with a “fashioned by”<sup>27</sup> label into the back of a dress that the speaker purchases secondhand, and the odor of whose body (the speaker reports) is still present in the dress. In contrast to Louise Jones, the workers who make up this greater majority are neither named, nor seen, nor sensed. Instead, they are abstracted into the price of the garments produced as calculus within a set of economic pressures: “I make anywhere from 10 to 15 dollars an hour at any of my three jobs. A garment from Target or Forever 21 costs 10 to 30 dollars . . . a garment from a department store costs 30 to 500 dollars,” Boyer writes. These workers appear to her as they do to a majority of Western consumers, almost invisible and made so by the allure of cheap (or just affordable) clothing. “[E]ach garment holds in it hours of a garment worker’s life,” Boyer reports having read on a sewing blog.<sup>28</sup> These lives and workers are acknowledged as present, but rendered distant and mediated through the internet, through literature, and through multiple steps of backwards mathematical calculation. Although these calculations are necessary, the question of who thinks to—and who is able

to—perform them remains open: for both the consumer who wishes to consume at lower prices in willful ignorance, and for the consumer who is driven by necessity to consume at lower prices, they may easily be left untouched. We are far from the “tendrilling” of “feeling”—and yet perhaps that “feeling” is a possible precondition for acknowledging that this distance is part of Boyer’s point. We might hear “feeling” in the sense of physical touch here: without necessarily becoming an impossible or overreaching call for empathy or encounter with other workers, necessary thought across distance happens—if it happens—via the “feel” or texture of the activity of making.

One quality of the “historical of sewing” is this complicated spatio-economic disposition at the present moment. Another, interlinked, is its relationship with gender. Although in a poem called “At Least Two Types of People,” Boyer seems at first to draw dividing lines along primarily economic class relations—those “for whom the ordinary worldliness is easy” and those for whom it is not, or the “haves” and the “have-nots”—Boyer’s economic distinction also reveals the extent to which this is bound up with gender. Participating in the unequal distribution of unequivocally gendered entities, her “have-nots” are those “for whom the salaries and weddings and garages do not come.”<sup>29</sup> In other words, in Boyer’s work, gender comes about most forcefully in conjunction with—not outside of—labor. The second prose section of “Sewing,” begins:

Every morning I wake up with a renewed commitment to learning to be what I am not. This is the day in which I will sew a straight seam . . .  
Each morning here is that sting of self-doubt, the chances of a wearable garment slim.<sup>30</sup>

Here, Boyer’s work is explicit about the creation of subjectivity by and through labor. The mastery of a skill means “learning to be what I am not,” while the failure to complete the task—the making of the garment—would mean the failure of the self. And yet by the end of this poem, subjectivity and labor seem again separate:

I’m okay with subjectivity. It’s silky wovens that mess me up. I put everything back in its place, thinking I ought to be sewing less and writing more. Everyday I have a list called “Everyday.”<sup>31</sup>

Boyer’s tone here is tricky, but the motion from a troubled realization of the intertwined nature of work and subjectivity to an acceptance of what *seems like*

their separation (the subject is fine, subjectivity is fine, even if work is going wrong) as a condition of the “everyday” is noteworthy. Through this progression, Boyer reveals this “everyday” as an ideology, a state in which the complex and dialectical interrelation of self and work acknowledged earlier in the poem appears to have disappeared. Following the work of Shulamith Firestone, we might contend that what emerges here is a “dialectic” of sex, or a “materialist view” of gender construction, by which some version of biological difference is intertwined with forms of labor to produce different sorts of gendered subjects, even if this construction is in fact obscured.<sup>32</sup> Boyer’s work negotiates the

“

***Gender and labor are inextricable; the garments that are ‘against’ women also, at least in part, represent what have created the category ‘women.’***

”

production and formation of the working subject. This gendered subject is generated through and shaped by labor, just as that labor contains forces that act upon or even against that subject in the plural (“garments against women”). Gender and labor are inextricable; the garments that are “against” women also, at least in part, represent what have created the category “women.”<sup>33</sup>

Finally, joining “labor” and “gender,” a third site of exploration here is the production of text—a type of work already evoked in our discussion of garment production, if we remember the etymology of the word “text” in the Latin for “to weave”—examined self-reflexively in its adjacency to other types of work. Here again we return to the figure of paralipsis as a way to characterize the complex relationship between textual and non-textual work.

