

Bad Timing (A Sequel). Paranoia, Feminism, and Poetry

woman is the screen
vulnerability and
-ities, women have
humiliated mem-
-ation are the lot
male reference
(Ward, "Imaginary Movie,
Imaginary Movie)

*these are things people can do to
themselves
they are:
leave molotov cocktail on own yard
set fire to own house
leave a glass of urine on own porch
leave an envelope of feces outside
own door
send a butcher knife to self at work
send letter to health department that
self is spreading VD
stab own back
(Spahr, "thrashing seems crazy,"
Response)*

The enemy is no longer outside. Increasingly, the enemy is no longer even identifiable as such. Ever-present dangers blend together, barely distinguishable in their sheer numbers. Or, in their proximity to pleasure and intertwining with the necessary functions of body, self, family, economy, they blur into the friendly side of life. . . .

Fear is not fundamentally an emotion. It is the objectivity of the subjective under late capitalism.

(Massumi, "Everywhere You Want to Be" 10–12)

*H*as “conspiracy theory,” both in its academically legitimized and pop-cultural manifestations, been quietly claimed as a masculine prerogative over the last decades of the twentieth century? Think of television’s pairing of Mulder and Scully, a speculative paranoiac and a rational empiricist, as an example of how the sexual polarity of a traditional Enlightenment dualism seems to have been reversed, though with the male term—now coupled with intuition rather than science—remaining privileged.¹ Named as if in a bequeathal of patrimony after the telecommunications network on which he appears, “Fox” Mulder, as *X-Files* viewers know, is not only the one of the two agent-intellectuals more

nobly committed to identifying and pitting himself against wide-ranging, even transglobal technological and political structures, but unlike his pragmatic, positivistic, and more locally oriented female partner, he is *always right*. Think also of the numerous conspiracy films analyzed by Fredric Jameson in *The Geopolitical Aesthetic* as allegories for the attempt—and failure—on the part of subjects to grasp the social totality that is global capitalism in formal or representational terms.² All of the films read as uniquely forefronting this dilemma center on the knowledge-seeking trajectories of male protagonists who, like the conventional *noir* detective, belatedly find themselves small subjects caught in larger systems of relations extending beyond their comprehension and control. Though this situation might be described as a relatively normal state of affairs for all late-twentieth-century subjects (and Jameson sees a political necessity in illuminating it as such), a feminist attentiveness to the persistence of sexual hierarchies requires noting that the narrative tradition delineating this representational problem is a conspicuously gendered one—as if “conspiracy theory” itself, an epistemology underpinned by the affective category of fear, becomes safeguarded *through* the genre of the political thriller as a distinctively male form of knowledge production. As Jameson himself suggests in using the political intrigue film’s knowledge-seeking protagonists as figures for the postmodern intellectual, and the conspiratorial plot these protagonists attempt to analyze and expose as an allegory for the “potentially infinite network” of relations constituting our present social order (9), the male conspiracy theorist seems to have become an exemplary model for the late-twentieth-century theorist in general, and conspiracy theory a viable synecdoche for “theory” itself.

In this manner, the disposition to theorize finds itself aligned with paranoia, the affective complex underwriting the conspiratorial imagination, which Cyndy Hendershot has usefully described in shorthand as the belief in a *total system*. Defined not as mental illness, accordingly, but as a particular species of fear based on the dysphoric apprehension of a holistic and all-encompassing structure,³ this coupling of paranoia with theory comes to the fore in the rhetoric Jameson uses to make an acute point in an entirely different essay:

Ours is an antitheoretical time, which is to say an anti-intellectual time; and the reasons for this are not far to seek. The system has always understood that ideas and analysis, along with the

intellectuals who practice them, are its enemies and has evolved various ways of dealing with the situation, most notably—in the academic world—by railing against what it likes to call grand theory or master narratives at the same time it fosters more comfortable and local positivisms and empiricisms in the various disciplines. (“Theoretical Hesitation” 267 emphasis added)

Jameson’s point about the sort of timing that organizes and informs “our time” in general raises provocative and, one might say, strategically “paranoid” questions. Why is it that *at the same time* capital grows more virtual, speculative, and irrationally exuberant in its daily operations, cultural critique grows increasingly positivistic and empirical, veering away from the very terms enabling it to better analyze The System’s global proliferation? In order to drive home this criticism of academic discourse’s escalating resistance to the level of abstraction increasingly *necessary* for critical intervention in late capitalist culture (as Gayatri Spivak has often noted, “Capital . . . is the abstract *as such*” [qtd. in Weinbaum 133–34]),⁴ Jameson cleverly utilizes what might be described as conspiracy-theory rhetoric, hinging not only on a reference to suspicious timing and holistic systems, but to “*the system*.” And not just a singular and unified system, but one syntactically anthropomorphized into a subject endowed with consciousness and volition, capable of “understanding” its enemies and “dealing” with them accordingly. Not unlike Descartes’s crafty Great Deceiver, “the system” in Jameson’s essay conspires against the contemporary intellectual, transformed into an agent with the potential to counterplot against his plots. Clearly “the system” is a *totalizing abstraction*, but to criticize Jameson’s argument on this basis alone puts one in the rather awkward position of appearing to confirm the current phobia towards theoretical abstraction in academic discourse that he is discussing. In fact, it seems as if Jameson cannily uses the language of conspiracy theory in anticipation of such objections, and as a style uniquely befitting the content of an essay that not only raises provocative questions about the current state of academic discourse, but reexamines a classic debate between Adorno and Benjamin over critical method in order to problematize a current and, for Jameson, at times uncritical romance with the latter’s more “theoretically hesitant” work. Yet for the feminist critic, it remains important to note how intimately tied conspiracy theory appears to be to the hermeneutic quests of male agent-intellectuals, and

even hermeneutic quests by male agent-intellectuals into the hermeneutic quests of other male agent-intellectuals, from the pages of *Critical Inquiry* to Twentieth-Century Fox Television.

But even if conspiracy theory *has* developed into a male-dominated epistemology in both academic and mass cultural settings, why, from a feminist perspective, should anyone care? Surely a mode of knowledge organized and informed by fear is not something feminism should want to claim as part of a viable politics of resistance, particularly given conspiracy theory's status in the wider culture as an irrational, even hysterical way of thinking. Yet, given the complete "saturation of social space by fear" that is simply, as Brian Massumi notes, our everyday existence in mass-mediated consumer culture, a saturation so thorough that fear no longer exists at the level of subjective content or personal experience but becomes *a structuring principle of subjectivity itself* ("Preface" ix),⁵ it seems odd that for all its ubiquity, paranoia tends to suggest a specifically masculine point of view. All the more so given that women clearly have more cause for fear within "the system" paranoia implies—since it is a system that not only knows that "ideas and analysis, along with the intellectuals who practice them, are its enemies" (267), but that with statistical regularity institutionalizes the economic and political disenfranchisement of women, widens disparities between female subjects in the Third and First Worlds, and produces laws alienating women from their own bodies to such a degree that any feminism based on a purportedly "immediate" relation to one's flesh appears increasingly unfeasible. Women, whose "forms of expression are determined by optical and electronic media, psychopharmacology, the war machine, the chemical industry, plastics technology, [and] bioscience" (Griggers ix), *do* have, however, a more "immediate" relationship to a fear founded on apprehension of patriarchy-capitalism as a holistic and systemic structure: one amenable to analysis from within (though its external boundaries cannot be empirically or securely delimited), in which sources of persecution are all too often real. The masculinization of paranoia *in its equation with knowledge* thus recalls Monique Wittig's reminder that "The universal has been, and is continually, appropriated by men," leaving women consigned to theorizing from particularities ("The Mark" 81).

Thus, from the role played by a hypothesized Great Deceiver and robots posing as humans in Descartes's formulation of "systematic doubt" (suggesting the extent to which humanist philosophy might be described as *originating* in paranoid speculation), to Freud's infamous

analysis of Daniel Schreber, in which paranoia is theorized not only as an expression of male homosexuality but as a model for psychoanalytical theorizing itself; to more recent descriptions of paranoia as a logical extension of Paul Ricouer's "hermeneutics of suspicion"⁶ or of "the totalizing scientific systems" exemplified by classic Newtonian physics,⁷ the coupling of paranoia and theory in male-dominated discourses has occurred to the extent that critics like Naomi Schor have found it politically strategic to claim paranoia as an equally viable model for *feminist* theorizing. In "Female Paranoia: The Case for Psychoanalytic Feminist Criticism," Schor argues that the close affinities Freud noted between paranoia and theory, particularly in his "oft-cited comparison of paranoiacs and philosophers," make the one case of female paranoia Freud examines in "A Case of Paranoia Running Counter to the Psychoanalytic Theory of the Disease" not only a potential exception to his rule, "[a] contradictory case . . . which seems at first to call seriously into question the universal validity of the theory of paranoia derived from the analysis of a male paranoiac," but a potential threat to "theory itself" (206). For Schor, then, the need to define and argue on behalf of a specifically female paranoia resides in the fact that the question of whether such a clinical category even exists poses the more urgent question of whether females are capable of theorizing at all, "albeit in the caricatural mode of the mad" (206). Citing Freudian disciple Ruth Mack Brunswick's differentiation of masculine and feminine paranoia as the distinction between a persecutory form marked by "elaborate ideation . . . excessive intellectuality, and . . . occurrence in individuals with a high power of sublimation" and a jealous form that is "par excellence the paranoia of women," Schor points out that "the tremendous difficulties and dangers inherent in defining a specifically female form of paranoia" are in fact the same difficulties and dangers involved in defining a specifically female form of theorizing (207).

Given, then, "the systemization and theorizing [characterizing] the paranoiac which led many commentators to associate paranoia with knowledge and knowledge-producing systems *per se*" (Hendershot 17), the effort to claim paranoia for feminist thought and cultural production may no longer seem outlandish, but rather an exigency in a world where any analysis of power at the transindividual level increasingly requires a language capable of dealing with "the system" as an abstract and holistic entity, as the word "patriarchy" has done in feminist writing for several decades without much fanfare. Though increasingly a source

of embarrassment to academics in today's newly repositivized intellectual climate, terms like "patriarchy" and "patriarchy-capitalism," which refer to monolithic, yet amorphously-delimited and fundamentally abstract, value-based systems, remain crucial for a critical language that in our antitheoretical time not only seems fated to ring with the debased sound of "conspiracy theory," but seems capable of demonstrating how paranoia has become a somewhat normative state of affairs. This is not to say, however, that feminists should claim paranoia merely *because* it has become an "everyday" structure of feeling. Nor should paranoia be claimed for feminism simply because of "the prestigious intellectual (hyper)activity associated with the male model" Schor describes (206), as if acquiring intellectual prestige were in itself a feminist goal. However, the fact that any attempt to think beyond local and particular circumstances currently seems to bear a "paranoid" inflection, even if only by default, makes it important to note that paranoia can be denied the *status* of epistemology when claimed by minority subjects, though valorized *as such* when claimed by the status quo. In one case, a mode of knowledge structured by an affective orientation *already involving the cognition that power operates systemically* will be reduced to its subjective implications alone (that is, reduced to a pure and ignoble "emotionalism"); in the other, paranoia's cognitive dimensions will be emphasized as an enabling condition for objective knowledge. It should be noted that paranoia, like disgust, is neither inherently left nor right wing, and has the capacity to be claimed for political purposes by both.⁸ Yet as a term that has managed to slide out of the domain of medical discourse and carry much broader signifying capabilities, its potential usefulness as a negative disposition that facilitates "negative thinking" can only seem amplified for leftist cultural struggle at a point in time when as global capitalism increasingly proliferates in virtual and all-encompassing ways, particularized subjects are increasingly denied the right to a fear grounded in their own cognizance of power's abstract and holistic structure—a denial with the pernicious effect of ensuring that this affective orientation to the world, *when it functions as a mode of knowledge*, becomes safeguarded as the special provenance of male agent-intellectuals.

