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Exploring the “Mind of the Hive”: Embodied Cognition in Sylvia Plath’s Bee Poems

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Critics of Sylvia Plath’s poetry over the decades have interpreted her writing of the body in different, often conflicting, ways. Alicia Ostriker reads the poems as an attempt to transcend the burden of female embodiment, while Kathleen Lant, Joanne Fiet Diehl, and Margaret Homans censure the poems’ obsessions with injured and demeaned female bodies. Others, such as Sandra M. Gilbert, Lynda K. Bundtzen, and Susan Van Dyne, have explained Plath’s body-writing as her means of empowering the female body in a masculinist culture. More recent Plath critics, such as Jacqueline Rose and Christina Britzolakis, have rejected the notions that Plath is writing an essentially female body or searching for her true womanly self. In The Haunting of Sylvia Plath, Rose suggests that Plath is revealing the impossibility of this conception of an authentic female self by writing it into her poems and subjecting it to critique. Britzolakis in Sylvia Plath and the Theatre of Mourning similarly argues that Plath’s work is not an authenticity quest, but a self-reflexive art, a series of inauthentic performances that parody cultural scripts such as “true confessions” and rampant consumerism. In these approaches, the material biological body is no longer at issue. Rose’s psychoanalytic approach determines that “for Plath, words plunge into the body, and writing is a sexual act,” yet this body is not a real body, but rather a representation in the mind mediated by Freudian notions of desire and fantasy (p. 29). Britzolakis reads the body in Plath’s oeuvre not through its materiality but as a “sign whose cultural meanings are in crisis” (p. 156). Conflicting pictures of Plath’s writing of the body thus emerge, some based on a biological notion of the body and some on a notion of body as discourse or representation. For me, this critical conflict raises the question of a middle ground. Is there a way to take Plath’s attentiveness to the biological body into account without resorting to a biological essentialism?

Plath’s famous bee sequence offers a useful site to approach this question, for in it questions of body, mind, culture, and feminist resistance all come together. In the five poems of the sequence, Plath explores two different models of self through the metaphor of the hive, experimenting with different configurations of the relationship of bodies, identity, and the world. The sequence begins with a model of body and identity that emphasizes surface in “The Bee Meeting.” It is a model that proves unsuccessful in resisting the
oppressive representatives of culture in the poem. But the following poems in
the sequence move beyond the surface of the hive, delving more deeply into
its complex, emergent, and distributed processes, offering a more successful
model of identity and source for resistance. Ultimately, I will argue, Plath's
status as both beekeeper and poet creates a fruitful nexus of science and
poetry that allows her to examine the structures and mechanisms of her own
consciousness, her hive-mind, and a new foundation for her sense of self that
runs deeper than the surface model with which she begins the sequence.

A more recent trend in feminist theory has sought to avoid the biological
essentialism of notions like *écriture féminine* but also to reject a strict social
constructionism in which biology is figured as a passive surface that culture
inscribes. These critics are more suspicious of the nature/culture and sex/
gender distinctions, arguing instead for a complex interweaving of biological
and cultural factors in the formation of identity. Judith Butler in *Bodies That
Matter* offers a performative model for subjectivity in which biological sex
and the body's materiality emerge through a “process of materialization that
stabilizes over time” through repeated unconscious performances or “cita-
tions” of gendered practices. Yet this process of materialization is never quite
complete, Butler claims, for material bodies are unstable, and gaps occur in
their unconscious performance such that they can exceed or even escape
the norm (p. 10). Elizabeth Grosz in *Volatile Bodies* is particularly troubled
by the erasure of bodies in social constructionist models of feminist theory
and hopes to move the body to the center of analysis as “the very ‘stuff’ of
subjectivity.” Like Butler, she is intrigued by the ability of bodies “to always
extend the frameworks which attempt to contain them, to seep beyond their
domains of control” (p. xi). Rejecting dualist models of the relationship
between mind and body, she suggests a Möbius strip metaphor, an inverted
three-dimensional figure eight, for understanding the relationship between
inside and outside, between corporeal exterior and psychical interior in the
formation of identity (p. xii).

While I appreciate that these theorists move to take bodies seriously in
their accounts, their models still seem to offer a potentially restrictive notion
of the body as a surface. According to Butler's theory, the unconscious per-
formance of ritualized acts and gestures produces the illusion of depth or
interiority “on the surface of the body.” Consequently, the “body is not a
‘being’” for Butler, “but a variable boundary, a surface whose permeability
is politically regulated” (p. 139). Similarly, Grosz's Möbius strip metaphor
figures subjectivity as “a surface whose inscriptions and rotations in three-
dimensional space produce the effects of depth” (p. 210). “All the effects
of depth and interiority can be explained in terms of the inscriptions and
transformations of the subject's corporeal surface” (p. vii). Butler and Grosz
in their rethinking of the relationship between nature and culture under-
standably concentrate on the shifting and permeable surface boundary of
the body at which the two interact. But their figuration of the body as a surface phenomenon and the psyche as a depth phenomenon potentially deemphasizes the very real materiality of the body’s corporeal (not just psychical) depths.

One recent feminist theorist attempts to take that corporeal depth into account without reverting to a biological determinism. Elizabeth Wilson’s *Neural Geographies: Feminism and the Microstructure of Cognition* delves beneath the surface of the body into its volatile neurobiological systems to explore a different foundation for feminist projects. Wilson critiques Butler’s move to displace sex and situate it inside the discursive field of a generalized gender, finding that this foundational “antibiological moment” forecloses any of the analytical potential of “this (biological) body” in Butler’s project. Wilson offers a more embodied alternative to gender as the foundation of feminist projects in the notion of *morphology*, which she borrows from Luce Irigaray (p. 63, italics in original). Wilson explains that *morphology* is not simply a social representation of the body or the internalization of a particular body image, nor is it reducible to a kind of foundational fixed anatomy. Instead, she defines it as “a particular biocultural instantiation of the body” (p. 64). Let me emphasize the word *particular* here; the focus is not on generalized representations of “the body,” but on “this (biological) body” whose biology itself is mutable and volatile; it has “scriptures” of its own (p. 64). Morphology can be thought of as “biology rewriting itself” according to the complex interplay of biological, environmental, and cultural influences (pp. 64, 65). In this model, as Wilson argues, “the separation of biology from culture that theories of gender require as their first premise is no longer operative” (p. 65). “Outside” forces that we like to call cultural do not inscribe a completely inert and passive “inside” of biological matter, but neither can biology be understood as an originary substrate that emerges as a full presence apart from the influence of the outside (p. 65). Therefore, in exploring the critical possibilities of the microstructures of cognition in “this biological body,” Wilson asserts not a biological determinism, but a “neurocognitive overdeterminism . . . that operate[s] in excess of the limits of presence, location, and stasis” (p. 201).