“Sewing” begins with a remarkable admission: “Having given up literature, it was easy to become fixed on the idea of a single shirt.”<sup>34</sup> The statement carries with it the funny false ring characteristic of written paralipsis: we read that the poet has “given up literature” at the moment of the poem’s commencement and know this statement to be false because we are reading it. As we embark into a long and literary description of the details of craft, similarities to the literature it is alleged to have replaced also begin to emerge, as the material details of needlework take on, through their poetic description, an aesthetic dimension of their own. There is more to the metaphor of reproductive work being like poetic work, in other words, than surface resemblance—it’s not that “sewing” replaces “poetry writing” as a similar and maybe interchangeable activity, but that poetic production, despite claims of its replacement by sewing, is still present and in fact reveals important facets of this second activity. To claims such as Iris Marion Young’s, which address the subversive and pleasurable “tactile

“

*The performance of two sorts of labor at a time, a supposed ‘impossibility,’ is anything but impossible for women and sometimes men who are also caretakers in a domestic sphere. And it also goes without saying that domestic labor and literary work have happened and do happen at the same time. Paralipsis signals both problems at once [...]*

”

imagination” that can be part of the gendered experience of clothing (choosing, feeling, wearing), poetic work adds the important tactile element of *making*.<sup>35</sup> We can think back to the substitution of the production of the “historical of sewing” for the “tendrilling of culture” that represents poetry: the way the former production happens depends on its being made into a *feeling*, adding an affective or sensual component that also partakes of the realm of *poiesis*.

Boyer’s examination of textual production suggests a useful adjacency of poetic making and other labor, as the presence of poetic work opens onto other forms of labor, revealing them in newly felt ways. But at the same time, conversely, Boyer’s use of paralipsis in “Sewing” emphasizes the dynamic of doubleness and potential incompatibility between types of work necessitated by a standard division of labor. Boyer’s insistence that she has “given up” writing for sewing evokes a real historical and still irresolvable problem of labor for women and caregivers: the fact that, as Tillie Olson, Virginia Woolf, and innumerable others have either written about or attested to by their literary silence, it is in many cases simply not possible to write and sew at the same time, or to pursue a literary career while taking care of a family.<sup>36</sup> Bracketing the paralytic slipperiness of the text momentarily, the trade-off scenario here points toward a concrete problem of the intersection of poetic and gendered reproductive labor. Yet the use of paralipsis, by which both stated work (sewing) and actually carried-out work (writing) manage to be present, suggests a second and equally real problem for women workers or reproductive laborers: namely, that the unrecognizability of unwaged work such as sewing (or cooking or cleaning or bearing and raising children) means that it often does happen simultaneously with other waged or market-mediated labor. The performance of two sorts of labor at a time, a supposed “impossibility,” is anything but impossible



for women and sometimes men who are also caretakers in a domestic sphere. And it also goes without saying that domestic labor and literary work have happened and do happen at the same time. Paralipsis signals both problems at once: the necessary trade-off of one type of labor for another, or what has been a sacrifice for many workers, *as well as* the failure of that trade-off and the resulting persistence of multiple types of work, even if this is “supposed to be” impossible.

\*\*\*

I want to conclude by returning to the capacity of Boyer’s paraliptic mode to open onto differences such as these and to work in multiple and contradictory ways at once. As we have seen, paralipsis can be a tool for conceptualizing the value and relationship between types of labor, across difference, distance, and difficulty. Indeed, the early Latin handbook of rhetoric, the *Rhetorica ad Herennium*, points out that the form is especially useful in situations of epistemological difficulty. It is often deployed when the speaker would like to mention something that he or she could not easily verify or support<sup>37</sup>—such as the reality of a different worker’s life, elsewhere, under the conditions of contemporary globalization marked by the “link[ing] [of] distant localities in such a way that local happenings are shaped by events occurring many miles away and vice versa,” to use Anthony Giddens’s 1990 characterization of globalization.<sup>38</sup> In a sort of expanded and dialectical paralipsis, *Garments Against Women* is *not* the story of millions of garment workers worldwide, exploited, overworked, underpaid—and yet it does contain the story of their exploitation and obfuscation within it, hidden behind the closer-to-hand figure of the sewer. In this, it gives the lie to visions of reproductive and especially garment work as ahistorical, opening instead onto a dilemma of the contemporary moment. Coupled with the persistence of older or ahistorical models for reproductive labor is the colossal challenge of knowing the global dimensions of even the same activity, sewing.<sup>39</sup> The difficulty of collecting statistics for this type of work raises contemporary problems of both consumption and solidarity under conditions of abstraction, uncertainty, distance, and difference: this is labor that occurs in and outside formal workplace boundaries, changes rapidly, is often undocumented, and is above all rendered invisible to some by the workings of the global supply chain—the complex interactions between consumers, multinational corporations, local corporations, factory owners, and individual workers.<sup>40</sup> Rather than