The danger, however, in claiming paranoia for feminism and intersecting oppositional struggles lies in a temptation to assume that such an effort automatically guarantees separation from the way everyday fear normally functions to sustain and reinforce existing forms of compliancy and subjection. This is particularly the case if fear has truly become pervasive to the extent that it no longer exists at the level of personal

experience but constitutes part of the very process of subject formation—a point eloquently made by Massumi, but also anticipated in Lacan and Klein’s very differently derived notions of an ego constituted through a central fantasy of persecution.⁹ Both Klein and Lacan view the standard course of ego formation as a paranoid process (more precisely, for Klein, as a paranoid-schizoid process); for Lacan in particular, the central role persecution fantasy plays in the constitution of subjects reveals that “taking one’s place in the Symbolic Order means living in a paranoid system which is *culturally sanctioned*” (Hendershot 17). Thus, as Massumi notes, “if we are unable to separate our selves from our fear, and if fear is a power mechanism for the perpetuation of domination . . . our unavoidable participation in the capitalist culture of fear [may be] a complicity with our own and other’s oppression” (ix). And in situations where there is no purely external or even clearly identifiable nemesis but rather “the enemy is *us*,” “analysis, however necessary, is not enough to found a practice of resistance. Fear, under conditions of complicity, can be neither analyzed nor opposed without at the same time being *enacted*” (Massumi ix).

In this essay, I hope to demonstrate the ways in which such an analysis-enactment becomes particularly significant to a “late” body of writing by women poets influenced by language writing and associated with the avant-garde, defined here as the collective activity fostered by specific material conditions and relations of production, and currently embodied in the rhizomatic network created by the publications of independent and non-profit presses, small press distribution centers, reading series, poet talks, and listserve discussions. In dystopic works ranging from Juliana Spahr’s *Response* (1995), which includes a poem drawing from an *Oprah* episode on a woman with “dissociative personality disorder” stalked by a male version of herself, and a poem in which alien abduction testimonials provide a way of exploring “the claims of truth in the age of cover-up and misinformation”; to Heather Fuller’s *perhaps this is a rescue fantasy* (1997), whose cover features an anonymous diagram containing instructions for building a book bomb, the conspiratorial imagination traditionally associated with an intellectually valorized, masculine paranoia is not only reclaimed, but reformulated for feminist inquiry in the highly specific guise of *complicity*. Since I would argue that one particularly vivid horror for the minority oppositional subject, while always already a subject of everyday fear bound up in the system she opposes, is that of having her very strategy of intervention in the system turn out to be “a dissimulated instrument of dominance” (Butler 29), confrontation with complicity becomes the specific form “paranoia”

takes in women's writing that refuses to delink the logic of sexual difference from the logic of capital, and in which abstraction and "systematic thinking" remain privileged (and hopeful) terms. In these works, fear of unintended collusion with a system in which one is already inscribed (a situation taken to nightmarish extremes in Spahr's account of the woman physically and psychologically assaulted by the male version of herself) becomes the primary focus of investigations into the more general structure of fear and its ideological contradictions.

In this manner, the question of "bad timing" central to paranoid rhetoric ("why is that *at the same time* . . . ?") plays a particularly prominent role as it resurfaces in contemporary work aiming for what Spivak has described as "the agential grasping *of* the spectral [entity]" that constitutes patriarchy-capitalism (9). And as we shall see, this notion of "bad timing" returns us to the question of the vexed relationship between "poetry" and "theory"—a relationship that not only played an incisive role in the historical development of late-twentieth-century, language-centered avant-garde writing, but remains of pressing concern to female writers excluded from the literary mainstream, both in the ongoing effort to critically discuss and theorize their own work, and in the effort to strategically define their own contemporaneity. As Gertrude Stein famously noted, one's sense of what it means to be "contemporary" is by no means self-evident nor something to be taken for granted: "It is so very much more exciting and satisfactory for everybody *if* one can have contemporaries, if all one's contemporaries *could be* one's contemporaries" (521 emphasis added).

***"The Problem With the Timing Is That It Is
Always Off While It Cannot Be Off at All"***

... it might be necessary to replace all
vowels with x m x g x c x l l y t x r n x n g p r x -
m a t x r x t x r r x r x n t x p x s t - p x s t x r x n y.

... it is that that is the problem
with the timing that it is always
off while it cannot be off at all
that is the he to be sure that the
she did not choose the wrong thing
(Joan Retallack, "Memnoir")

The "always off" timing mentioned in Retallack's poem "Memnoir" might be said to reside in an oscillation between the excessively early (the "prxmxtxr") and the excessively late ("pxst-pxst"). This timing has affective implications, since the passage from precipitateness to belated-

ness accompanies a shift from terror (“txrrxr”) to irony (“xrxny”), while at the same time producing an illegibility undermining the stability of the transformation itself. The excess of x’s accompanying the shift from one feeling-tone of late capitalism to another, premature fear (“prxmxtxr txrrxr”) to doubly-belated irony (“pxst-pxst xrxny”), recalls an analogous moment from Diane Ward’s long poem “Imaginary Movie,” in which a similar excess of signification coalesces around the issue of temporality:

*as a center
meanwhile & and
at the same time
refusing to be
favored by fear
and wage labor*

*as fractions of dislocation
the center
family life
moves to the screen
where the cast mouths
our thoughts*

In the first stanza by Ward, the semantically unnecessary repetition of the conjunction, “& and,” links two terms that *already* signify the temporal coexistence of events on their own: “meanwhile” and “at the same time.” This excessive, even redundant expression of simultaneity calls attention to another temporal relationship expressed in the image of “simulcast” figures mouthing the thoughts of the poem’s collective subject. But in this case, the relation is one of *belatedness*, the subjects watching the screen find themselves spoken for in advance, their thoughts “mouthed” prior to any attempt at self-embodied articulation. These two relationships to time—a sense of overdetermined simultaneity or contemporaneousness (“*meanwhile & and / at the same time*”) and a sense of redundancy or belatedness (the temporality characteristically assigned to subjectivity in postmodern theory)—bring us face to face with a historically specific crux in feminist literary criticism with particular pertinence to academic readings of works by contemporary female poets associated with the avant-garde.

The crux I am interested in is best elaborated through a series of extremely general observations, though in isolation some of these

will seem to have little to do with gender per se. To begin with a fairly straightforward one, most of the linguistic paradigms developed in late-twentieth-century theoretical writing that would seem to speak most directly to, for, and about avant-garde poetry (Barthes's notion of the "writerly," Derrida's *différance*, Lacan's insistence on the letter, etc.) were primarily generated through, elaborated by, and applied to readings of canonically traditional and "readerly" texts. This genealogical circumstance suggests the limitations of relying entirely on paradigms like "writerliness" as basis or support for the argument that qualitative differences exist (as I believe they do) between works produced within the material conditions that give rise to an avant-garde and works produced under the auspices of official verse culture. If Barthes's *S/Z* demonstrates that even the classic realist novel can be read as a site marked by "the infinite play of the word [before it becomes stopped] by some singular system," and thus as an occasion for readers to observe "the plurality of entrances, the opening of networks, [and] the infinity of languages" Barthes associates with the writerly, then these linguistic attributes cannot be solely relied on to make arguments for avant-garde transgressiveness, much less distinctiveness.¹⁰ Even if the writerly is, as Susan Suleiman notes, "playful, fluid, open, triumphantly plural, and in its plurality impervious to the repressive rule of structure, grammar or logic" (6), the fact that these qualities seem to describe twentieth-century avant-garde literature in its diverse entirety still does not mean that concepts like "writerliness" can be used as criteria for distinguishing work produced in this cultural context from work that is not.

One strange and indirect consequence of this is that the now academically routinized notion of the open, polysemous, and endlessly self-differing text, as initially developed in post-68 poststructuralist readings of canonical literature, often appears *belated* when currently identified, associated, or articulated with post-68 language-centered writing—in spite of the fact that the initial developments of the two practices historically coincided.¹¹ Accordingly, the "belatedness" I am describing is not one related to an actual time difference between the emergence of language-centered theory and of language-centered writing. The erroneous claim of *historical* belatedness has in fact been an argument used by some of language-centered writing's most conservative detractors (often detractors of poststructuralist language theory as well) in order to dismiss avant-garde writing of the 70s and 80s as a bad hybrid of poetry either simply wedded to or eagerly trying to imitate the genre of theory.¹² Rather,

the belatedness is one which exists for the critic *now*—which is one reason it is a belatedness oddly specific to our own contemporaneity with the literary work continuing to be produced. For what makes criticism or any other cultural production “contemporary” is not so much its rupture from work of the past, but its relation to other cultural developments (like poetry) *happening meanwhile & and / at the same time*. Ironically, then, the very fact that language-centered writing and poststructural language theory followed parallel and concurrent trajectories in their historical development seems responsible for the way in which *current* articulations of these continuing projects with one another always seem to carry the sensation of a temporal lag or delay. To borrow from Retallack’s poem, the problem with such timing is that it seems “off” while it cannot be “off” at all.