It is a return to the vicissitudes and possibilities of “this biological body” and its interplay with culture that Plath is exploring in many of her poems, and especially in the bee sequence. The mutually constitutive relationship between body and culture is an important and fraught question for Plath, and the lyric laboratory of the bee poems facilitates an experimental attempt to imagine a form of embodiment that does not dissipate into script or surface. The hive-mind model offers a more successful understanding of the body/self that, like Wilson’s model, incorporates the interior morphological structures of consciousness.
Plath’s bee poems, written as a group in early October of 1962, just months before her suicide, have often been read as a formulation of a new poetics and her discovery of a new, more powerful creative identity and agency. For example, Paula Bennett, like many Plath critics in the 80s, determines that the bee poems represent Plath’s search for a “true self,” a self that she ultimately finds by identifying with the image of the queen bee and her deadly, victorious flight: she is “reborn even as, stripping off her old self, . . . she dies.” More recent critics have argued that the bee poems are exploring a much different model of selfhood than the “true self” model. Frederike Haberkamp finds that the bee poems illustrate a shift in Plath’s work from a self “defined within a rigid matrix of mutually exclusive opposites” to a self understood as riddle and paradox, a “self-in-process.” Similarly, Britzolakis asserts that the bee poems resist a stable notion of subjectivity, the image of the hive allowing for shifting and multiple points of identification (pp. 96, 97). Plath is actually critical of the killer queen, according to Toni Saldívar, who argues that she is seeking a new, more sustaining fiction of self than the queen bee image.

Critics connect the bee poems not only to Plath’s model of self but also to consciousness in particular. David Holbrook claims that the image of the hive in the poems reflects Plath’s own diseased and “schizoid” consciousness. The images of the hive, the bee box, and the cellar in the poems have often been interpreted as images of Plath’s unconscious or of consciousness more generally. Carole Ferrier finds that the bee poems “chart a progress in consciousness” but not in a solipsistic sense of Plath searching for her individual “true self.” Instead, the poems attempt “to break through to a generalization and universalization of her personal experiences.” In other words, Plath uses a more phenomenological account of her own experiences of consciousness in order to thematize issues of selfhood and consciousness more generally.

So how is Plath theorizing consciousness in the bee poems? While I appreciate Ferrier’s shift toward understanding the bee poems as an examination of a more universal notion of consciousness, I believe her answer to this question falls short. Ferrier concludes that Plath’s progression in the poems ends, as many other critics argue, in her identification with the queen bee in “Wintering.” This reading seems less plausible as the queen is mentioned only once in the poem and as more of an equal to her fellow female bees (p. 215). Instead, I will argue that the progression in consciousness charted in the bee poems moves from the surface to the interior of the body/self, from a model of consciousness as the product of culture to a model that incorporates the deeper morphological structures of consciousness. In the bee poems, Plath moves beneath the surface of
the performative model of identity she begins with in “The Bee Meeting,” exploring in the image of the hive a more deeply biological foundation for identity and source for feminist resistance.

The bee poems open with “The Bee Meeting,” a title that reflects the exterior, culturally oriented model of identity it posits. A “bee” can also be a gathering of neighbors, as in a quilting bee, so the title “Bee Meeting” emphasizes the relational, culturally constructed notion of self that will appear in the poem. The speaker of the poem joins a meeting of some “villagers” (p. 64, l. 1): “The rector, the midwife, the sexton, the agent for bees” (l. 2). But she does not at any time feel a part of the ritual that seems to be taking place among them: “they are all gloved and covered, why did nobody tell me?” (l. 4). The questions, confusion, and rhetoric of vulnerability continue throughout the poem, as the speaker is passively “led through a beanfield” (l. 15) by the villagers to the “circle of hives” in the “shorn grove” (p. 65, l. 23). They finally dress her in protective gear like their own, leading her to claim, “they are making me one of them” by putting on her body’s surface an identity of their choosing (l. 22). The speaker here is becoming a cultural product as she passively submits to the shaping and directing power of the villagers. She therefore immediately identifies with the hive as the villagers approach it for the “operation” (l. 26), an identification that is also reflected in the sound of the “I”s of the first three lines disappearing into the assonance of the “white hive” and the “mind of the hive” (ll. 34, 37):

I cannot run, I am rooted, and the gorse hurts me
With its yellow purses, its spiky armoury.
I could not run without having to run forever.
The white hive is snug as a virgin,
Sealing off her brood cells, her honey, and quietly humming.

Smoke rolls and scarves in the grove.
The mind of the hive thinks this is the end of everything.
Here they come, the outriders, on their hysterical elastics.
If I stand very still, they will think I am cow parsley,
A gullible head untouched by their animosity.
Not even nodding, a personage in a hedgerow. (ll. 31-41)

Here the speaker views the hive as a monolithic entity, sealing off its cells, trying to protect its “virginity,” avoiding penetration by the villagers. She, like “the mind of the hive,” thinks their attack “is the end of everything” (l. 37). In this poem, the hive represents a monolithic model of self understood as a passive surface for culture to penetrate, shape, and direct, a model allowing little potential for self-assertion or resistance.

The hive does resist, however. At the same time that the speaker conflates herself with the passive hive, fearing the attack of the villagers, she
also remains separate from the hive, fearing the stings of “the outriders, on their hysterical elastics” (l. 38). These outriders illustrate that the hive is not a monolithic entity, but a complex community with many members. Nor is the hive passive; rather, it actively resists the attack. Significantly, however, their resistance is described as “hysterical.” Feminist theorist Susan Bordo’s work on hysteria may help to enlighten our understanding of the hive’s attack here. She describes the sufferer of hysteria (often female) as a performance artist acting out and giving voice to dramas of social oppression. She explains how these pathologies are often exaggerations of stereotypically feminine traits or the particular “feminine mystique” of their time. In such cases, Bordo determines, “the woman’s body may be viewed as a surface on which conventional constructions of femininity are exposed starkly to view, through their inscription in extreme or hyperliteral form.”