emphasizing the global connection of workers, Boyer's work underscores the absence of what it is not, paralipically recognizing global populations of workers and recognizing the difficulty of thinking about—acknowledging, sensing, feeling—those workers. It offers a way, in Jameson's words, of “deal[ing] with the fact of distinct and autonomous realities that seem to offer no contact with each other.”<sup>41</sup>

But Jameson's phrasal verb—to deal with—indicates one final way in which paralipsis works: not only to address an epistemological dilemma, but really to move through a practical one. Contemporary labor is more than a conceptual problem; it is also a practical one. For Boyer, struggling to get by in and through and with her work as a poet—and even as she wants to deal with the problems of this work under the conditions of neoliberal precarity—paralipsis points toward a mode of working that would contain both resistance and work. This would be a way of expressing resistance to capital's terms for labor while nevertheless performing labor—a performance that would be necessary and valuable on its own terms. In the case of literary work, the motion of stated refusal (“I am not writing”), of strong preference, and of simultaneous labor is not a mode of deception or feigning; it is not pretending not to do something but doing that thing anyway. In the space of the literary figure, it is instead genuinely refusing and yet still genuinely doing. Boyer writes, “And how could it be literature if it is not coyly against literature, but sincerely against it, as it is also against ourselves?”<sup>42</sup> In Boyer's formulation, “not coy but sincere” refers to literature's turning against itself, or the act of refusal, the refusal of the literary. But Boyer's work is valuable for its sincerity on both sides: as sincere as its refusal to be literature is its refusal to refuse literature. Thus Boyer's work gives a new way of thinking about the capacities of literary language. Opening onto a social and historical context that includes multiple labor types, this literary paradox points toward a potential re-configuration of labor. Impossible to carry out, but impossible to stop, this labor would be carried out anyway, ultimately transformed through that performance. If this is an optimistic reading, it is not out of step with the book's concluding dedication: “I also thank my daughter, Hazel, who has allowed me the possibility of a literature that is not against us and to whom I dedicate this book.” The performance of work carries the germ of the transformation of work. For Boyer, any alternative future comes about through the joint and mutually illuminating performance of poetic and reproductive labor.

The stakes of this re-configuration are not limited to literary labor. In the case of reproductive or domestic labor, which is most frequently described as dull, if not deadening, most of the strategies put forth for such “dealing with” involve its abolition. This is achieved generally from two different and opposing directions. First, there are those like Angela Davis who call for the reorganization of this work, pointing toward models of its industrialization, communization/socialization, or automation through technology.<sup>43</sup> And second, there are those who, recognizing its intractability—the fact that neither technological innovation, existing models of collectivization, or integration into the market economy have significantly reduced what continues to seem like an unequally shared and unrewarding burden—call for flat-out refusal, rejection that would lead to a total transformation of work and society. Boyer’s formula differs from both of these. Rather, it involves something more like Susan Fraiman’s “awareness of domesticity’s doubleness,”<sup>44</sup> or like what Silvia Federici describes as her recognition of the “double character” of reproductive labor, acknowledging her own shift over several decades from the “refusal” to the “valorization” of housework as labor that is at once deeply exploitative but also necessary as a site of ongoing struggle and the condition for future struggle.<sup>45</sup> Moving beyond conceptions of the nuclear family and the housewife that have both defined and limited white Bourgeois feminism, it involves the recognition that reproductive labor is arduous, inescapable, and yet, as bell hooks writes, has been a “radically subversive political gesture” for some.<sup>46</sup>