For the contemporary critic, then, the already unsettling experience of this belatedness emerging in the relationship between temporally coinciding discourses, avant-garde language theory and language-centered poetry, becomes further exacerbated by their conceptual attunement. From Kristeva’s theory of the semiotic as a rhythmic, polysemic dimension of language with the potential to disrupt a symbolic discourse defined as repressive and phallogentric, to Deleuze and Guattari’s notion of the rhizome as an acentered system marked by multiplicities and capable of undermining rigid and hierarchical structures, poststructuralist models of textuality emphasizing heterogeneity and invested in a politics of form do seem overtly to demonstrate, as the writers of the collaborative, avant-garde manifesto “Aesthetic Tendency and the Politics of Poetry” noted, that the developments of theory and poetry in the late twentieth century have not been only complementary, but that “theoretical models based on language . . . find *a uniquely proper object* in poetry” (Silliman et al. 268). To generalize broadly for the sake of argument (at the risk, of course, of flattening out the enormous philosophical differences between Kristeva and Deleuze, or the significant aesthetic differences between the work of diverse poets), the striking conceptual consonance between approaches to language in late-twentieth-century theoretical writing and avant-garde poetry *would* seem to place each in a special, even privileged relation with respect to illuminating and extending the scope of the other, setting the stage for a productive cross-fertilization. Both practices share a basic commitment to the idea of “textual politics” and to the critique of liberal humanism; both emphasize and privilege difference over self-sameness and internal consistency,

multiplicity over univocality, flux over stability, and ambiguity and slippage over rigid correspondences between words and meanings, etc. Each *would seem* to be the other's uniquely proper object. Yet this presumably ideal situation for the literary critic reading late-twentieth-century avant-garde poetry (the theory and the poetry already seem to be "speaking" to one another, as it were, and doing so *meanwhile & and / at the same time*) leads to what can only be described as a certain redundancy or obviousness when the two discourses are placed in dialogue with one another *now*. In other words, the paradoxical combination of the two factors characterizing the relation between late-twentieth-century language theory and language-centered poetry (philosophical attunement and historical alignment) ensures that for the critic today, most attempts to articulate a poetics based on foregrounding connections between the literary text and poststructuralist theory will end up seeming, well, somewhat predictable or descriptive—a rather undesirable outcome from the standpoint of both discourses, in their mutual privileging and politicization of difficulty and defamiliarization. Interestingly, the problem here is not one of a gap, dissonance, or contradiction (the negative terrain in which avant-garde theorists and artists have traditionally found themselves most comfortable working), but rather one of a fit that seems almost too close. "In its privileging of the letter and constant deferral of stabilized meanings, Bruce Andrews' *Lip Service* produces a heterogeneous flow of matter and signs in order to break down normative frameworks of reference and sense-making." "Tell me something I don't already know!"

This unusual situation for contemporary readers of contemporary writing is peculiarly amplified, however, in the attempt to define a *feminist* poetics within the literary avant-garde along similarly theoretical lines. For the models of language advanced by the theoretical avant-garde in the 70s and 80s that seemed in greatest attunement with poetic explorations of language happening *meanwhile & and / at the same time*, have more frequently than not been models relying on abstract notions of the "feminine" to claim their political efficacy or oppositionality to traditional humanist values. As Rosi Braidotti notes,

From . . . Derrida's injunction that in so far as it cannot be said the "feminine" functions as the most pervasive signifier; [to] Foucault's bland assertion that the absence of women from the philosophical scene is constitutive of the rules of the philosophical game, to Deleuze's notion of the "becoming-woman"

marking a qualitative transformation in human consciousness—the feminization of thought seems to be prescribed as a fundamental step in the general program of anti-humanism that marks our era. (140)

Braidotti views the role the “feminine” assumes in the discourse of male theorists in the late twentieth century, that of “a powerful vehicle for conveying critical attempts to define human subjectivity,” as a dubious if not sinister development insofar as she finds this “advocating the ‘feminine’ or ‘becoming-woman’ of theoretical discourse—[using] woman as the figure of modernity” to coincide with and reinforce the waning of the rational subject. More precisely, she questions the “deconstructing, dismissing, or displacing the notion of the rational subject *at the very historical moment* when women are beginning to have access to the use of discourse, power, and pleasure” (140 emphasis added).

The concept of “bad timing” thus reemerges as central to Braidotti’s position, which follows the pattern of what Pamela Moore and Devoney Looser have critically (but not altogether disparagingly) described as the “conspiracy theory” version of feminist critiques of postmodernism: “In this type of critique, feminists lament that poststructuralisms came into vogue just as women and people of color came into a voice” (535). Andrew Ross similarly emphasizes the notion of bad timing in an essay using Nicholas Roeg’s eponymously titled film as an allegory for late-twentieth-century feminist theory’s linguistic turn. While Braidotti singles out the privileging of “becoming-woman” in the work of male theorists as the object of skepticism (at one point describing theory’s strangely timed feminization as an expression of male envy for women’s enunciative position—“Envious[ness] of a history of oppression that the political will of the women’s movement has turned into a major critical stance for women to use to their best advantage” [141]), Ross points out that the privileging of the “feminine” takes place in the work of female theorists as well, particularly in what Ross refers to as the “language feminism” of post-Lacanianists such as Kristeva, Cixous, and Irigaray, where “the feminine” is yoked to an explicitly *antisexist* and not just “antihumanist” approach to language and subjectivity. In this sense, Ross complicates the implication in Braidotti’s critique that the valorization (or fetishization) of “becoming-woman” in avant-garde language theory can only amount to an afeminist position at best, and an anti-feminist position at worst. However, Ross’s use of “bad timing” in his own account of lan-

guage feminism not only reinforces the notion of antifeminist conspiracy reflected in Braidotti's critique of the "becoming-woman" of poststructuralist theory, but turns on a principle of belatedness similar to the kind I have described above. Summarizing how the category of the "feminine" enables theorists like Irigaray and Kristeva to define and advocate a specifically antiphallocentric language, Ross writes:

Language is taken up as an instrument for changing subjectivity, rather than accepted as a given medium. In assuming this (by now) conventional role, the idea of a "woman's language" inherits the modernist taste for more natural forms of expression. Perhaps the language feminism movement is the last serious manifestation of the modernist tendency. If that is the case, then its lateness as a cultural phenomenon is open to question. What are the political consequences, for example, of taking up the cause of anti-rationalism—the traditional mark of oppression for women—as a liberatory style after the rationality of a feminist politics had begun to be acknowledged and respected? (76)

Framed as a question with emphasis on the temporal preposition "after," Ross's rhetoric of discerning "bad timing" in this passage clearly echoes the rhetoric used by Braidotti and other, more stringent feminist critics of poststructuralism such as Nancy Hartsock ("Why is it just at the moment when so many of us who have been silenced begin to demand the right to name ourselves, to act as subjects rather than objects of history, that just then the concept of subjecthood becomes problematic?") and Somer Brodribb ("What is the meaning of this particular ideology of masculine domination? Strange timing: the subject is now annulled by . . . white western wizards while women's, black and Third World liberation movements are claiming their voices" (qtd. in Moore and Looser 535). However, after raising the issue of belatedness in this feminist "conspiracy theory" context, Ross immediately pushes the question further:

In whose political interests is it for that lateness not only to be ideologically produced, but also to be produced as such a distinctive and vulnerable political target? Above all, it would be in the interests of those for whom "women don't know what they're talking about" anyway [Lacan's infamous quotation] and many of those are not even modernists yet. (76 emphasis added)

While Ross thus describes language feminism in terms of a problematic belatedness, and then turns around provocatively to question the very construction of this belatedness *as* a problem (since it is clearly an assessment open to exploitation by those wanting to dismiss the feminist project in its entirety), he nonetheless remains generally skeptical about the political efficacy of using the category of the “feminine” as basis for claiming a *feminist* language or aesthetic. Here Ross comes to share a position put forward by Silvia Bovenschen as early as 1976 and reasserted in subsequent decades by numerous feminists, including Domna Stanton, Monique Wittig, and Teresa de Lauretis.¹⁵ The point is perhaps argued most extensively from a Marxian perspective by Rita Felski, who not only questions the automatic equation of a recently countervallorized “feminine” discourse with feminist cultural production in the work of female theorists, but the way this equation is often facilitated through an uncritical use or valorization of the term “avant-garde.” In *Beyond Feminist Aesthetics*, Felski singles out Cixous’s *écriture féminine* and Kristeva’s use of the “semiotic” as “attempt[s] to argue a necessary connection between feminism and experimental form” that,

when not grounded in a biologicistic thinking which affirms a spontaneous link between a “feminine” textuality and the female body, rel[y] on a theoretical sleight-of-hand that associates or equates the avant-garde and the “feminine” as forms of marginalized dissidence vis-à-vis a monolithic and vaguely defined “patriarchal bourgeois humanism” which is said to permeate the structures of symbolic discourse. (5)

Similarly, while acknowledging the extent to which psychoanalysis productively enables the critique of phallocentrism for numerous feminist thinkers, Ross argues that

the credentials offered by a “feminine discourse” promise little more than to recycle those archaic sexual oppositions which modern psychoanalytical theory sought to render obsolete, and formulate them anew in terms of a set of linguistic characteristics—concrete/abstract, content/form, intuition/intelligence, parataxis/syntax, mass/outline, fluidity/consistency. Within this logic of identity, the materiality of language is asserted as the natural grain of the woman’s voice, and is posited as a counterthrust to the rational “masculine” discourse of science power and knowledge. (74)

More disturbingly for Ross, in language feminism's appeal to female anatomy as an index of this different language, "[t]he history lessons of psychoanalysis are freely ignored, bribed off by the more heady promise of self-determination from a position outside history, symbolic meaning, syntax, in short, a desertion of the logic of everyday social commerce" (74).

As Ross's critique of language feminism progresses, however, the "lateness" that he is careful to problematize quickly, but nonetheless winds up emphasizing in his initial characterization of the "appeal for a different feminine speech" as belated modernism, is eventually redefined as a temporal condition specific to *postmodernity*. For according to Ross, postmodern discourse, in contrast to "the modernist rage for new languages" language feminism represents (77), demonstrates a "paradoxical concern with its own lateness, as a culture of secondarity, and not at all with its unified contribution to a linear history" (76). Postmodern feminist reading, according to Ross, is thus "especially tolerant of bad timing, since it sets out, as Lyotard has noted, to look for the rules which govern its own discourse only to find them too late to act upon, or else (the same thing), realizes that they have been acting all along" (77). Setting aside the striking resemblance between this characterization of a "good" postmodern feminist reading and any one of the political thrillers or conspiracy films discussed by Jameson (where the rules of the game are always discovered "too late," and this belated discovery provides the climax of every narrative), the notion of belatedness as simply an expression of the critical state of the postmodern condition leaves open the question of whether Ross views language feminism's "lateness" as specific to its own dubious status as a late modernism, or as a lateness specific to and attuned with the sensibility of the postmodern viewpoint from which language feminism is currently perceived—in which case, it oddly seems to lose its status *as* a problem for Ross, becoming instead, in its bad timing, temporally apropos.

In any case, the "bad timing" Ross attributes, and yet seems to back away from attributing, to language feminism bears a close relation to the paradoxical belatedness informing contemporary attempts to place avant-garde language theory and language-centered poetry in a continuing and productive dialogue. Carrying the inflection of paranoid rhetoric, this "bad timing" becomes all the more pronounced for critics attempting to articulate an explicitly *feminist* avant-garde poetics via the increasingly outmoded-seeming arguments of language feminism, or even via the afeminist, yet "feminine"-embracing language theory that according

to Braidotti comprises the majority of late-twentieth-century theoretical writing as a whole. The already overdetermined consonance between art and theory becomes even more explicit in this case, since both feminist avant-gardes tend to approach language as inflected by gender and gender differentiation as an effect of language, opening the possibility for sexual politics grounded in, or at the very least, intimately connected to a politics of form. In other words, the already existing “dilemma” of unique affinity between the antihumanist stances, values, and tactics of two contemporaneous avant-gardes, artistic and theoretical, becomes heightened once feminism enters both pictures, particularly since one of the most significant things “language feminism” does, from the standpoint of avant-garde writers in general and female avant-gardists in particular, is to make explicit claims for avant-garde writing’s political agency, as well as claims for a special relationship between “the feminine” and formally innovative writing.