Thus, the hive puts on a “hysterical” performance for the interlopers, attempting to resist the attack.

The speaker of the poem seems to learn a lesson from the hive’s surface performance of resistance, as she plans out a stereotypically feminine performance of her own. She alludes to the mythological nymph Daphne, who ran to escape the lovesick, pursuing Apollo. Like Daphne, the speaker here worries, “I could not run without having to run forever.” Unlike Daphne, however, who is turned into a tree by her father, this speaker desires to turn herself into a plant. Moreover, she desires not to be a beautiful tree, but “cow parsley,” a common weed (l. 39). If the outrider bees perform a typical “hysterical” script, then the speaker performs stereotypical feminine passivity here. She has a “gullible head,” easily confused and duped by others because of lack of knowledge and confidence in herself (l. 40). She is so passive as to be “not even nodding” (l. 41). She is not even a real person, but a mere “personage,” an image of a person carved out of the hedgerow—a kind of topiary wallflower (l. 41). The passivity continues later in the poem, where the speaker identifies herself with another passive performer: “Pillar of white in a blackout of knives. / I am the magician’s girl who does not flinch” (p. 66, ll. 52-53).

The speaker also sees her passive performance reflected in that of the old queen, with whom she identifies once the villagers have “open[ed] the chambers” of the hive (p. 65, l. 42). “The old queen does not show herself” (p. 66, l. 50) during the operation, the goal of which is actually to save the queen for another year by “moving the virgins” who would be her rivals (l. 49). Mary Lynn Broe argues that the passive performance embodied in the queen bee offers a new understanding of passivity as a source of strength and power. “Physically, her fate is in others’ hands. Mentally she remains untouched, undetected, her mind as well as her body ‘sealed in wax’” (p. 100). This optimistic reading is troubling to me with its sug-
gestion that no matter what is done to the woman’s body, her mind can merely slip away to some safe and protected place where she imagines herself as strong and powerful. In a more plausible reading, Britzolakis argues that the speaker in the poem is deliberately performing this naive and passive performance in the poem, a “masquerade which allows her to assume the central role in the drama,” and thus demonstrates a kind of poetic authority (p. 97).

Though such performances of hysteria and passivity are perhaps useful in their exposure and indictment of particular cultural values for gender, Bordo ultimately questions the efficacy of protests that cause so much suffering on the part of the performer. Plath, too, seems to question the efficacy of the bees’ hysterical performance. The villagers are so knowledgeable of how the bees will respond that they are wearing protective gear against them and will not be harmed or penetrated themselves. The head “surgeon” of the ritual is even more impenetrable, for he is dressed like an astronaut in “a green helmet, / Shining gloves and white suit” (p. 65, ll. 28-29). The villagers have also brought the “smoke [that] rolls and scarves in the grove,” which guarantees that the outriders will be crippled, disoriented, and confused in their hysterical flight (l. 36). Even if the speaker of the poem puts on a willed performance, a reinvention of self to prove some kind of poetic authority, her ultimate fate is far from victorious. The poem concludes with the question, “Whose is that long white box in the grove, what have they accomplished, why am I cold?” (p. 66, l. 55). The speaker’s passive performance, willed or not, inevitably culminates in a coffin holding the most passive body of all—a corpse.

“The Bee Meeting” introduces the conflation of hive/mind/self that will be key to understanding the poems that follow in the sequence. But here the hive/self is viewed, for the most part, monolithically as a passive object to be manipulated by “the villagers,” the representatives of cultural influence. The model of the body/self as a surface on which to perform already scripted gender roles results in a most costly defeat.

The next poem in the sequence, however, shows Plath pushing beneath the surface of the hive/self, exploring its complexity. “The Arrival of the Bee Box,” with its shorter lines that do not overflow onto the next, has a much less hysterical tone and less explicitly performative nature than “The Bee Meeting.” The “long white box in the grove” of the last poem has transformed in this poem into “a clean wood box” that the speaker has “ordered” (p. 67, l. 1). Though it might look like the “coffin of a midget,” she knows it is not because there is “such a din in it” (ll. 3, 5). The next stanza illustrates an interesting conflation of the bee box and the mind:
The box is locked, it is dangerous. I have to live with it overnight. And I can’t keep away from it. There are no windows, so I can’t see what is in there. There is only a little grid, no exit. (ll. 6-10)

Like the unconscious mind, she has “to live with it overnight,” and she “can’t keep away” from its influence. Instead of a monolith or a “hysterical” performance, like the outriders in “The Bee Meeting,” here the hive/mind is complicated, deep, and dangerous. Like a scientist of the mind, the speaker shifts perspective back and forth, between objective analysis of the mind from the outside and subjective experience of the mind from the inside. She is both outside looking in—“I can’t see what is in there”—and inside looking out—finding “no exit.” What she does know is that it is busy and multiplicitous in the box/mind. The bees are “swarmy” and “clambering” (ll. 13, 15); they are “like a Roman mob, / Small, taken one by one, but my god, together!” (ll. 19-20). The speaker also has a fluctuating sense of authority over the bees. She asserts, “They can die, I need feed them nothing, I am the owner,” but also describes their noise as “appalling” and “unintelligible,” and determines “I am not a Caesar” (p. 67, ll. 25, 17, 18, 22).

The speaker’s understanding of her relationship to this complex and dangerous image of the mind is vexed. She is both fascinated—“I can’t keep away from it”—and terrified—“I have simply ordered a box of maniacs” (ll. 8, 23). She feels that she has some power over it, that she is the owner, but also that it is in some ways completely beyond her control. This lack of control provokes a return to the Daphne myth of transformation at the end of the poem: “I wonder if they would forget me / If I just undid the locks and stood back and turned into a tree” (p. 68, l. 28). But unlike the speaker of “The Bee Meeting,” who remains panicked in the face of the hysterical bees, the speaker here is more reasonable and hopeful about her relationship to the box and its crazy contents: “I am no source of honey / So why should they turn on me?” (ll. 33-34). Rather than performing passivity in the face of the swarm, this speaker takes action, deciding to nurture the box/mind, despite its uncontrollable and unfathomable nature: “Tomorrow I will be sweet God, I will set them free. // The box is only temporary” (ll. 35-36).