And yet there’s more to be said about the affective charge of working paralip- tically, the pinch of fully inhabiting a contradiction or a paradoxical form. In the crunch of economic precarity, there is the question of whether the charge of working while working against work is even bearable, for whom, or for how long. And even beyond—or prior to—contemporary capital’s ability to absorb “creative” resistance, there is also the problem of what, if anything, expressed resistance means in a non-literary context when work is still carried out: for many forms of work, it doesn’t much matter what you say or think about the work you do, as long as you still do it. The literary strategy of paralipsis is, in other contexts, perhaps not so much a strategy as simply the mode of operation for many kinds of work. Thus, at the moment of seeming closest to other types of labor, literary work again separates itself. This reckoning with the fact that literary work must be set back apart from other types of labor is at the heart of the paradox of literary paralipsis, in the form of its

anxious self-renunciation. This sort of *poiesis* expresses the wish to be something else, performing its own desire not to be marked out as poetry, separate from other forms of work. This negative impulse is both literary work's positive force—it is the way poetry reveals the uneven labor-scape of which it is a part, and offers its vision for getting by—and the site of literary difference. “This is not poetry,” is Boyer’s continual assertion, which always nevertheless tips back over into poetry.

---

/ **Notes** /

<sup>1</sup> Amy King, “‘Literature is against us’: In Conversation with Anne Boyer,” *Poetry Foundation’s Harriet Blog*, August 30, 2015, <http://www.poetryfoundation.org/harriet/2015/08/literature-is-against-us-in-conversation-with-anne-boyer/>.

<sup>2</sup> Anne Boyer, *Garments Against Women* (Boise, ID: Ahsakta Press, 2015), 44.

<sup>3</sup> *Ibid.*, 19.

<sup>4</sup> See Bruce Robbins, “The Sweatshop Sublime,” in “Mobile Citizens, Media States,” special issue, *PMLA* 117, no. 1 (January 2002): 84–97.

<sup>5</sup> Of course conceptualization itself—what Jameson figures as *anagnorisis*, or conceptual recognition—is an important type of work done by poetry and literature. In his discussion of *anagnorisis* as recognition or discovery in the context of epic, Jameson turns from a discussion of global surplus populations to the demands of the “wages for housework” movement in order to emphasize the real importance of conceptual work: in this case, the recognition and re-configuration of labor categories, an “act of theoretical production, in which new characters are produced for our collective and political discovery and recognition.” *Valences of the Dialectic* (Brooklyn, NY: Verso, 2009), 582.

<sup>6</sup> Caroline Levine, *Forms: Whole, Rhythm, Hierarchy, Network* (Princeton, NJ: Princeton University Press, 2015), 7.

<sup>7</sup> See David Palumbo-Liu on the capacity of literary form to operate to reveal difference across contexts: “the element I wish to foreground,” he writes, “is . . . that of Form, of the englobing of the sameness/difference dialectic, as it is construed as a common ground in an uncommon age.” “Atlantic to Pacific: James, Todorov, Blackmur, and Intercontinental Form,” in *Shades of the Planet: American Literature as World Literature*, ed. Wai Chee Dimock and Lawrence Buell (Princeton, NJ: Princeton University Press, 2007), 199.

<sup>8</sup> Boyer, *Garments Against Women*, 20.

<sup>9</sup> Anthony Reed points to paralipsis as a mode of black aesthetic production; see his discussions of the work of W. E. B. Du Bois and the book *Zong!*, by the contemporary poet M. NourBeSe Philip. *Freedom Time: The Poetics and Politics of Black Experimental Writing* (Baltimore: Johns Hopkins University Press, 2016), 16, 57. See also Dorothy J.

Wang, *Thinking Its Presence: Form, Race, and Subjectivity in Contemporary Asian American Poetry* (Stanford, CA: Stanford University Press, 2014).

<sup>10</sup> This view is usually linked back to two passages, the first from volume 1 of *Capital*, in which Marx distinguishes human production by the presence of an imaginative design ([Chicago: Charles H. Kerr, 1906], 197-98), and the second from *German Ideology*, which proposes the variety of types of work (including “criticism”) that would be available to an individual in a communist society (ed. R. Pascal [New York: International Publishers, 1939], 22).