As interlinked tensions exacerbated by feminism’s intervention in both discourses, it is not difficult to see how the belatedness or “always already” that has become the *sine qua non* of late-twentieth-century theory, with its focus on the linguistically and retroactively determined subject, and the overdetermined contemporaneousness or “at the same time” informing this discourse’s relationship to language-centered poetry, come to a particular head in avant-garde writing by women that is explicitly and unapologetically engaged with theoretical or philosophical work, from Joan Retallack’s sustained interface with ordinary language philosophy in *How to Do Things With Words* (1999) to Diane Ward’s oblique running dialogue with feminist film theory in *Imaginary Movie* (1992). These texts and others equally committed, from the very start, to the premise of *political form*, continue to raise questions that initially surfaced in feminist debates over the viability of a feminist aesthetic based on the concept of a “feminine” language. Though in academia this debate has waned to the point of obsolescence over the last decade, due in part to powerful critiques of language feminism like Felski’s, and in part to the general shifting of feminist criticism from the terrain of speculative theory to more locally grounded and historically based arenas of inquiry, the questions raised by it have had a much more lingering impact on feminists from the literary avant-garde, who for obvious reasons have found it more difficult to dismiss completely attempts to align strategically the “avant-garde” with feminism as entirely valueless, or as representing an embarrassing “French phase” in feminist theory best quickly forgotten.

For it is not difficult to see how arguments for “a necessary connection between feminism and experimental form,” however faulty, belated, or strangely timed, might continue to have a particular political and practical importance for female avant-gardists, since efforts to create new alliances between the “feminine” and the avant-garde pose strategic challenges to the misogynist stance from which women are viewed as earnestly striving towards the goal of making truly radical, avant-garde art but failing to do so (for reasons now ascribed to social factors instead of the older biological ones: women cannot *politically afford* to abandon more conventional means of expression for formally radical ones),¹⁴ as well as the disabling notion of a fundamental asymmetry between the avant-garde, when conceived as a “masculinist” cultural formation, and feminism’s past and ongoing role in the critique of masculinist privilege.¹⁵

Moreover, in the case of the feminist avant-garde writer, the classic avant-gardist position that form is political leads to an all too familiar impasse between two standpoints, neither of which seems wholly secure or satisfying. For the feminist writer, the stance that *form is political* implies that there is no politically neutral language, and by extension, no language uninflected by gender and its ideological codes. From this standpoint, it makes sense to claim that yes, there are “masculine” and “feminine” languages, although in the same way, as poet Harryette Mullen observes in *Trimmings*, that there is masculine or feminine clothing.¹⁶ Ultimately, this standpoint asks the feminist poet to accept the category of “feminine” form, even as a construction designating an “open and receptive, materially and contextually inventive” tradition dominated by male modernists and valorized by afeminist poststructuralist theorists, but also, more importantly, to join other women writers in a strategic *reappropriation* of “feminine” form, as poet/critic Joan Retallack argues in “: RE: THINKING: LITERARY: FEMINISM.” As Retallack notes through a persona named Genre Tallique, an imaginary, presumably French theorist onto whom Retallack places the burden of articulating her essay’s more polemic claims (and who occasionally reappears, in the form of epigraphs and bibliographic references, in Retallack’s poetry), “[m]en, like Joyce, Pound, and Duchamp, could be feminine in their art, but not their life. Women could be feminine in their life, but not their art (note the conspicuous absence of names here)” (366). Thus, according to Retallack, the feminist challenge faced by the contemporary female avant-gardist, in the face of “a ‘feminine’ [aesthetic] tradition dominated by males,” is to take advantage of the fact that “women have not until very recently

been in a situation to *exercise* the power of the feminine” (365), with “the feminine” now designating “aesthetic behavior” rather than an “expression of female experience” (374). The premise (and promise) of textual politics thus ultimately underwrites the possibility of feminist agency Retallack finds available in the act of women reclaiming “the experimental feminine” for themselves (372). As Tallique states much more bluntly, “[f]eminist writing occurs *only* when female writers use feminine forms” (359 emphasis added).

But the avant-garde premise that *form is political* can also lead to an opposing position within feminism: that the attachment, even critical attachment, of gender codes to language promotes the restriction of women to certain kinds of expression and in fact perpetuates binary gender divisions and the hierarchies inevitably accompanying them. This position culminates in a feminist need to insist that linguistic categories should not be gendered, even in aesthetic or critical efforts to challenge past ways in which forms and genres certainly *have* been gendered. It therefore calls on feminist practitioners to do away with the notion of “feminine form” altogether, however much political promise has been theoretically ascribed to the concept. Yet if one adheres too strongly to either of the positions circumscribed by the “politics of form” position, one runs the risk of asserting “no language is politically neutral, no language is code-free” to a degree that one remains stuck with the task of constantly negotiating between “masculine” and “feminine” categories, inadvertently galvanizing them; or one runs the risk of dangerously underestimating or appearing to disavow the pervasiveness of gender ideology in all cultural forms. A familiar question thus returns: how does one develop a critique of sexual difference without referring to the binary terms whose reiteration would seem to affirm and reinforce the system of “sexual difference” itself? Since the feminist critic constantly faces a situation in which the basic presuppositions of the sex-gender system are not only posited but potentially reentrenched, “*by the practical context of [her own] intervention in them,*”¹⁷ the enterprise of critique threatens to become a paranoid economy, with the question of “complicity” at its very center. As Butler asks, “Can a critical intellectual use the very terms that she subjects to criticism, accepting the pre-theoretical force of their deployment in contexts where they are urgently needed?” (159). Or should these terms be simply left alone in the rather optimistic hope that they might decay by themselves (177)? Is a critique of sex-gender without recourse to sex-gender terminology even possible?

This crux emerges as the central issue faced by the eleven female poets who participated in the forum “Women/Writing/Theory,” a critical exchange organized by poet and artist Johanna Drucker in 1990 and published across two issues of *Raddle Moon*, an internationally circulating, Vancouver-based “little magazine” edited by Susan Clark. For the project, Drucker asked the participating American and Canadian poets (Abigail Child, Norma Cole, Jean Day, Jessica Grim, Kathryn MacLeod, Laura Moriarty, Chris Tysh, Juliana Spahr, and Julia Steele) to respond to the following questions:

How would you theorize about your work? How does your [poetry] already articulate a theoretical position? What attitude do you have toward theoretical and critical writing? Do you find conventions of critical/theoretical writing inherently masculinist, or masculinist by association? What is the relation you posit between your gender and your [poetic] writing practice? What is the relation between your gender and your attitude toward, or use of, or resistance to theory and/or theorizing?

Across the extremely varied responses by each poet, two distinct approaches to the question of poetry’s relationship to theory, and to the question of gender and form, eventually stand out among the others. One position, as put forward by Day and Moriarty, equates “theory” with “overly systematic thought” (Day 26) and reflects concern with “systematic thought” as an activity antithetical to their own aesthetic practice as female poets: “Systematizing and its uses are, by necessity, reductive and false, a false map or model” (Moriarty 55). Recalling, perhaps, the gendering of paranoia in its own particular association with “overly systematic thought,” these responses call for poetry’s disassociation from theory based on implicit identifications of the latter as masculine. Parenthetically citing the words of other participants in the forum, poet Chris Tysh points to this when alluding to the “conventional beef about theory’s HAR(D)NESS, ‘overly systematic’ (Day), ‘mastery’ (Steele).” For Tysh, this equation “regrettably designs a panel, say, a hunting scene where the master on horseback gallops in a correctly gendered fashion while we, fluid bodies, are crossed, bridged, or evaporated according to weather, tearing hounds on the moor. . . . The obligatory equation of theory with ‘the big one’ (Steele) can only profit the patriarchal status quo” (“Round 2” 46).

Echoing Tysh’s concerns about the masculinization of “theory”

in its entirety, Drucker articulates a position that initially derives from strong dissatisfaction with “the concept of the feminine which has gradually gained ascendancy in theoretical writings,” particularly since these “theoretical abstractions of the ‘feminine’ [threaten] to eclipse or displace the issues of *feminist* work,” posing risks “too great to be ignored” (17). In an interesting turn of logic, however, the valorization of the “feminine” in theory that disturbs Drucker (as we have seen it disturb Braidotti, Felski, and others) is eventually held responsible for the *rejection* of theory by other female avant-garde poets, which Drucker perceives to be a political mistake. Since Drucker views the theoretical ascendancy of “the feminine” as simply formulating a new set of imperatives for female avant-garde writers, inviting women “[t]o hide ourselves inside of language, to claim the body against the law as if it were our own, to use the tropes of sensation, fluidity, reception” (18), and since Drucker views these new imperatives for female expression as foreclosing attempts by women to “use language assertively” and “speak with authority” (modes of speaking Drucker finds absolutely essential for feminist politics),¹⁸ she views the celebration of “feminine form” *in* theory as complicit in encouraging the flight *from* theory on the part of other female experimentalist writers, a rejection made on the basis that the *form* of “theory”—viewed here as a discourse of “strong” position-takings marked by the rhetoric of authoritative assertion—is a masculine one. Since the notion of a “feminine” language variously defined, as Retallack notes in the following catalog, as “self- and other-interrupted, tentative, open/interrogative (Sally McConnel-Ginet, Mary Field Belenky, et al.); marginal, metonymic, juxtapositional, destabilizing, heterogenous, [and] discontinuous. . . . (Genre Tallique, Craig Owens, Page duBois, Janet Wolff)” (“: RE: THINKING” 367 all parenthetical references in original), would seem to promote “the accusation that speaking with authority replicates the forms of patriarchal repression, that to use language assertively is to speak as a man” (Drucker 19), and since Drucker appears to view the activities of “speaking with authority” and theorizing as synonymous (note that this is something many implicated theorists would challenge), the notion of “feminine form” is implicitly held responsible for what Drucker perceives as a dangerous aversion to theory by her female contemporaries. Thus in a clarification and extension of her position published in the forum’s second round of responses, Drucker claims that although she does not want to treat theory as some kind of (masculine) “other,”

Nor do I want to condemn women writers to a position circumscribed by theory in which they are supposed always to be “diffuse,” “plural” and “polysemous” just because the idea of clear articulation and assertive, reductive statements has a tradition of coming from male writers. Sometimes we just want to make statements. I feel strongly that gender codes should not be attached to forms of writing, be they theoretical or poetic, or we condemn ourselves to the same essentialism from which we originally thought writing would save us. (“Round 2” 51)

Though it is irresistibly tempting, I need to refrain from launching into a full-scale analysis of the various positions and contradictions emerging throughout the “Women/Writing/Theory” project here, since my goal in providing a sampling of the stances taken within this fairly heated exchange of ideas is simply to emphasize that (1) regardless of how individual writers actually perceive it, the relationship between contemporary “theory” and “poetry” *matters* to female avant-garde writers; (2) questions about “feminine” form become central in their attempts to assess this relationship, as does the status of “overly systematic” and holistic thought. My other aim in offering this brief overview of the “Women/Writing/Theory” exchange is to historically situate and provide a specific context for examining recent “paranoid” work by Juliana Spahr, one of the forum’s original participants. In Spahr’s long poem *LIVE*, a work explicitly engaged with questions of gender specificity in language, “the logic of everyday social commerce” (Ross 74) in mass-mediated culture, and the enactment/analysis of everyday fear, the issues of “bad timing” and “overly systematic thought” associated with paranoia, as well as with contemporary approaches to the relationship between poetry and theory, are conspicuously brought to the fore.

