

5-2011

## The Ripening of Mangos

Katherine Hoerth  
*University of Texas-Pan American*

Follow this and additional works at: [https://scholarworks.utrgv.edu/leg\\_etd](https://scholarworks.utrgv.edu/leg_etd)



Part of the [Creative Writing Commons](#), and the [English Language and Literature Commons](#)

---

### Recommended Citation

Hoerth, Katherine, "The Ripening of Mangos" (2011). *Theses and Dissertations - UTB/UTPA*. 93.  
[https://scholarworks.utrgv.edu/leg\\_etd/93](https://scholarworks.utrgv.edu/leg_etd/93)

This Thesis is brought to you for free and open access by ScholarWorks @ UTRGV. It has been accepted for inclusion in Theses and Dissertations - UTB/UTPA by an authorized administrator of ScholarWorks @ UTRGV. For more information, please contact [justin.white@utrgv.edu](mailto:justin.white@utrgv.edu), [william.flores01@utrgv.edu](mailto:william.flores01@utrgv.edu).

THE RIPENING OF MANGOS

A Thesis

by

KATHERINE HOERTH

Submitted to the Graduate School of the  
University of Texas – Pan American  
In partial fulfillment of the requirements for the degree of

MASTER OF FINE ARTS

May 2011

Major Subject: English/Creative Writing



THE RIPENING OF MANGOS

A Thesis  
by  
KATHERINE G. HOERTH

COMMITTEE MEMBERS

Dr. Steven P. Schneider  
Chair of Committee

Dr. Caroline S. Miles  
Committee Member

Dr. Deborah Cole  
Committee Member

May 2011



Copyright 2011 Katherine Hoerth

All Rights Reserved



## ABSTRACT

Hoerth, Katherine, The Ripening of Mangos. Master of Fine Arts (MFA), May, 2011, 88 pp., 17 references.

This project is a collection of poems which draw influence from Romantic, confessional, and post-modern poetry movements, and can most accurately be described as Confessionalistic, though they are resistant to categorization. The poems function to dismantle archetypal definitions of feminine identity, and instead aim to depict identity to be fluid and multifaceted.

*The Ripening of Mangos* is divided into four sections. The first section deconstructs the ‘angel’ or ‘virgin’ archetype, while the second deconstructs the ‘monster’ or ‘whore’ archetype. Section three includes voices of procreation, and functions to complicate the image of ‘the mother’. The last section, Transplanting, shows gendered identity within the context of other power constructs (such as language, sexuality, class, and ethnicity) and shows the transcendence beyond singular notions of identity.





## DEDICATION

For Bruno, always, for Bruno



## ACKNOWLEDGEMENTS

I owe my gratitude to the members of my thesis committee who provided invaluable input and advice throughout the entirety of this project: Dr. Deborah Cole and Dr. Caroline Miles. Dr. Steven Schneider, who served as chair, gave much of his time, energy, and encouragement. I would also like to thank the entire MFA faculty at UTPA for their support throughout the past few years.

Thanks to the editors of the following journals, where some of the following poems have appeared or are forthcoming:

*Borderlands: Texas Poetry Review*: “South on 281.”

*BorderSenses*: “The Girl who Opened the Door.”

*Cold Mountain Review*: “The Cornfields Outside Santa Rosa.”

*Front Porch* (Texas State University): “La Pulga Beauties.”

*Word Riot*: “Breakfast with Fur” and “The Blue Moment.”

And special thanks to Mouthfeel Press for publishing *Among the Mariposas*, a chapbook in which many of these poems first appeared.