<sup>11</sup> Sarah Brouillette, *Literature and the Creative Economy* (Stanford, CA: Stanford University Press, 2014), 39.

<sup>12</sup> Paolo Virno, *A Grammar of the Multitude: For an Analysis of Contemporary Forms of Life* (Los Angeles/New York: Semiotext(e), 2004), 24.

<sup>13</sup> Brouillette, *Literature and the Creative Economy*, 40.

<sup>14</sup> Kathi Weeks, *The Problem with Work: Feminism, Marxism, Antiwork Politics, and Postwork Imaginaries* (Durham: Duke University Press, 2011).

<sup>15</sup> Weeks, *The Problem with Work*, 29.

<sup>16</sup> Boyer, *Garments Against Women*, 42.

<sup>17</sup> *Ibid.*, 41.

<sup>18</sup> *Ibid.*, 43.

<sup>19</sup> *Ibid.*, 46.

<sup>20</sup> Boyer, *Garments Against Women*, 29.

<sup>21</sup> Lina Stotz and Gillian Kane, “Global Garment Industry Factsheet,” *Clean Clothes Campaign*, February 2015, <https://www.cleanclothes.org/resources/publications/factsheets/general-factsheet-garment-industry-february-2015.pdf>. Global statistics are difficult to come by; the web source cited here uses figures drawn from the International Labour Organization (ILO) as well as an NGO called “Women Working Worldwide.”

<sup>22</sup> *Ibid.*

<sup>23</sup> Jenny Holdcroft, “Transforming Supply Chain Industrial Relations,” *International Journal of Labour Research* 7, nos. 1 and 2 (December 2015): 96.

<sup>24</sup> Garment Worker Center, Research Action Design, and UCLA Labor Center, *Hanging by a Thread!: Los Angeles Garment Workers’ Struggle to Access Quality Care for their Children*, 2015, <http://garmentworkercenter.org/wp-content/uploads/2015/05/CHILDCARE-Full-Report-English-4-17SM.pdf>. This report speaks further to the difficult or impossible intersection of multiple types of labor.

<sup>25</sup> Boyer, *Garments Against Women*, 29.

<sup>26</sup> See Maya Gonzalez and Jeanne Neton’s “The Logic of Gender: On the Separation of Spheres and the Process of Abjection” for a detailed explanation of the overlappings of these spheres, and the shifting place of reproductive labor among them. In “Gender, Race, Class and Other Misfortunes,” special issue, *Endnotes* 3 (September 2013), <https://endnotes.org.uk/issues/3/en/endnotes-the-logic-of-gender>.

<sup>27</sup> Boyer, *Garments Against Women*, 28.

<sup>28</sup> *Ibid.*, 29.

<sup>29</sup> *Ibid.*, 23.

<sup>30</sup> *Ibid.*, 26.

<sup>31</sup> *Ibid.*, 26.

<sup>32</sup> Shulamith Firestone, *The Dialectic of Sex: The Case for Feminist Revolution* (New York: William Morrow and Co., 1970), 286.

<sup>33</sup> This point opens up some difficulty with the term “women,” if by “women” we refer mainly to a certain category of workers. One alternative would be to speak of “feminized” workers—for those who take on traditionally “female” tasks; another would be the term “reproductive labor force.” I use “gendered reproductive labor” again as description of this work at present, which is to say that I acknowledge that it is not necessarily carried out by biological female human beings, and that the relationship between “gender” and “labor” is not at all stable, but want still to maintain “gender” as a factor in shaping who does this sort of work, and how.

<sup>34</sup> Boyer, *Garments Against Women*, 25.

<sup>35</sup> Iris Marion Young, *On Female Body Experience: “Throwing Like a Girl” and Other Essays* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2005), 70.

<sup>36</sup> Tillie Olsen’s *Silences* ties the silence of women authors and would-be authors to the material and economic circumstances of their lives. “More than in any other human relationship,” she writes, “overwhelmingly more, motherhood means being constantly interruptible, responsive, responsible. . . . Work interrupted, deferred, relinquished, makes blockage—at best, lesser accomplishment.” (New York: Feminist Press at the City University of New York, 2003), 19.