The final line of this poem is the only place in the bee poems where Plath breaks out of her five-line stanza, and the implications of this alteration are important to examine. The shift in style and tone from “The Bee Meeting” to “The Arrival of the Bee Box” suggests that Plath is experimenting with, or has “arrived” at, a different approach to understanding the mind/self. By ordering her own bee box, the speaker is taking on a more authoritative stance than she took in the first poem. Yet unlike the easy
authority and control of the villagers in their manipulation of the hive, the speaker here exemplifies a scientific curiosity that remains open to learning from the box itself through her own senses (she places her eye to the box’s grid and listens carefully to their “unintelligible syllables”). These actions imply that she wants to explore the workings of the hive/mind on a deeper level. She’s not just in it for the honey.

Scientific investigation does require putting things in “boxes,” however, just as her scientist father Otto Plath placed bees and chunks of hives into jars to study. Such boxes and jars can be aids to observation and analysis but can also distort the study because they create an unnatural environment. By beginning her own investigation of bees with an artificially imposed “box” of them, Plath signals the scientific nature of her study, with its emphasis on the structures and mechanisms behind the workings of the hive. Indeed, we might read Plath’s boxy five-line stanzas throughout the sequence as metaphorical bee boxes. But she is not really interested in understanding the bees and, metaphorically, her own mind, in such an artificial box. As the break in stanza form suggests, “The box is only temporary.” She will set the bees free to construct their natural environment, the hive. Plath wants to explore the structures and mechanisms behind consciousness and the mind not merely from a detached, scientific perspective, but, more importantly, from a phenomenological standpoint—learning how those structures and mechanisms feel for an unfettered living organism.

My argument that Plath adopts a more scientific perspective here in the bee poems is supported by her biography. We know from her letters and journals that Plath kept bees at her home in Devon beginning in the summer of 1962. As many have noted, her father, Otto Plath, was a professor of biology at Boston University and, more specifically, an entomologist who studied bees and published *Bumblebees and Their Ways* (1934). There is no direct proof that Plath read her father’s book, but it seems quite probable that his studious daughter who also had an interest in bees would have read his work. Gilbert has pointed out that the two writers focus on many of the same aspects of bees—the velvety pile and flight of the queen, the transferring of hives from boxes, bee stings, and the wintering of bees (p. 62).

The beginning of Otto’s bee book is lyrical in its descriptions of the work of the colony and the beauty of the creatures themselves: “If one takes a walk on a clear, sunny day in middle April, when the first willows are in bloom, one may often see young bumblebee queens eagerly sipping nectar from the catkins. It is a delightful thing to pause and watch these queens, clad in their costumes of rich velvet, their wings not yet torn by the long foraging flights which they will be obliged to take later.” But as the book progresses, the more invasive scientific procedures and dry
classifications appear in chapters such as “Rearing of Colonies in Artificial Nests,” “Finding and Transferring of Colonies,” “The Economic Importance of Bumblebees,” and “Classification Based on Behavior.” Sylvia Plath’s own bee “treatise” obviously remains on the more lyrical side of the spectrum. Mary Lynn Broe argues that Plath is revising the highly organized “theoretical world” of her father’s bumblebees in her more “real world” experience with honeybees. I agree that the form of the poem allows Plath to “revise” or perhaps even critique the scientific perspective embodied in her father’s work, but that revision does not require that she leave her scientific toolbox behind, just as Otto Plath could not leave his passion for bumblebees and their ways out of his treatise.

Another justification for reading the bee poems as a kind of scientific experiment on Plath’s part comes from Susan Van Dyne’s useful study of the manuscripts of the Ariel poems. She explains that Plath wrote drafts of the bee poems on the back of a typed draft of her successful autobiographical novel The Bell Jar, apparently working her way from back to front, almost without missing a page, through two chapters of the novel (p. 102). Van Dyne makes some interesting speculations about the meaning of this choice on Plath’s part, but she does not discuss the implication that Plath is figuratively, like her father, putting her bees in a bell jar by making this choice.

I was struck while reading Otto Plath’s Bumblebees and Their Ways by the number of times he mentions taking bees and pieces of hives and putting them in glass jars to study (pp. 29, 51, 107-09). Certainly, his daughter must have been conscious of her parallel action in writing the bee poems on The Bell Jar, a bell jar containing and facilitating her experimental visions and revisions.

In the lyric laboratories of her poems, then, Plath is able to explore, both scientifically and poetically, the structures and mechanisms of the hive. This fruitful nexus of science and poetry also allows Plath to examine metaphorically the structures and mechanisms of her own consciousness, her hive-mind, and a new foundation for her sense of self that is deeper than the surface model illustrated in “The Bee Meeting.” Cognitive science has often used the metaphor of the hive (or a similar construction) to explain how consciousness is structured and functions. These models are sometimes called “connectionist” models of cognition. They understand and model cognition as a network of interconnected units in which the connections, rather than the units themselves, play the most important role in cognition. Cognitive scientist Marvin Minsky defines a connectionist consciousness as a “society of mind”: a group of smaller processes called “agents” that cannot think by themselves, yet when joined together in societies, make up consciousness and the self.

Like individual bees with their different jobs in the hive—gathering food, manufacturing honey, tending eggs, laying eggs, etc.—the separate
“agents” of the mind could not create consciousness nor probably survive on their own. As Plath writes, they are “Small, taken one by one, but my god, together!” (p. 67, l. 20). Cognitive theorists Francisco Varela, Evan Thompson, and Eleanor Rosch use a metaphor similar to the hive when they describe consciousness as an emergent phenomenon, much like a “cocktail party conversation.” That is, the “agents” of consciousness are not under the control of one overseeing authority; rather, like the bees in the hive, they are self-organizing, autopoietic. The complex mini-societies and hierarchies of the hive and of consciousness emerge as the system creates itself.