## TABLE OF CONTENTS

	Page
ABSTRACT.....	iii
DEDICATION.....	iv
ACKNOWLEDGEMENTS .....	v
TABLE OF CONTENTS .....	vi
CHAPTER I. CRITICAL INTRODUCTION .....	1
The Confessional Poetry Movement .....	2
Confessionalistic Poetry .....	10
Philosophical and Formal Concerns .....	13
On Content and the Feminist Genealogy .....	19
On Structure .....	25
Limitations and Future Goals.....	30
CHAPTER II. POETRY.....	31
Not the Sonnet You Dreamed Of .....	31
GERMINATION.....	32
What They Told the Girl with Bite Marks on Her Lips .....	32
The Girl Who Opens the Door.....	34
La Pulga Beauties .....	35
Black D'orsays .....	36
Dear Ricky Martin .....	37
The Girl Who Wears Those Cute Stiletto Shoes .....	38
Sweet Salome .....	39

The Cornfields Outside Santa Rosa .....	41
The Foxtailed Girl .....	44
BLOOMING .....	46
Adan y Eva in the Rio Grande Garden of Eden .....	46
How do Clams Make Love? .....	47
Original Sin .....	48
In Defense of Vanity .....	49
Breakfast with Fur .....	50
The Garden of Dresses .....	51
That Sort of Woman .....	52
The Blue Moment .....	55
Upon Hearing Bruno Speak Spanish .....	56
My Shadow Watches .....	57
RIPE WITH WORDS .....	59
August 19, 2010 .....	59
To the Star Gazer.....	61
Eros .....	62
Betty Crocker .....	63
Santa Rosa of Lima .....	66
The Mother of Sweet Texas Onions .....	67
The Dancing Woman .....	69
A Taste for Autumn .....	70
Just Words .....	71
TRANSPLANTING.....	72
Baptism at the Iglesia .....	72

South on HWY 281 .....	73
Town of Mistakes .....	74
Chocolate Sundae .....	75
Deisies Bloom in Fall .....	76
The Common Denominator of the Afternoon Manicure .....	77
The Double Murder .....	79
Traveling West .....	81
My Reflection in the Rio Grande .....	82
REFERENCES .....	84
APPENDIX.....	85
BIOGRAPHICAL SKETCH .....	88





## CHAPTER I

### CRITICAL INTRODUCTION

This project is an eclectic collection of poems addressing sexuality, gender, culture, language, race, class, place, and the earth. My poems can be labeled Romantic, confessional, feminist, post- modern, Confessionalistic, free verse, lyric, and narrative. However, it seems to me that none of these terms accurately depict this entire body of poems. Some terms rub against the heels of my poetics, while others slip off as the lines take steps through completion. It seems as if the identity of my poetics is a multitude of forms and contradictions, all woven together in this manuscript wearing the name *The Ripening of Mangos*.

When searching for a movement, a label, for my entire body of work, I have encountered some difficulty. Assigning my poems one label would bring with it an identity, one that does not necessarily describe the verse in its entirety. For example, the term “confessional” brings with it a complete set of characteristics (which will be discussed in more length later) and my poems may or may not have some of these characteristics. The same is true for such terms as “feminist poetry,” “post-modernist poetry,” or any other that may be assigned to my poems. Post-structuralist philosopher Judith Butler writes that assigning a singular term to describe a subject’s identity will represent a little piece of the subject in isolation from all other power constructs. In *Gender Trouble*, she writes:

If one “is” a woman, that is surely not all one is; the term fails to be exhaustive... because gender intersects with racial, class, ethnic, sexual, and regional modalities of

discursively constituted identities. As a result, it becomes impossible to separate out “gender” from the political and cultural intersection in which it is invariably produced and maintained (3).

Here Butler shows how one term fails to fully encompass the multifaceted nature of a person’s identity (in this particular case, a woman’s identity). She explains that using gender as a sole tool for creating identity is misguided, because to do this would ignore the other forces of power that interact with gender, such as class, ethnicity, and sexuality. In this manuscript, I write in a multitude of different styles, and I have many different influences that all intersect with one another. It is impossible to call my poetics (or the poetics of anyone) just “confessional,” “post confessional,” “avant garde,” “feminist,” “modernist,” or even, “ethnic.” These terms, instead of simply categorizing a poet’s style, can actually serve to limit the way in which a reader encounters the poems, and even the way in which the author creates them. For example, if I were to accept the identity of a “feminist” poet, I may begin writing only feminist works and ignore the other influences on my poetics. Labels not only define their subjects, but create identities for them as well. Therefore, instead of my poetics accepting a specific label, I believe it will be more accurate to describe the influences, the genealogy of poetry that pre-exists my own, to create a diverse foundation that my poems stand upon.