<sup>37</sup> “This figure is useful if employed in a matter which it is not pertinent to call specifically to the attention of others, because there is advantage in making only an indirect reference to it, or because the direct reference would be tedious or undignified, or can easily be refuted. As a result, it is of greater advantage to create a suspicion by Paralipsis than to insist directly on a statement that is refutable.” Cicero, *Rhetorica ad Herennium*, trans. Harry Caplan, (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 1954), Book VI, xxvi, 36-37, 321.

<sup>38</sup> Anthony Giddens, *The Consequences of Modernity* (Stanford, CA: Stanford University Press, 1990), 64. For Giddens, as well as Harvey, Lesjak, and Jameson, the dilemma of globalization is at least in part an epistemological one. Harvey’s call for a better understanding of the “global historical geography of [uneven] capital accumulation” is picked up Jameson and, following him, Lesjak, for whom—in an alternative to Robbins’s Kantian “sublime”—the figure of the dialectic is one way to approach the difficult conjunction of disparate places and workers. As Lesjak writes, “the particular challenge of a spatial dialectic is to hold together the visceral, affective, and local textures of experience and the global, virtual, derivative-driven flows of capital.” Carolyn Lesjak, “Reading Dialectically,” *Criticism* 55, no. 2 (Spring 2013): 264.

<sup>39</sup> As Beth English points out, “normative standards of labor” hinder efforts by activists, policymakers and others to regulate and improve conditions in the garment sector: these include ideas about garment work as a first step out of the home or an agricultural society into the industrial workplace for women. “Global Women’s Work: Historical Perspectives on the Textile and Garment Industries,” in “The Gender Issue: Beyond Exclusion,” special issue, *Journal of International Affairs* 67, no. 1 (Fall/Winter 2013): 68.

<sup>40</sup> Although already dated, a statistic from the ILO indicates the pace of such transformation: “In the twenty years from 1970 to 1990,” according to a 1996 report, “the number of TCF [textile, clothing, and footwear] workers increased by 597 percent in Malaysia; 416 percent in Bangladesh; 385 percent in Sri Lanka; 334 percent in Indonesia; 271 percent in the Philippines; and 137 percent in Korea.” “Globalization Changes the Face of Textile, Clothing and Footwear Industries,” *International Labour Organization*, October 28, 1996, [http://www.ilo.org/global/about-the-ilo/newsroom/news/WCMS\\_008075/lang--en/index.htm](http://www.ilo.org/global/about-the-ilo/newsroom/news/WCMS_008075/lang--en/index.htm).

<sup>41</sup> Jameson, *Valences of the Dialectic*, 24.

<sup>42</sup> Boyer, *Garments Against Women*, 48.

<sup>43</sup> Angela Davis, “The Approaching Obsolescence of Housework: a Working-Class Perspective,” in *Women, Race, and Class* (London: The Women’s Press, 1981).

<sup>44</sup> Fraiman describes “the tension between, on the one hand, asserting the value of domestic cultures and women’s creative shaping of them and, on the other, acknowledging the evils of domestic ideology as well as the unredeemable aspects of domestic labor.” *Extreme Domesticity: A View from the Margins* (New York: Columbia University Press, 2017), 19, 16.

<sup>45</sup> Federici writes of her late realization of reproductive work as “work that reproduces us and ‘valorizes’ us not only in view of our integration in the labor market but also against it,” the place where “the contradictions inherent in ‘alienated labor’ are most explosive” and a possible “ground zero for revolutionary practice.” *Revolution at Point Zero: Housework, Reproduction, and Feminist Struggle* (Oakland, CA: PM Press, 2012), 2-3.

<sup>46</sup> bell hooks, “Homeplace,” in *Yearning: Race, Gender, and Cultural Politics* (Boston: South End Press, 1990), 43. For hooks, defining domestic labor as women’s natural work not only obscures the work being done but also erases the political choice by black women to create “homeplace” as “a site of resistance . . . defined less by whether or not black women and men were conforming to sexist behavior norms and more by our struggle . . . to resist racist domination and oppression.” “Homeplace,” 42, 47.