Plath has an ambiguous attitude toward the self-organizing nature of the hive in “The Arrival of the Bee Box.” Because of its lack of a director, the hive seems to her like a dangerous mob, “a box of maniacs,” and, as in the first poem, she is apprehensive about this lack of control. At the same time that she fears the seemingly chaotic box, she also begins to embrace her lack of control over it. An important moment in the poem is her declaration, “I am not a Caesar.” Plath acknowledges the multifarious nature of the hive and of her own consciousness, accepting that both are self-organizing systems with elements beyond her control. She may be the “owner” of her consciousness, and she has control over whether it lives or dies (“I need feed them nothing”). But if she chooses life, then she must acknowledge that life is built on biological structures and processes beyond her control. At the end of the poem she finally relinquishes her hopes for authoritative control over the agents of the hive, the agents of consciousness: “I will set them free” (p. 68, l. 35).

A connectionist model of consciousness like Plath’s hive-mind reveals the ways in which morphology, a particular biocultural instantiation of the body, is “biology rewriting itself,” as Elizabeth Wilson explains. Because there is no all-powerful homunculus to control consciousness, its emergence, its “rewriting,” is decentered and subject to slippage, deferral, and difference. In this way it shares much with Saussurian models of the language system. As Wilson notes:

Saussurian pure difference is instantiated in the architecture and functioning of the web of interconnected units. In the same way that each element of the linguistic system is instantiated not through its own self-given identity but rather through a system of differences, so too each unit and connection of a neural network is dependent on every other unit and connection in the net for its cognitive effect. (pp. 162-63)

In this model, then, biology itself becomes a site of play, lacking a static center, origin, or presence to constitute it. Gerald Edelman and Giulio Tononi’s “dynamic core hypothesis” is a good example of this model. They suggest that consciousness is not located in any hard-wired section of the brain, but that it emerges from constantly shifting clusters of connections (p. 144).
utopic as these connectionist models of consciousness might seem in their lack of reductionism and embrace of play and différance, Wilson warns that these scientific models are inextricably imbedded in the constraints of the empirical methods that create them (p. 163). She also cautions that connectionism should not become a new center that is somehow not subject to the operations of play (p. 94).

Plath’s status as both empirical beekeeper and bee-interpreting poet allows the experiments within her lyric laboratories to play with scientific models of the hive-mind but also to hold them up to critique. In “Stings,” the next poem in the sequence, Plath seems to parody a scientific-empirical search for centers and origins. The bee box has been opened at the beginning of the poem, and she and another beekeeper are separating the combs into cups. The fear of the previous poems has dissipated, as she explains that they handle the combs “bare-handed” (p. 69, l. 1). The process is described in much more scientific imagery than the first two poems. The hive itself is laid out like a cadaver on the table as the two beekeepers perform an autopsy on the brain-like gray matter and “wormy mahogany” of “Brood cells grey as the fossils of shells” (ll. 14, 12). Again, the speaker questions her power over the bees, asking, “Will they hate me . . . ?” but then unaccountably asserts, “I am in control” (p. 70, ll. 28, 32). The hive itself is described in the poem as a “honey machine” (l. 33), and later an “engine” (p. 71, l. 59), mechanistic terms that suggest the presence of an engineer in charge of building and controlling the hive-mind.

Plath seems to associate such an essentialist model of top-down control with a masculinist presence. The opening stanza of the poem emphasizes that the other beekeeper is a man, with “He and I” (p. 69, l. 5) appearing alone at the end of the stanza. Later in the poem, she introduces a mysterious “third person” who “is watching” the transaction (p. 70, l. 38), a person many critics have connected to her husband Ted Hughes. Perhaps it is the male, empirical gaze in the poem that precipitates the speaker’s desire to reassert “control” (l. 32) over the hive and to return to an essentialist model of self in the image of the queen bee. The hive attacks the third person, “Moulding onto his lips like lies, / Complicating his features” (ll. 49-50). The hive may complicate or restrict the gaze and even the discourse (the alliterative “lips like lies”) of the masculinist presence, but she fears that its agents pay the ultimate price: “They thought death was worth it” (p. 71, l. 51). The speaker therefore shifts from embracing the hive’s multiplicity, as she did in the previous poem, to seeking out some kind of powerful monolithic core or center to the hive in the figure of the queen: “Is there any queen at all in it? // If there is, she is old, / Her wings

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torn shawls, her long body / Rubbed of its plush——” (p. 69, ll. 15-18). The speaker ultimately conflates this search for the queen with the search for her self: “but I / Have a self to recover, a queen” (p. 71, l. 52). And she finds the queen at the end of the poem as she emerges from the hive, flying “More terrible than she ever was” (l. 57).

Many critics have read this discovery of an essential queenly self and the queen’s “terrible” flight as a victory for Plath. Toni Saldívar, however, in a helpful reading of this poem, takes issue with this interpretation. She connects the seemingly “triumphant” line, “but I have a self to recover,” to the earlier description of the queen’s body as being “Rubbed of its plush.” The queen/self is not meant to be discovered, but, rather ludicrously, re-covered, that is, reupholstered, “a new fabric or fabrication as a new theory of self” (p. 175). The model of self that the queen represents is a superficial one, prioritizing top-down control. The speaker desires to put on a new fabric, to perform a new identity, and, significantly, this performance, the queen’s victorious ascent, is a Pyrrhic victory. As a beekeeper, Plath knew that the flight of the queen is a suicidal one—she takes flight when she is old and has been usurped by another queen, and she will die without the protection of the hive. She might be flying with terrible power and beauty, but it is a flight to her death:

Now she is flying
More terrible than she ever was, red
Scar in the sky, red comet
Over the engine that killed her——
The mausoleum, the wax house. (p. 71, ll. 56-60)

When the speaker of the poem gives up the multifaceted and playful model of the hive-self and embraces the monolithic notion of a centralized, all-powerful queen-self, the hive becomes a “mausoleum,” an “engine that killed her.”