***“THE MAN OR WOMAN SAYS I OR
WE WILL TELL YOU OR THEY ONE
THING, EVERYTHING THAT HAPPENS
HAPPENS RIGHT ON TIME. RIGHT ON
TIME, DID YOU OR ME HEAR ME OR
YOU? RIGHT ON TIME.”***

Paul Smith’s *Discerning the Subject* culminates in an enthusiastic endorsement of late-twentieth-century feminist theory as “almost

unique—and thus salutary—among the various discourses of resistance” in its ability to deploy a “contradictory doubled strategy,” one undermining “the old habit of presuming the ‘subject’ as fixed guarantor of a given epistemological formation” while at the same time “[casting] doubt on the adequacy of the poststructuralist shibboleth of the decentered ‘subject’” (151). Smith’s celebration of feminism is partly arrived at, however, by a chapter-length reading of paranoia that would seem to confirm what probably already seems self-evident: that feminist paranoia is at best a ludicrous notion, if not an impossible one. For Smith identifies paranoia precisely with the male humanist tradition that much of late-twentieth-century academic feminism has devoted itself to contesting, though in a number of highly different ways. According to Smith, humanist paranoia surfaces in a variety of discourses, ranging from realist narratology to contemporary Marxist theory’s “holistic inquiry into art” (93), to the hermeneutic traditions represented by figures such as Gadamar and Geertz. In the process of formulating a linkage between paranoia and knowledge-construction in these interpretive practices, Smith defines “paranoia” as an ideologically sanctioned arrangement in which the observing/interpreting subject constructs a world designed “to meet the conditions of a general, shared, and objective reality” without acknowledging that this totalizable reality is in fact a construction, enabling the subject “to protect its own coherence and autonomy and also to fulfill the juridical demands of the symbolic system in which [its] utterances may be understood” (98).

In this manner, Smith’s analogy between the paranoid and the male humanist rests on a notion of “self-delusion” that is at once psychological and epistemological. According to Smith, both paranoia and humanism posit an interpreting subject “unable and/or unwilling to recognize the condition of its own interpretations as constructs, fictions, imaginary narratives” (97), a subject who “wishes to maintain its rights on a reality which it will not yet recognize as its own offspring or construction” (87). Temporarily leaving the figure of the humanist aside, the implication is that the paranoid is a person who is not only self-aggrandizing, but simply *erroneous* in her account of the world, having mistaken “inside” for “outside,” subjective fantasy for objective fact, and that which she has produced or constructed for that which she has not. Thus in spite of Smith’s firm adherence to the position that no “supposedly objective world” can be perceived independently of the discourse used to confront or examine it, he nonetheless seems to imply that some objective, extradiscursive reality does exist against which the paranoid’s

fictions can be tallied and defined *as* fictional. Smith's analogy between paranoia and Marxist theory, classified by him here as another subspecies of humanism, also rests on his claim that both "partake of and help constitute a familiar occidental epistemological category which is that of *the conceivable whole*" (88). For Smith, the paranoid and Marxist/humanist's mutual susceptibility to this "holistic impulse" (92) goes hand in hand with a susceptibility to fantasies of subjective coherence, plenitude, and autonomy: "[H]olism arises from and continues to fund an ideological and epistemological economy which characteristically requires of its agents a 'full' subjectivity (often with an underbelly of blocked awareness—what the social scientists call unconsciousness) which it presumes and employs in the maintenance of juridical social relations" (93). Though it is neither clear nor immediately self-evident *why* the positing of a conceivable social whole, as one inevitably does when using terms like "capitalism" or "patriarchy," would necessarily presume, rest on, or confirm the subjective "fullnesses" of the individuals constituting part of it (in fact, the characteristically belated revelation of The Total System in the conspiracy genre always seems to produce the exact *opposite* effect on its subjects, resulting in radical self-dislocation rather than guaranteeing subjective plenitude), Smith provides little elaboration beyond his original assertion that this presupposition of subjective fullness is simply the case.

Thus in the course of proposing and illustrating an ideological alignment between paranoia and male humanist thought, Smith produces a notion of paranoia that would seem utterly incompatible with postmodern feminism (to say the least), while at the same time seeming to confirm its *undesirability* for feminism (to state the obvious). And yet it seems entirely possible to imagine a form of paranoia that while conforming to key aspects of Smith's definition (the production of speculative interpretations, an active confusing of fantasy with reality, the formulation of a conceivable totality or social whole) cannot be so easily reduced to escapism, delusion, or epistemological error. For instance, it is remarkably easy to imagine a subject guilty of projecting the internal onto the external, taking subjective fictions and constructs for objective truths, and participating in the construction of a conceivable whole, who in doing so reveals a new or previously undisclosed truth about the world. This situation is remarkably easy to imagine because it has been already imagined incessantly across decades by popular genres aimed at both genders: the subject at once paranoid and correct being a constantly recurring figure in gothic melodrama (a particular subset of the "woman's film"),¹⁹

science fiction, horror, and political thriller narratives. In fact, as forms of “cultural problem solving,”²⁰ all of these genres might be described as attempts to vindicate and legitimize paranoia’s methodological value. In a typical scenario, the subject is indeed paranoid, in the sense of having hyperbolic feelings of persecution related to a conception of power at an abstract and systemic level, but these feelings of persecution are later revealed as completely founded and justified—though usually done so too late. Moreover, it seems possible to conceive of a paranoia in which a certain kind of truth emerges *precisely* through the confusion of constructed fictions with objective reality, as Slavoj Žižek has argued in *The Sublime Object of Ideology* using aesthetic examples ranging from *Hamlet*’s play-within-the-play to *trompe l’oeil*. The kind of symbolic truth discerned from this conflation is not, Žižek stresses, that “‘life is just a dream,’ ‘what we call reality is really just an illusion,’ and so forth” (47), but a truth related to the extent to which fantasy operates as a support of reality itself (45).

The aspect of paranoia elucidated by Smith that has the most direct implications for internal feminist debates concerning the political efficacy of “language feminism” and the viability of a “feminist” aesthetic, however, is the manner in which this phobic organization conspicuously forefronts the question of how the subject’s “own” discursive constructions can be adequately distinguished from those that she has not constructed, but that in contrast function to construct *her*. In other words, the paranoiac’s failure to separate what she has produced from what she has not, in addition to highlighting a problem of distinction that has historically motivated avant-garde language feminism’s appeal to the notion of a uniquely “feminine” language (as well as avant-garde poetry’s desire to push the limits of existing languages) brings the structural problem of complicity to the fore.

It is precisely this complicity, foregrounded in the difficulty of separating that which one has constructed from that which constructs, or distinguishing one’s own utterances from the way in which one is spoken, that Juliana Spahr consistently explores throughout her work. The poem “responding” from her book *Response* (1995), for example, overtly locates itself in the margin between these possibilities by utilizing the “generic” phrasing we might associate with an institutional fill-in-the-blank form, diagnostic, or questionnaire. By foregrounding the slots or positions in a predetermined arrangement over the particular objects that occupy them, Spahr’s writing repeatedly raises the question of what forms of

“responding” are ultimately available to subjects when heeding the call to respond properly:

we know we respond resistantly as faked children's book of realist adventure tales have turned into military instruction manuals

or [name of major historical figure] hails a cab, [generic possessive human pronoun] hand raised here, beckoning as the red flag with [name of fast food chain] waves behind [generic human pronoun] and the red star on top of the [name of cultural landmark in major city] twinkles.

many people raise their hands for different purposes all day long (19)

Recalling Lacan's figure for the subject of paranoid knowledge, the “notary in his function” (who is, as David Kazanjian notes, “a petty bureaucrat, an impoverished figure through whom the state performs its functions without his or her conscious or willful consent” [129]), Spahr's use of bureaucratic rhetoric recurs in her long poem *LIVE*, which begins with no less than three “INTRODUCTION”s. One explains in fairly straightforward, first-person narration the poem's connection to its author's “typical entry level job” at a state-run “psychiatric institution doing desktop publishing, slide production, and transcription.” The “INTRODUCTION” preceding this, however, unfolds as follows:

It begins like this: a man or woman speaks memo after memo with numbered and lettered items. Then a man or woman transcribes these memos into consecutively numbered or lettered items, correcting the speaker's mistakes in consecutivity. A man or woman cleans up after this original man or woman, the one who spoke the memos. Another watches his or her children. One answers his or her phone. In work a person is hired to do something for another person. In this language of hierarchy, the man or woman is called boss; the other man or woman is called secretary, maid, nanny, or receptionist. The person who does something may or may not do this thing if they were not paid. It is more common to not want to do this thing. This person who does something often feels oppressed by their job, by their relation to the monetary system which makes them work, by the continual tension between managers and workers. Figure

that I or you have been looking for work for three or six or some amount of years and can not find such work. As in theories of capital, realize this situation and see it as the beginning place for all current thinking or escaping.

The relentless splitting of the subject between “man or woman” and “I and you” in the passage above is a situation both anticipated and rendered disturbingly literal in Spahr’s earlier poem “thrashing seems crazy,” the account of the woman stalked by a male version of herself. In “thrashing,” the bifurcation is explored as a form of violence that cannot be properly understood as coming from either within or without²¹—a situation that Spahr continues to foreground in *LIVE*:

THE MAN OR WOMAN SAID TO THE
TWO MEN OR WOMEN DRESSED IN
SILK AND LACE AND SHOWING LOTS
OF THEIR OR OUR BODIES ESPE-
CIALY ITS FORBIDDEN OR EXPOSED
PARTS, HE OR SHE SAID “YOU OR I ARE
KILLING ME OR YOU, JUST KILLING
ME OR YOU.”