### **The Confessional Poetry Movement**

Confessional poetry is difficult to define, perhaps because it is not an actual philosophy. Representative authors are typically cited as Robert Lowell, Sylvia Plath, and Anne Sexton. I will discuss the poetry of Sexton and Plath specifically, as their poetry more closely relates to my own. M. L Rosenthal, who is credited with originally coining the term ‘confessional poetry’ in

his essay “Poetry as Confession,” defined this type of poetry as pointing inward towards the poet, exposing the intimate details of his or her life. The speaker (who is also the poet) is placed at the center of the work (109). Since then, contemporary critics have continued to redefine confessional poetry. David Yezzi, a current poet and critic, identifies confessional poetry as follows in his essay titled “Confessional Poetry and the Artifice of Honesty”:

What distinguishes confessional poetry... is the rawness of its addresses and the incorporation of guilty personal detail for emotional effect... Often the particulars of a poet’s life provide the basis for more general speculation, which constitutes the poem’s bid for universality. Conversely, in confessional poetry, such details can serve to deny universality by delineating the poet as apart and uniquely suffering. (3)

David Yezzi’s definition brings up several valid characteristics of confessional poetry. First of all, confessional poets opened up new subject matter traditionally closed to poetic discourse. They wrote about subjects such as “family, sex, alcoholism, madness - - or the emphasis of self” (Yezzi, 3). Particularly relevant to my work, Anne Sexton wrote about female sexuality, masturbation, madness, the body, and other controversial subject matter regarding women. Her poems include “The Abortion,” “Menstruation at Forty,” “Suicide Note,” “Dreaming the Breasts,” “In Celebration of My Uterus,” and, probably most shocking to the readers of her milieu, “The Ballad of the Lonely Masturbator.”

In addition to broadening the poetic conversation to include new subject matter, confessional poets also re-examined the use of the personal “I” in their works. Confessional poetry was born in an era that generally looked down on the personal in poetry. It was a reaction

to the “impersonality” that T.S Eliot advocated in his essay “Tradition and Individual Talent.” The critical atmosphere of the time period generally favored impersonality in poetry with the prevalence of New Critical thought. Therefore, with the emergence of the confessional, the personal was once again celebrated and brought back into the forefront of poetic style (Yezzi, 3).

However, Confessional poets were not simply returning to the Romantic “I” persona. They modified it to be a more direct “I” that reflected an autobiographic self (as opposed to the Romantic universal “I”). When Anne Sexton first began writing, her poetry was, for the most part, “straightforwardly autobiographical” and largely therapeutic (Rees-Jones, 286). Essentially, the speaker of the poem is the poet herself, reflecting on her everyday experiences. Romantic poets like Walt Whitman did this as well, except that perhaps the “I” persona was more representative, reaching more towards the universal experience of all humans. Confessional poets, on the other hand, made a more direct connection between the self and the “I” in their works, as Rees-Jones points out in her article “Consorting with Angels.” Rees-Jones writes that the nature of confessional poetry is “determined exactly by its very authenticity” and that the subject matter and instances in the poem are indeed autobiographical, though at times subject to “tinkering” (284). For the Confessional poet, the self comes first – their poems serve to expose the details of everyday life and in that reveal universal truths. Romantic poets, on the other hand, serve the universal truths and may or may not employ personal details in the process.

Another characteristic of Confessional poets is that their poetry was emotionally charged. Yezzi writes that they wrote with their emotions on their sleeves (3). That is, they wrote about their lives with language rich in emotion. Many of the confessional poets led fascinating lives riddled with depression, mental breakdowns, marriages that fell apart, and alcoholism. Because

their works drew from these experiences, their readers were fascinated by the gritty details of the poets' lives.

However, confessional poetry is perceived by critics to have several limitations. Some critics charge confessional poets with alienating their readers with too much extreme information about their lives. With the publication of Plath's *The Bell Jar* and *Ariel*, Yezzi even goes so far as to compare her readership to a cult. However, in addition to her 'cult following', Plath also had a wide readership, and today Sylvia Plath can even be described as a household name. Therefore, the public was (and still is) obviously interested in what she and other confessional poets had to say - beyond a marginal cult of manic women. Maxine Kumin (in her introduction to *The Complete Poems* by Anne Sexton) suggests to us that women readers in fact did identify with Sexton's "graphic expose of female experience." What Plath and Sexton were producing was fresh and new, especially in terms of subject matter. Women readers, perhaps, could relate to the experiences.