But as Plath knew from her own beekeeping and perhaps also from reading her father’s book, the death of the queen does not mean the death of the hive; she is not the hive’s center or its origin. Similarly, the suicidal bees that attack the “third person” are probably just “outriders” protecting the hive, which will certainly live on without them. This is one of the advantages of a multiplicitous, self-organizing system—a “honey-machine” or “engine” that is emergent, not constructed. When parts of a self-organizing system break down or die, then other parts can take over or they can be replaced. A damaged part of an “engine” causes the whole system to crash, but human cognitive systems, like the system of the hive, are remarkably resilient.

Otto Plath observes in his book that the original queens of a colony “are often killed and supplanted by others entering their nest; hence, it is possible that the members of a bumblebee colony
may be the offspring, not of one, but of several queens” (p. 13). Moreover, if there is no queen to replace the old queen, then other agents of the hive take over her duties: “It is a well-known fact that bumblebee workers occasionally take to egg-laying, especially if the old queen is feeble or has disappeared from the nest” (p. 26). If a queen makes her “terrible” flight from the nest, the hive does not become a “mausoleum” but rather continues about its business with different agents shifting to take over her roles.

It is this aspect of the hive’s survival skills that Plath takes up in the next poem, “The Swarm.” “The Swarm” is unique among the bee poems in that it has no central female speaker; instead, the speaker remains genderless, observant, and external to the actions taking place in the poem. This new perspective, following the clear alignment of the self and the queen in “Stings,” signals that here the speaker is identifying with the hive, the swarm, which contains multiple perspectives. The swarm thus offers a model of identity different from the monolithic queen, as well as a more playful empiricism than that modeled in “Stings,” an empiricism that is not reductive but open to the playing movement of différence.

The action of the poem begins with the “dull pom, pom” sound of gunshots down “the Sunday street” (p. 72, l. 2). A swarm of bees has escaped its owner and argues in a ball “Seventy feet up, in a black pine tree” (l. 18), and the owner, “the man with grey hands” (p. 74, l. 51) is attempting to shoot it down. The swarm is “So dumb it thinks bullets are thunder” (p. 72, l. 20) and will supposedly come down from its height to escape the storm. Plath interlaces the story of the beekeeper and his swarm with the image of Napoleon and his armies. Napoleon’s dictatorial power is associated with that of the queen bee in “Stings”: the queen is a “red / Scar in the sky,” and Napoleon is “a red tatter” (p. 73, l. 40). But the attitude toward this dictatorial, monolithic self is quite different in this poem. Here Plath mocks the power of the “little general” and, by analogy, the beekeeper: “At Waterloo, Waterloo, Napoleon, / The hump of Elba on your short back” (p. 72, ll. 7-8). His vast armies, too, are shrunken and made to look ridiculous: “The white busts of marshals, admirals, generals / Worming themselves into niches” (p. 73, ll. 44-45). Saldívar argues that in “The Swarm” Plath is “questioning the very power she had assumed for herself in ‘Stings’” (p. 176). A reductive search for origins forecloses the possibilities of empirical play, and the resulting monolithic, centralized, all-powerful notion of self ultimately will meet its Waterloo.

The hive, however, meets a different fate in the poem. Eventually, the gunman is successful in his goal of recapturing the swarm: “Pom! Pom! They fall / Dismembered, to a tod of ivy” (p. 73, ll. 37-38). Note that the swarm, despite being shot down, does not fall dead or destroyed to the ground but is merely “dismembered.” The gun shots may have killed individual agents within the hive, but the hive itself remains, for the most
part, healthy and whole. Plath directly connects this aspect of the hive to consciousness when she conflates the hive with a human head by telling us, “The swarm is knocked into a cocked straw hat” (l. 42). Though this gesture might be interpreted as a kind of defeat for the hive, Plath’s tone remains optimistic, even cheerful. The speaker seems to learn something from the conflation of head and hive that the image conjures up, as he/she exclaims, “How instructive this is!” (l. 46). The speaker learns that because of the distributed, self-organizing nature of the mind, it, like the hive, may be hurt or “dismembered” by some outside force but may still survive. This image of a busy hive with a hat on it becomes an alternative to the queen bee as a model of self.

The queen bee’s monolithic model of self comes across as disembodied, even inhuman at the end of the poem. The “man with grey hands smiles,” but it turns out his gray hands “are not hands at all, / But asbestos receptacles” that protect him from the bees’ stings (p. 74, ll. 53-54). His autonomous sense of power seems to have gone to his head as he sadistically and needlessly begins shooting at the grounded hive again: “Pom! Pom! ‘They would have killed me’” (l. 55). The beekeeper feels threatened by the bees, thinking that through their diverse and distributed power they could kill him. But perhaps the beekeeper is also fascinated by this power. If we read the “They” of his quote as the bullets themselves, then he seems awed by the hive’s power to survive in the face of an attack that would have killed him. Despite his outside attempts at controlling the bees, they remain “A black, intractable mind” (l. 58) in the poem, a model of self that is not easily governed and managed from the outside because its structures and systems are self-organizing, polythetic, and shifting. Yet in spite of the evidence of the “intractable mind” of the hive, the beekeeper still assumes he has power and control over it: “Napoleon is pleased, / he is pleased with everything. / O Europe! O ton of honey!” (ll. 59-60). Here Plath returns to her ridicule of the reductive power of the Napoleon/queen bee model of identity.

In “Wintering,” the final poem in the bee sequence, the queen bee model has been left behind, and Plath focuses on the self-determining survival of the hive through the winter. The bees winter in a cellar, “in a dark without window / At the heart of the house,” a description many critics have connected to Plath’s own mind or unconscious (p. 75, ll. 6-7). After the “instructive” lesson about the hive/mind’s distributed, self-organizing nature in “The Swarm,” Plath attempts to explore these aspects and deep structures of her own “black, intractable mind.” “Wintering” takes place deep within the mind’s structures—it has “a dark without window,” and “No light” (l. 14) beyond the exploring beam of her torch. This journey is a kind of breakthrough for Plath, as she writes, “This is the room I have never been in” (l. 11). Like the “wormy mahogany,” the gray matter of
the hive that she encountered in “Stings,” the objects in this room are “appalling,” reminding her of “Black asininity. Decay” (l. 16). Deep within the recesses of the mind, among the oldest evolutionary structures, the speaker seems dismayed by the id-like lack of logic or judgment (“asininity”) and age associated with these structures. But she also surrenders to this “Possession” (l. 18) by older agents, structures, and systems outside of her control: “It is they who own me,” she determines, “Neither cruel nor indifferent, / Only ignorant” (ll. 19-21). These agents are not little generals, dictating her actions and thoughts for their own cruel entertainment. Nor are they little gods, pushing her around with indifference. Instead, these agents are “Only ignorant,” working on their own designated tasks, oblivious to their role in the larger systems of her mind.