In both texts, the subject’s splitting demonstrates how the “uncertainty of paranoia—the uncertain demarcation of the subject”—might function as “a way of understanding a set of controlling technologies, practices, and ideas that are responsible for one’s persecution and yet a vital part of one’s identity” (Melley, “‘Stalked By Love’” 95). Yet there is a considerable difference between the way the “uncertain demarcation of the subject” associated with paranoia functions in these two poems. In “thrashing seems crazy,” the “uncertain demarcation” operates at a thematic level to highlight explicitly gendered forms of persecution/identity. In *LIVE*, it operates at a grammatical level to highlight what seems to be a form of *generic* identity, in an exploration of “controlling technologies, practices, and ideas” ostensibly less related to the sex-gender system than to capital. But while producing an effect similar to that produced by Spahr’s device of substituting abstract grammatical categories (“[gendered pronoun],”

“[name of nation used as an adjective]”) for concrete particulars in the poem “responding,” the *or* phrases in *LIVE* paradoxically call attention to the *persistence* of sexual difference in the very phrasing of “generic” identity. On one hand, the expression “man or woman” marks a fundamental indeterminacy concerning the subject’s gendered particularity that seems to gesture in the direction of “choice”—though a choice that does not necessarily have to be made in order for the statements in Spahr’s introduction to convey their meanings. And yet this sexual indeterminacy is put forward in such a structure-bound, deliberately formulaic way, that *LIVE*’s insistently conveyed “irresolution” about gender specificity might be said to testify more to sexual difference’s ideological tenacity *as a binary system* (and to its inseparability from the questions of labor, time, and money that are the poem’s more overt concerns) than any statement made from a resolutely feminine or masculine position. To borrow an expression from Butler, the specific ends up “clinging” to the generic in a way that “exposes the formalism of [the latter’s] claim as necessarily impure” (24). We can see this situation dramatized by Spahr in the sentence, “The man or woman is called secretary, maid, nanny, or receptionist,” where the predication of “man or woman” ironically relies on occupational classifications continuing to bear a decidedly gendered inflection, and particularly since her generic phrase “MAN OR WOMAN” excludes the category of transgendered subjects in such a conspicuous way as to remind us that the sex-gender system may in fact be constituted by this very exclusion. And yet this excluded particular, conspicuously absent from the “choice” of terms offered (where the illusion of “choice” is precisely what gives the phrase “man or woman” its deceptively “generic” quality) nevertheless returns to disturb the generic expression, particularly if one reads “man or woman” as not only presenting a *forced* choice between the two available terms, but as a negative and insufficient expression of transgendered identity itself. In other words, one might imagine the transgendered subject haunting Spahr’s expression in the form of a minority gender identity that initially gains visibility under the limiting conditions of patriarchy as a radical undecidability between the two dominant terms offered, but that then *calls attention to the falseness and insufficiency of that very “choice,”* promoting the formulation of a new positive identity within the genus of “gender” with the potential to undermine the organizing principle of the genus itself.²² The phrase “MAN OR WOMAN,” I would argue, is thus *an inherently “paranoid”* phrase used by Spahr as such—“paranoid” in the sense of bespeaking a seemingly

“generic” category that needs to erase repeatedly “all remnants of [what] it excludes” in order to constitute itself (Butler 22). And yet this paranoid phrasing also seems to have the capacity to show how certain founding principles of the sex-gender system (its tenacious dualism or masculine-feminine polarity) “can be put under erasure *and* played at the same time” (Butler 264).

The irony of this situation is perhaps best captured in the following passage from the poem’s central column of continuously running text:

WHILE MEN OR WOMEN ARE
ATTRACTED TO SHORT PHRASAL
UNITS, MEN OR WOMEN PREFER
MORE ROLLING SENTENCES. THIS
IS CALLED GENDER OR SEXUAL
DETERMINISM. HIS OR HER POEMS
SEEM TO DEMONSTRATE, DESPITE
THEIR DISCONNECTEDNESS, THE
CONNECTEDNESS OF EXPERIENCE
RATHER THAN FREEDOM. THIS IS
CONTRARY TO HIS OR HER DESIRES
YET IT IS WHAT MAKES US OR THEY
APPRECIATE THE BALLSY ATTITUDE
OF HIS OR HER WORK.

Calling attention to the fact that *LIVE* itself deploys “short phrasal units” as well as “rolling sentences” in its analysis/enactment of everyday fear (“A MAN OR WOMAN WALKED ACROSS THE STREET WITH A PLASTIC MEDICAL APRON CAUGHT ON HIS OR HER ANKLE. THE CITY WAS SO DENSE THAT TOUCHING AND BEING TOUCHED WAS A PART OF EVERYDAY LIFE OR DEATH”), Spahr’s generic/paranoid phrasing appears to neutralize the assignation of gender values to language even as the claim to gender specificity *in* language is being made. And yet the poem

stages the seemingly unintended resurfacing of this specificity in the lingo of aesthetic evaluation, once again demonstrating the paradoxical persistence of sex-gender (“BALLSY ATTITUDE”) in the very assertion of generic syntax and subjectivity. In doing so, this moment also seems to highlight the traditional masculinization of paranoid knowledge, given that the belief in an absolute “CONNECTEDNESS OF EXPERIENCE” fundamental to paranoia and conspiracy theory is precisely where the gender-specificity of language resurfaces.

Elsewhere in *LIVE*, the logic of hyperconnectivity on which paranoid knowledge relies becomes a metaphor for communicative exchange, while also presented as a possible threat or source of fear in itself.

A MAN OR WOMAN HAS A VACUUM
TUBE UP TO HIS OR HER MOUTH
AND HOLDS OUT THE OTHER END
OF TUBE TO ME OR YOU OR ANYONE
PASSING BY. I OR YOU SAY NO THANK
YOU BUT PONDER REQUEST. IS IT
COMMUNICATION OR MANSLAUGH-
TER? THE CLIPBOARDS AT PLANNED
PARENTHOOD ARE COVERED WITH
DECLARATIONS OF LOVE: SES AND
JEFF 4 EVER; KIM LIKES JIM; KK + BK.
TOO MANY TO WRITE DOWN.

In the image of the “MAN OR WOMAN” offering to physically attach himself/herself to the speaker/reader by means of a familiar household device, “CONNECTEDNESS OF EXPERIENCE” suggests the possibility of social bonding and violence at the same time. And yet the fearfulness implicit in this encounter does not seem anchored to a particular self-point, since the potential threat posed by the MAN OR WOMAN’s ambiguous invitation (nothing less than “manslaughter”) is not only being posed to a “generic” subject, but articulated in a language that is strikingly aloof

or detached: “I OR YOU SAY NO THANK YOU BUT PONDER REQUEST.” Thus if there is a form of everyday fear being analyzed and enacted at this moment, it does not seem to be a fear that could be described as “personal experience,” in the sense being contained by an individual subject.

In conjunction with its simultaneous reliance on both concrete and abstract language, as well as first and third-person narration (“I worked a year at a psychiatric institute doing desktop publishing, slide production and transcription” versus “A man or woman transcribes these memos into consecutively numbered or lettered items”), *LIVE*’s simultaneous insistence on “generic” and “gendered” phrasings of subjectivity renders the poem, like much of Spahr’s work, highly impersonal and personal at once. Conveyed with the insistence and yet typographic uniformity of all-capitalized text, a stylistic device reinforcing the seeming affectlessness and neutrality of Spahr’s characteristic “zero-level writing”,²³ the generic/gendered delineation of the subject persists throughout *LIVE* as it explores the inextricably linked issues of time and labor:

THE MAN OR WOMAN SAYS I OR
WE WILL TELL YOU OR THEY ONE
THING, EVERYTHING THAT HAPPENS
HAPPENS RIGHT ON TIME. RIGHT ON
TIME, DID YOU OR ME HEAR ME OR
YOU? RIGHT ON TIME. HE OR SHE
KEPT THINKING OF GOOD THINGS
THAT WOULD HAPPEN IF HE OR
SHE WOULD GET A JOB; THINGS
LIKE HEALTH INSURANCE OR A
FEELING OF USEFULNESS. WE OR
YOU ARE INFLUENCED BY FORCES
BEYOND OUR CONTROL. PAULIE
SHORE TALKS ABOUT AIDS ON THE
TELEVISION IN A SILLY VOICE. CNN

REPLACED THE WORD FOREIGN
 WITH THE WORD INTERNATIONAL
 AND HE OR SHE WONDERED IF HE
 OR SHE SHOULD FEEL FUNNY WHEN
 HE OR SHE USES THAT WORD IN
 CONVERSATION.

The “MAN OR WOMAN”’s emphatic, even somewhat hysterical insistence on the absolute synchronization or perfect timing of events (“RIGHT ON TIME”) results in echolalia, ironically undermining the very concept of synchronization put forward by the speaker, as well as the speaker’s ability to communicate his or her confidence in perfect timing in a temporally precise way. In spite of the speaker’s obstinate assertion that “EVERYTHING THAT HAPPENS”—including ordinary speech acts like the one being performed—“HAPPENS RIGHT ON TIME,” the echolalic repetition of the phrase “RIGHT ON TIME” suggests a missed beat, or an unintended pause or delay, induced in his or her own communicative act by the implied silence or non-responsiveness of the listener. “RIGHT ON TIME, DID YOU OR ME HEAR ME OR YOU? RIGHT ON TIME.” In other words, the “generic” speaker, for all his or her insistence on perfect timing, fails to achieve the goal of being RIGHT ON TIME in his or her delivery of a proposition *about* perfect timing—a situation somewhat analogous to the temporal “stutter” or paradoxically redundant expression of synchronicity in Ward’s “meanwhile & and / at the same time.”

In the context of the poem’s shift from this moment of badly timed communication (“DID YOU OR ME HEAR ME OR YOU?”) to communicative events taking place on television (and in particular, broadcast events with the capacity to induce changes in the American vernacular), *LIVE*’s preoccupation with synchronicity and the timely delivery of communications comes to connect with the ideals of simultaneity and flow associated with the medium of television itself. In addition to the poem’s concern with the “RIGHT ON TIME,” through its absence of page numbers and continuous streaming of parallel texts, *LIVE*’s formal structure calls attention to television’s own governing ideology of liveness, which Jane Feuer has defined as “the promise of presence and immediacy made available by video technology’s capacity to record and transmit images

simultaneously” (qtd. in Torres 141). Feuer stresses that “liveness” is not an ontological reality but rather an imaginary relationship to the conditions by which reality is produced and perceived. Indeed, as Feuer notes, “as television in fact becomes less and less a ‘live’ medium, in the sense of an equivalence between time of event and time of transmission, the medium in its own practices insists *more and more* on the live, the immediate, the direct, the spontaneous, the real” (qtd. in Torres 141 emphasis added).

Given Spahr’s focus on the paranoid logics of hyperconnectivity, gender determinism, and timing, it seems significant that the qualities of fluidity, immediacy, and (over)presence emphasized in the televisual ideology of “liveness” bear a striking, even pointed resemblance to the “tropes of sensation, fluidity and reception” (Drucker, “Women/Writing/Theory,” 18) associated with avant-garde language theory’s celebration of feminine syntax and bodily experience. In fact, simultaneity, immediacy, and “an equivalence between time of event and time of transmission” have played crucial roles in arguments for a distinctly feminine language based on appeals to the female body as a site of temporal alterity, such as in Kristeva’s theory of the semiotic and of a nonlinear, nonconsecutive “women’s time.” It is almost as if *LIVE* deliberately relocates the tropes of flow and immediacy central to avant-garde language theory’s concepts of feminine language from the gender-specified body to the fully disembodied realm of mass media. More precisely, *LIVE* relocates these tropes of immediacy and presence elsewhere associated with the female body to the commodified activity of *transcription*, a form of employment made possible by the very liveness of visual or audio communicative technologies, given the demand this “promise of immediacy and presence” introduces when the information originally recorded and transmitted “live” must be re-recorded or committed to memory in the decidedly non-live technology of writing—an activity repeatedly associated in late twentieth-century theoretical writing with death. If the ideology of liveness explicitly counteracts the work of memory through its emphasis on the RIGHT ON TIME, the now and present, and a simultaneity between time of event and time of transmission, the work of transcription enacts the very opposite temporality, widening the gap between time of event and time of transmission (or more precisely, the time of transmission and the time of recording). In fact, the work of transcription, which can *only* take place between these moments, presumes and requires that such a temporal gap exists.

The function of the transcriber, like that of Lacan's "notary," thus entails a secondary, mechanical reprocessing of language that would seem completely at odds with standard notions of poetic practice. The transcriber not only writes down language that is not his or her own, but language that has been already put forth—in this case, by a state-run psychiatric institution. Transcription thus involves a relationship to language that is *inherently* one of belatedness or redundancy. The relationship between transcription and language is also one of labor, and a form of labor few would describe as intellectually or aesthetically "rewarding." In working on or reprocessing the language of the state, the transcriber, like Lacan's figure for the subject of paranoid knowledge, does seem to become "an impoverished figure through whom the state performs its functions without his or her conscious or willful consent" (Kazanjian 129). Yet while dramatizing the contrast between the belatedness intrinsic to the labor of transcription and the "RIGHT ON TIME" or synchronization of communicative events insisted upon by its "generic" speaker, *LIVE* nonetheless uses the "impoverished figure" of the transcriber as a figure for the poet, deliberately blurring the difference between the decidedly unglamorous labor of reprocessing the language of others, and the work of poetic construction.

This conflation of poetry and transcription partly takes place at the level of composition itself, as evinced from the author's statement about her writing process in the first-person introduction. Here *LIVE* is described as a "mimetic" poem, representing the author's attempt to "write work" while performing a form of commodified labor that would seem to preclude it: "I tried during my job to do my other work, that without an economy, only to realize that there was little hope. This [the poem] was my attempt to get around this problem." And yet according to Spahr's personal statement, the attempt "to get around the problem" seems to have involved nothing other than the activity of transcription itself, though in a form incapable of generating a wage: "I collected phrases from my day as they came to me on a notebook that I kept to the side. I collected notes from my boss's memos, things I had seen on the way to or from work, stories overheard. I collected them into one long stream of day/text and barely edited them."

At a certain level, this statement seems to suggest a self-conscious abdication of writing as an assertion of personal agency. The poet claims not to have "written" during her tenure as a state-employed transcriber, but in lieu of this activity, to have collected, catalogued, and

recorded language in the form of unmediated information. In this sense, Spahr's statement suggests an attempt to write herself out of the poem, or more precisely, to construct the poem as a deliberate elision of self *outside its economically imposed function as transcriber*. According to the statement, none of the language in *LIVE* is actually "live," in the sense of being uttered and recorded simultaneously, and none of it would seem to be the speaker's "own"; all of it is language that has been *rewritten* or simply "inserted" in an act of labor ironically equivalent to the form of paid labor initially posited as obstructing poetic practice. Indeed, much of *LIVE*'s central column of text consists of editorial commands ("CHANGE 'THE MOST DANGEROUS STUDIES ARE THOSE THAT COME WITH THE TRAPPING OF AN ELABORATE METHOD AND AUTHORITATIVE CONCLUSION THAT ARE BASED ON FLAWED SAMPLES OR INAPPROPRIATE DESIGN' TO 'THE PAPERS THAT UNDERMINE THE REPUTATION OF THE JOURNAL ARE THOSE THAT COME WITH THE TRAPPINGS OF ELABORATE METHOD AND AUTHORITATIVE CONCLUSIONS BUT ARE BASED ON FLAWED SAMPLES OR INAPPROPRIATE DESIGN'"') presumably coming from the speaker's employer.

But *LIVE* also consists of two other continuously running texts positioned on top of and to the right of its central column: sentences from Gertrude Stein's essays "All About Money" and "Money," and as Spahr informs us, "questions from a diagnostic instrument used to determine mental illness in children that I worked on over and over again." Spahr also tells the reader that these diagnostic questions were taken from "sections on Conduct Disorder and Oppositional Defiance Disorder," which she "found especially problematic in that they diagnosed any kind of potential protest about one's surroundings as deviant." Thus at the bottom right-hand margin of the page alongside centered passages like this one:

THREE MEN OR WOMEN SURROUND
 ANOTHER MAN OR WOMAN WALK-
 ING BESIDE THEM. THEY OR YOU
 FLEX THEIR STUFF AND SAY QUIETLY
 TO THE MAN OR WOMAN, "DON'T BE
 SCARED MAMA OR PAPA, WE OR ONE
 AIN'T GOING TO HURT YOU OR HE

OR SHE.” IT IS A THREAT WRAPPED
 IN A CARESS. IN THE DREAM I OR
 YOU HELD HIM OR HER AND AFTER-
 WARDS I OR YOU FELT AFRAID OF
 WHAT I OR YOU HAD EMBRACED.
 CHOOSE CHOICE OR ANGER. HE OR
 SHE USED THE EXPRESSION ITS SO
 PROZAC NATION A LOT BEFORE HE
 OR SHE WENT ON PROZAC. THE
 STONED MAN OR WOMAN STUM-
 BLES OR PASSES EFFORTLESSLY
 DOWN THE CROWDED STREET AS
 I OR YOU OR THE CROWD PART
 AROUND THEM OR US TO MAKE
 ROOM

we find the question:

In the last year,
 (that is, since [NAME
 EVENT/NAME CURRENT
 MONTH of last year])
 have you been mad at
 people or things?

This juxtaposition explicitly foregrounds the connection between the clinical diagnosis of anger, in which the transcriber employed by the state psychiatric institute indirectly participates, and the quotidian feelings of fear described in the “THREAT WRAPPED IN A CARESS,” or the dream-caress which later leads to apprehensiveness. At other moments, however, the link between the instrumental rhetoric used to identify “Oppositional Defiance Disorder” and the central column of text seems

less clear, particularly as the questions initially unfold. All of the questions, however, call attention to the manner in which the generic categories inscribed within the language of psychiatric diagnosis echo the “generic” phrasings of subjectivity in which binarized sexual specificity paradoxically persists:

Now I am going to ask you some questions about getting angry or doing things that could get you in trouble.

In the last year, that is, since [NAME EVENT/NAME CURRENT MONTH of last year], have you lost your temper?

In the last year (*that is, since* [NAME EVENT/NAME CURRENT MONTH of last year]), have you argued with or talked back to your [CARETAKERS (or [teacher/boss)?

Creating the possibility of actually producing the emotion it would seem only to quantify and evaluate, the second meaning in the diagnostician’s initial statement (“Now I am going to ask you some questions about getting angry or doing things *that could get you in trouble*”) suggests that the questionnaire’s “neutral” rhetoric nonetheless poses a certain threat to the subject who complies by responding in kind. Spahr’s adaptation of a format that characteristically produces kinds of persons in the very process of individually assessing them (soliciting “responses” when the possibilities for responding have been predetermined by an existing generic grid) turns the poetic text into a phobic organization in which it becomes impossible to separate the interpretations the subject

generates from those that generate the subject. Yet this aesthetic outcome speaks less to what Smith perceives as paranoia's "dual ability to objectify or realize a reality and yet to proclaim the 'subject's' innocence of its formation" (87) than to an arrangement in which a threatening social reality is realized with the outcome of disclosing the subject's *participation* in its formation. While also suggesting a displacement of "anger" from/to the speaker's own experience to/from the clinical tools used to assess it, the striking similarity between the generic language of the diagnostic instrument, and the equally generic, neutral-sounding language used by *LIVE*'s speaker to describe her ordinary workday, highlights this complicity to an extent that it becomes one of the poem's predominant themes.

Indeed, in its claim to a certain passivity, it is possible to see how a cynical reader might interpret Spahr's relinquishment of poetic authority in her introduction ("I collected [all my phrases] into one long stream of day/text and barely edited them") as a capitulation to the demands of the wage-labor system. It does seem accurate to say that in *LIVE* the writer's self often seems to disintegrate into the pure tasks of gathering and recording language for which she is being monetarily compensated, not unlike the way *Modern Times* stages the breakdown of a factory worker's subjective boundaries into the wrenching function he is paid to repetitively perform. But like Chaplin, the transcriber/poet/speaker in *LIVE* is an employee within the system who seems to perform her function *too well*, generating an excess of activity that finally cannot be instrumentalized or assimilated into surplus value. Like Chaplin, the transcriber's subjection is revealed to have an aggressive component unleashed by a hyperbolic exaggeration or redoubling of the activity that the system demands. In this sense, in *LIVE* the speaker writes work—and "works" writing—in more ways than one.

In its inherent or structural belatedness, and as the site of connection between the speaker's work as state employee and her work "without an economy," transcription thus becomes the paradigm through which *LIVE* simultaneously analyzes and enacts everyday fear under its conditions of complicity. It also functions as the paradigm enabling *LIVE* to stage the reintegration of "art" and "life praxis," with the intent of organizing new forms of the latter, which Peter Burger has described as central to the project of the historical avant-garde.²⁴

HE OR SHE SAID THAT THE THEORY

OF LIFE SHOULD BE THE THEORY
 OF POETRY, OR WAS IT THAT THE
 THEORY OF POETRY SHOULD BE THE
 THEORY OF LIFE? AND WHAT DOES
 EITHER OF THOSE MEAN? HE OR
 SHE WAS DISTURBED TO SEE HIM
 OR HER NAKED FIRST THING IN THE
 MORNING. IMAGINE THE QUESTION
 AS THE MOMENT OF COMPLEXITY
 AS IT LEAVES A NUMBER OF DIFFER-
 ENT ANSWERS POSSIBLE.