Cognitive scientist Gerald Edelman writes about these older structures and systems known as the brain stem and the limbic (hedonic) system in Bright Air, Brilliant Fire. He explains that these “systems of the interior” evolved early to take care of basic survival mechanisms such as appetite, sexual behavior, heart and respiratory rate, sweating, digestion, defensive patterns, sleep, and the like. These systems are often arranged in neurological loops within the brain, and they respond relatively slowly, while higher levels of consciousness can respond in milliseconds (p. 117). Plath’s bees, in their slow, seasonal cycles of work and wintering, are good representatives of these older evolutionary systems of the mind.

This is the time of hanging on for the bees—the bees
So slow I hardly know them,
Filing like soldiers
To the syrup tin . . . (p. 75, ll. 22-25)

In their slow-moving march on the loop from the hive to the tin of Tate and Lyle syrup, the bees are a perfect model for those deep systems of the interior. The speaker literally seems to be observing the slow, looping movement of the agents of these internal systems in her mind, systems concerned, like the wintering bees, with basic subsistence and survival.

By claiming these multiple agents outside of her control as the contents of identity, the speaker is able to make her final statement about this different model of mind: “Now they ball in a mass, / Black / Mind against all that white” (p. 76, ll. 31-33). The bees/agents must be unified in a “ball,” each carrying out its designated purpose within the structure of the hive/mind. Yet they also remain a “mass,” a complex and overdetermined web of relationships and connections that are essential to survival. Throughout the bee poems, as here, Plath connects the sometimes frightening incomprehensibility of the mind with the color black—the “blackout of knives” in “The Bee Meeting,” the “Black on black” of the bees in the bee box, the “black ball” of “The Swarm.” But what is the “white” to which this
black mind is opposed? “White” here seems to be associated with the outside world—the snow outside the cellar where the bees “carry their dead” (l. 37)—and, more specifically, with Western consumer culture. Plath deliberately chooses to include the brand name of the white syrup, “Tate and Lyle” (l. 26), that the bees “live on, instead of flowers” (l. 29) over the winter. She also describes the snow outside as “a mile-long body of Meissen,” a brand of white china (l. 35). By positing a “Black / Mind against all that white” (ll. 32-33), then, Plath asserts that this self-organizing and unfathomable notion of mind is a potential source for resistance against the pressures of “all that white.”

The next stanzas illustrate that Plath is interested particularly in a kind of feminist resistance: “The bees are all women, / Maids and the long royal lady. / They have got rid of the men, // The blunt, clumsy stumblers, the boors” (ll. 38-41). The wintering hive may be filled with women, but the source for this resistance is not from specifically female body parts. The deep, self-organizing, and complicated structures that the hive/mind model suggests in the bee poems are present in both sexes. Indeed, the hive model, with its inclusion of both sexes (the hive could not survive the next spring without “The blunt, clumsy stumblers”) offers a much more fluid, less dichotomous notion of gender that begins even at the biological level of an organism. Plath emphasizes this point by focusing not on the female bees of the hive at the end of the poem, but on the image of a flower bulb. She imagines a woman knitting, “Her body a bulb in the cold and too dumb to think” (l. 45), and then ends with the following:

Will the hive survive, will the gladiolas
Succeed in banking their fires
To enter another year?
What will they taste of, the Christmas roses?
The bees are flying. They taste the spring. (ll. 46-50)

With the image of the bulb, Plath again seems fascinated by the deeper evolutionary structures of the mind. The bulb is the foundation of the flower, and its most private, hermetic part. It does not interact with the outside world, but instead banks its fires, staying slow and inactive, but bent on survival, protected from the white snows of winter. This model of a self composed of internal, uncontrollable, biological structures creates a more victorious ending for the speaker. Unlike the hysterical outriders’ surface-level performance, the bees here are representatives of a deeply embodied notion of identity. Unlike the flight of the queen bee at the end of “Stings,” which will certainly end in her death, here all the bees are flying; all of them “taste the spring.” The entire hive/mind rises in victory, and based on what we learned of its survival skills in “The Swarm,” its chances for enduring another year are good.
Ultimately, the laboratory of the bee poems yields for Plath a theory of identity rooted in the biological structures of an embodied consciousness. The seemingly chaotic “din” of the hive/mind offers not a return to a biological determinism as a source for human identity, but a biological overdeterminism. With its lack of a centralized controller and its assertion of its own “writing” working along with the scripts and influence of culture, this theory of identity also offers a more potent mode of resistance than the performative model of identity Plath enacts in “The Bee Meeting.” The nexus of science and poetry in the bee poems highlights the interplay of body and culture in human identity, rather than reducing identity to the product of one or the other. This nexus also allows Plath to play with empirical models of the embodied mind, to take biology seriously, while at the same time avoiding essentialism and holding those models up to critique. Thus, the bee poems not only provide a new model of identity, but also explore a potentially new foundation for feminist projects. This is a foundation not in an essentialist notion of sexed bodies, nor in a disembodied notion of gender, but in the complex, self-organizing biological structures of particular bodies. Plath’s bee poems reveal the vicissitudes and possibilities of “this biological body,” a body that is volatile, mutable, and always in excess of the limits and scripts imposed upon it.

NOTES


4 Christina Britzolakis, *Sylvia Plath and the Theatre of Mourning* (New York: Oxford University Press, 1999). Subsequent references will be cited parenthetically in the text.


Butler, too, utilizes Irigaray’s term in *Bodies That Matter*, but her “imaginary morphology” defines an ego that emerges from practices of identification, imitation, and citation of regulatory schemas (gender) that then produce the body (sex) (pp. 13-14). An abiological notion of gender, again, is the foundation of this model.