As part of this endeavor to integrate “day” and “text,” or artistic production with the daily routines revolving entirely around one’s wage-labor, *LIVE* not only foregrounds the “THE CONNECTEDNESS OF EXPERIENCE” historically privileged in avant-garde efforts to synthesize art and everyday life, but calls attention to the kind of articulating logic central to paranoid knowledge, which insists *there must always be a link*, or at the very least an “and” (and maybe even an “& and”) between situations and events—even ones as disparate as transcribing responses to “Oppositional Defiance Disorder” questionnaires and being offered a vacuum tube to suck on by a stranger in the street. Though the exact nature of the connections between *LIVE*’s social particulars always remains unexplained, their very aggregation suggests a social imaginary: an unabashed attempt to think “a system,” or at the very least, to think gender and capital “meanwhile & and / at the same time.” Granted, like the “monolithic and vaguely defined “patriarchal bourgeois humanism” said to permeate the structures of symbolic discourse” that Felski sees language feminism defining itself against, the social totality *LIVE* hints at through its exploration of fear under conditions of complicity seems amorphously bounded. Yet this amorphousness of definition can be viewed as precisely the political point being made, as Melley demonstrates in his study of women’s stalking fiction, which argues that the characteristic amorphousness of its persecutory figures strategically enables female authors to depict these

shadowy and vaguely defined perpetrators as “deindividuated stand-ins of a more general cultural pattern” and “construe male violence as if it were ‘intentional *and* nonsubjective’” (94 emphasis added), thus “mak[ing] visible the violence involved in the production of ‘normal’ heterosexual relations” (96). Moreover, while the vague or amorphous definition of a “total system” suggests a certain failure on the part of the subject to *conceptualize* a social whole adequately, it could be argued that it is only in such failures—or failure in general, which Robyn Wiegman has described as “the unavoidable consequence of imagining political transformation” (“Feminism” 130)—that a *conceivable* totality manifests itself. Far from necessarily presupposing or proceeding “hand in hand with . . . fantasies of subjective coherence, plenitude, and autonomy,” as Smith suggests, the effort to “partake of and help constitute a familiar occidental epistemological category which is that of the conceivable whole” might be viewed as an effort uniquely *fostered* within the negative, self-dislocating space created by belated and dysphoric disclosures of complicity. As Žižek notes, totality

does not designate simply a total mediation accessible to a global subject but, rather its exact opposite . . . “totality” is encountered at its purest in the negative experience of falsity and breakdown, when the subject assumes the position of a judge exempt from what he is passing a judgement on . . . here the message of “totality” is simply: “No, you are involved in the system you pretend to reject. . . . So, far from being correlative to the Universal subject, ‘totality’ is really experienced and ‘actually exists’ precisely in the negative shock of failure, or paying the price for forgetting to include oneself in the situation into which one intervenes.” (“Da Capo senza fine” 228)

In “writing work” that insistently foregrounds the subject’s inscription within the system she opposes, but also assumes this situation as the beginning point for, rather than an obstruction to critical intervention, Spahr constantly stages the encounter with social totality *as* negative affect. In doing so, the minor, seemingly politically effete role of the state-employed transcriber comes to take on surprisingly new cultural meanings, contributing to the effort to think how the small subject’s inevitable complicity (or perhaps even her “paranoia”) might eventually become “the condition of agency rather than its destruction” (Butler 277). For as Spahr herself suggests, while paranoid logic always offers “escap-

ing” as one option, it offers “thinking” as the other: “*As in theories of capital, realize this situation and see it as the beginning place for all current thinking or escaping.*”

“Bad Timing” is designated a “sequel,” not only because it bears the title of the film by Nicholas Roeg, but also because it is so clearly indebted to previous work by critics on the paranoid imagination—Fredric Jameson’s The Geopolitical Aesthetic, Timothy Melley’s Empire of Conspiracy, and in particular, Craig Dworkin’s “Parting with Description,” a reading of Lyn Hejinian’s Writing Is An Aid to Memory as a text explicitly calling for “paranoid” interpretative strategies that directly inspired my own secondary and belated intervention. This article is therefore dedicated to him. Special thanks to Paula Moya for her detailed reading and challenging, always thought-provoking criticisms of this essay in draft form. Thanks also to Steve Evans and Dan Farrell.

Notes

- 1 One of the liabilities in making references to television in academic articles is the speed with which changes in programming take place, outpacing the timing of writing and publishing. Since this article was first drafted, the gendered positions of paranoiac and empiricist have flip-flopped once again, with Scully (Gillian Anderson) now occupying the former position after the replacement of Mulder (David Duchovny) by Agent Doggett (Robert Patrick).
- 2 See in particular the dazzling opening section, “Totality as Conspiracy.”
- 3 It is my hope that this definition of paranoia, as a specific subcategory of fear grounded in the apprehension of a “total system” encompassing the subject, and amenable to analysis from within in spite of the fact that its external boundaries cannot be securely delimited (a situation requiring that the system be “imagined” rather than “known”), provides an implicit, affirmative response to the question, put to me helpfully by Paula Moya, of whether or not a paranoia whose causes are real is, in fact, “paranoia” at all. One useful outcome of this distinction is that it enables the seemingly contradictory (though very familiar) position of being at once paranoid and correct.
- 4 As Weinbaum notes, Spivak makes the point that while capital opens up the abstraction necessary for antiessentialist thinking, it also makes instrumental use of essences to sustain itself: “Capital is antiessentializing because it is abstract as such . . . [while essences] are deployed by capitalism for the political management of capital” (133). In more recent writing, Spivak emphasizes the “spectralizing global sweep” of “‘pure’ finance capital—the abstract as such,” while also pointing to the potential disruptions of this sweep by resistance networks associated with a “partially spectralized ‘rural.’” See “From Haverstock Hill Flat to U.S. Classroom.”
- 5 See Massumi, “Everywhere You Want to Be” and introduction, in *The Politics of Everyday Fear*.
- 6 See Fisher.
- 7 See Hendershot.
- 8 Timothy Melley emphasizes this point in *Empire of Conspiracy*, 11.

- 9 For a reading of these psychoanalytical theories that links constitutive paranoia to a globalized commodity culture, see Brennan.
- 10 As Suleiman notes, one of the main paradoxes of S/Z “is that after formulating the difference between the readable and writable in such stark terms, Barthes appears to undermine those very differences by reading Balzac’s *Sarrasine*, which he singles out as a readable text par excellence, *as if* (well, almost as if) it were a writable text” (38).
- 11 The contemporaneity of the two discourses is stressed by poets Ron Silliman, Carla Harryman, Lyn Hejinian, Steve Benson, Bob Perelman, and Barrett Watten in their collective essay “Aesthetic Tendency and the Politics of Poetry.” As the authors note, *Beginning with Stein and Zukofsky, and significantly reinforced by the examples of the abstract poems of Frank O’Hara and John Ashbery and the aleatorical texts of Jackson McLow in the fifties, there has been a continuity of experimental work that foregrounds its status as written. Partly by virtue of its contributions to a critique of the self, this kind of writing became in the seventies and eighties a way to extend poetry into areas that had previously been closed to it. This development of experimental technique took place at the same time as the historic explosion of interest in language and linguistics resulting from the work of such authors as Barthes and Kristeva. In no sense did the theory precede the work; the early literary magazines of our movement were almost entirely concerned with publishing poems. It was only with the publication of the collaborative poem Legend (1978), the magazine L=A=N=G=U=A=G=E* (Ed. Bruce Andrews and Charles Bernstein from 1978) and the transcripts of some of the early talks in Hills/Talks (1978) that theory began to take its place alongside poetry as a matter of real concern. (268 my emphasis)
- 12 Interestingly, although similar arguments have been made about “theory art” in other media during the same period, particularly in plastic and media arts, for the most part the marriage of art and theory in these cases was respected and even celebrated by critics, with practitioners like Martha Rosler, Cindy Sherman, Mary Kelley, and Laura Mulvey frequently cited as exemplars of the theoretical turn. Moreover, in addition to increasing the market values of individual works, the “turn to theory” in visual arts from the 70s and 80s increased the cultural cachet of “avant-garde experimentalism” itself—though ironically, the theoretical turn lauded by art critics was in effect a *linguistic* turn. In one situation, a close relationship between theory and art was critically embraced; in the other, it became grounds for aesthetic dismissal.
- 13 See, for instance, Stanton and Wittig. Citing Bovenschen, Teresa de Lauretis similarly points to the limitations of a countervalorized “feminine” discourse, though in the context of rethinking avant-garde “women’s cinema” rather than literary practice.
- 14 A version of this position was put forward by Ron Silliman and later challenged by Leslie Scalapino. Silliman writes, *Progressive poets who identify as members of groups that have been the subject of history—many white male heterosexuals, for example—are apt to challenge all that is supposedly “natural”*

about the formation of their own subjectivity. That their writing today is apt to call into question, if not actually explode, such conventions as narrative, persona, and even reference can hardly be surprising. At the other end of this spectrum are people who do not identify as members of groups that have been the subject of history, for they instead have been its objects. The narrative of history has not led to their self-actualization, but to their exclusion and domination. These writers and readers—women, people of color, sexual minorities, the entire spectrum of the “marginal”—have a manifest political need to have their stories told. That their writing should often appear much more conventional, with the notable difference as to whom is the subject of these conventions, illuminates the relationship between form and audience. (qtd. in Buuck 27–28)

Buuck's essay provides a useful overview of this debate, as well as of more recent “exemplary moments” within the avant-garde writing community in which questions of gender and form have come to the fore.

- 15 This is still an important task for feminism, although certainly not its defining or necessarily primary goal. In fact, I agree with Robyn Wiegman's call for a productive “transition from the critique of patriarchal masculinism to internal struggle within feminism,” in which we shift from a mode of critique “embroiled, indeed embattled, in a heterosexual paradigm in which women's relationships to men are centrally interrogated” to one which is “fundamentally a homosocial circuit in which *feminism* signifies from the conflicted terrain of relations among women” (“What Ails,” 363n2). However, the critique of patriarchal masculinism not only remains a contemporary exigency, but also often provides a site for fostering the internal feminist debates giving rise to the homosocial circuit Wiegman privileges.
- 16 This quotation appears in an epilogue to the poems called “Off the Top” (n. pag.).
- 17 See Žižek, “*Da capo senza fine*” 229.
- 18 The idea that political resistance necessitates straightforward, assertive, and authoritative (i.e. non-writerly) language is critically questioned by Barbara Johnson in “Is Writerliness Conservative?” Johnson addresses what she describes as “recent ‘Left’ criticism of recent ‘Left’ criticism [in which] undecidability, described as an outgrowth of certain critical theorists’ privileging of language, has repeatedly been deemed politically suspect as an oppositional strategy.” She consequently adopts Barthes notion of the writerly as “infinitely plural and open to the free play of signifiers and of difference, unconstrained by representative considerations, and transgressive of any desire for decidable, unified, totalized meaning” (26) as a useful synonym for “the undecidable” (radicalized ambiguity), in order to redress the accusation frequently made by critics of deconstruction that undecidability necessarily leads to political nihilism or, worse, quietism.
- 19 On gothic melodrama as “the paranoid woman's film,” see Doane, *The Desire to Desire* 123–54.
- 20 Linda Williams defines genre in this way.
- 21 On this phenomenon as one specific to the representation

of gender relations in stalking fictions, see Melley's "Stalked by Love" 71. This essay reappears as a chapter in *Empire of Conspiracy*: The reference here is to the version that appeared in *differences*.

22 See Žižek, "Class Struggle," in Butler et al., 99.

23 Spahr makes reference to her own "zero-level writing" within the poem "responding" itself (28).

24 See *Theory of the Avant-Garde* 49–50.

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