This notion of individual biological instantiations, of biology as volatile and mutable, is reflected in cognitive scientist Gerald Edelman’s Theory of Neuronal Group Selection described in his *Bright Air, Brilliant Fire: On the Matter of Mind* (New York: BasicBooks, 1992). Individual brains construct radically different neurological configurations, dependent on their lifelong interactions with the outside world.

Neurobiologist Antonio R. Damasio’s two-tiered model of consciousness outlined in *The Feeling of What Happens* also illustrates this morphological interplay between biology and culture, with the mechanisms of core consciousness asserting themselves on the inside, and those of extended consciousness, built on the core, being written and rewritten by biocultural interactions of the inside and outside; see *The Feeling of What Happens: Body and Emotion in the Making of Consciousness* (New York: Harcourt Brace, 1999).

Wilson is obviously indebted to Grosz’s notion of volatile bodies in this model of neurocognitive overdeterminism, and she cites Grosz often in *Neural Geographies*. Nonetheless, I find an important difference between Wilson’s model of the brain’s morphology as “biology rewriting itself,” and Grosz’s description of the body’s writing as being a kind of “etching.” Grosz chooses “etching” because it takes into account the specificities of the material being inscribed (p. 191), but it still seems to me to imply a kind of passivity on the part of the body as it is inscribed by cultural or psychical forces, whereas the morphology of the brain’s systems that Wilson describes conveys biology actively writing itself.


Toni Saldívar, *Sylvia Plath: Confessing the Fictive Self* (New York: Peter Lang, 1992), pp. 169, 171. Subsequent references will be cited parenthetically in the
text.


18 Sylvia Plath, *Ariel: Poems* (New York: HarperPerennial, 1999), p. 64. Subsequent citations of Plath’s poetry are from this edition and will be included parenthetically in the text.

19 Carroll Smith-Rosenberg also notes, in *Disorderly Conduct: Visions of Gender in Victorian America* (New York: Alfred Knopf, 1985), p. 203, that hysterical women of the nineteenth century were described as “impressionable, suggestible, and narcissistic; highly labile, their moods changing suddenly, dramatically, and seemingly for inconsequential reasons, . . . egocentric in the extreme,” all stereotypes of femininity at the time. The twentieth century’s feminine mystique is alternatively reflected in the anorexic’s thin, weak body and the agoraphobic’s self-effacement and passivity.


21 The “I” sound resonates again here in the dream of the “bride flight” and in the queen’s “upflight.”


23 Cognitive scientists Gerald M. Edelman and Giulio Tononi write of their discipline, “[W]e are trying to connect a description of something out there—the brain—with something in here—an experience, our own individual experience, that is occurring to us as conscious observers;” see *A Universe of Consciousness: How Matter Becomes Imagination* (New York: Basic Books, 2000), p. 11. Subsequent references will be cited parenthetically in the text.

24 Plath also describes the box here as “dark, / with the swarmy feeling of African hands / Minute and shrunk for export,” which can easily be read as a racist representation. Renée Curry, in *White Women Writing White: H.D., Elizabeth Bishop, Sylvia Plath, and Whiteness* (Westport, CT: Greenwood Press, 2000), undertakes a fascinating reading of the racial implications of Plath’s use of white and black in her poems, suggesting that Plath is exploring the black / white power binary and interrogating the privileges of occupying a white body (pp. 125, 126). She argues that in “The Arrival of the Bee Box” Plath “writes an omnisciently authorial and colonizing ‘I’” that “expresses utter disgust with Otherness” (pp. 159-60). While I find Curry’s argument compelling, I think that Plath also seems to conflate the hive and its dark, frightening “Otherness” with her own mind throughout the sequence. “[W]hite” suggests the push of cultural influences, such as the villagers dressed in white in “The Bee Meeting,” while the speaker there is dressed in both black and white. I will address this issue further in my reading of “Wintering.”

25 Gilbert speculates, “Her father’s red-leather Thesaurus, we’re told, was always with her. Why not also *Bumblebees and Their Ways*?” (p. 62).


As many critics have noted, the story related in the poem of the third person wearing a “square of white linen . . . instead of a hat” and being attacked by the bees is a story about Hughes that Plath recorded in her diary. Note how Plath plays with sound and syllables in the line describing his escape: “In eight great bounds, a great scapegoat.” The eight, stressed, essentially one-word syllables mimic the pounding of his “eight great bounds.” The internal rhyme and near rhyme within the line—“ate, ate, ate, ape”—transform him into a kind of animalistic, hulking Cinderella losing his “slippers” and his hat as he goes.

Susan Van Dyne and Sandra M. Gilbert are notable examples.

Saldívar makes this point about the queen-self, but she reads the queen/hive relationship as one between a self and a community (p. 176). Because Plath conflates hive and mind so often in the bee poems, I believe my reading of the queen/hive relationship as representing two different models of self (one monolithic and one polythetic) is more plausible.


Wilson, *Neural Geographies*, p. 10.

Ellin Sarot, “Becoming More and More Historical: Sylvia Plath’s ‘the Swarm,’” *Concerning Poetry*, 20 (1987), 45. Many critics have commented on the uniqueness of “The Swarm” among the bee poems, and some see it as so different as to not belong in the sequence at all. My reading of the sequence as Plath’s exploration of an embodied consciousness allows us to see how integral “The Swarm” really is.


The outside observer also finds the “Black asininity” of the hive/mind “appalling” (making pale or white) earlier in the poem.

“The smile of the snow” (p. 76, l. 34), which “is white” in this poem, is easily connected to the smile of the “man with grey hands” in “The Swarm,” which is described as “The smile of a man of business, intensely practical” (p. 74, l. 52).

Indeed, this model of the hive mind also offers a different perspective on race, for these foundational structures and systems of consciousness are the same for all human beings, regardless of race. Plath’s inclusion of the “Chinese yellow” (p. 75, l. 20) of her torch along with the blackness “bunched in there like a bat” (l. 13) in the foundational “cellar” (l. 5) of her consciousness might also suggest a sense of the common ancestry of races in human evolutionary history. These dual colors
also appear in the “banded bodies” (p. 73, l. 47) of the bees, the agents that make up
“the mind of the hive,” themselves (p. 65, l. 37).