Another possible limitation of Confessional poetry is its sentimentality. While some critics applaud confessional poets for their emotional honesty, others deem them as being overly sentimental. In an analysis of Sexton's poem "Double Image," Yezzi writes that Sexton's "woeful inability to see beyond herself isn't moving, it's depressing." He shows that many readers feel the suffering depicted in these poems is alienating, not universal, because it is so extreme that readers cannot relate. However, this can be rebutted by citing the wide readership of poets like Plath and Sexton. While perhaps their poems can be received as being extreme by some readers (perhaps particularly male readers), it is difficult to argue that the majority of readers could not relate to them because of their wide readership. Their writing, in concentrating so heavily on their own personal experiences, can, however, be criticized as being myopic,

looking only into oneself and not the world around them. In fact, in Plath's final collection of poems, *Ariel*, she relates her own suffering to those under the Nazi regime. Yezzi charges "Daddy" in particular with a "dangerous form of sentimentality" that puts on display the enormous ego of the poet (3).

Lastly, and probably most troubling for me as a poet, is the criticism that the women confessional poets uphold the dichotomous perspective of female archetypes. As Ostriker writes in her essay *Stealing the Language*, it is largely thanks to mythology that a woman is either "an angel or a monster" (72). Some critics name the dichotomy the "virgin and the whore" (Rushing, 1989). Deryn Rees-Jones articulates this dilemma of transgressing beyond the reticent "angel in the house" identity in her essay on Anne Sexton, "Consorting with Angels":

For the woman poet... the transgression works as a double model. On one hand, it offers a liberation from stereotypical representations of woman (...the paragon of sexual and domestic virtue) while on the other hand it may actually reinforce patriarchal anxieties about women's fury and madness, desire and dirtiness... The woman who confesses is, however, frequently read [by critics] as testifying only to her own anguish and her own 'weakness'; she is simply revealing the awfulness of femininity which was 'known' to be there all along, and which, in the most simplistic terms, has led to her oppression in the first place.

Rees-Jones explains that, instead of deconstructing the female identity by defying the stereotypical virgin or angel identity, Sexton is actually going to another extreme by embodying the other side of the dichotomy (the monster or the whore). While this was certainly not Sexton's intent, the critical interpretations of her work cause it to be somewhat problematic because her

poetry continues to illustrate the female psyche as exemplifying one of the two extremes of feminine identity. Rees-Jones does go on to explain that in her later work Sexton was able to transcend this through the use of the androgynous angel as the speaker of her poetry.

In *The Ripening of Mangos*, I draw on the foundations built by the confessional poetry movement. Thanks to Anne Sexton and Sylvia Plath, subject matter that was once taboo is no longer. I am free and able to write about female sexuality precisely because they have already opened that door. For example, my poem “Breakfast with Fur” (50) speaks to the nature of female pleasure. The speaker of the poem instructs the reader how to indulge, yet at the same time hide, the pleasure of drinking tea. My graphic discussion of sexuality (the cup in the poem is Oppenheimer’s famous “Fur Covered Teacup”) may not have been possible to write were it not for Sexton’s poems that came before mine. Though, admittedly, I do employ many metaphors to make the sexuality in the work more implicit than in Sexton’s poems. Perhaps I’m simply not as brave as Sexton was, or perhaps it is because of the great criticism she received from the literary community. I do not want a prominent critic to say, someday, that “My Shadow Watches” (57), with its direct sexual references, is ‘the straw that broke the camel’s back’ (as Louis Simpson wrote in reference to Sexton’s “Menstruation at Forty” in *Harper Magazine*).

Another way in which my poems build on the foundation of Confessional poetry is in utilizing the first person “I” (though my use of the “I” is a constructed persona and is not as direct as the “I” in Plath and Sexton’s poetry, which will be discussed in more detail later). As discussed before, Confessional poets drew from the Romantic tradition and wrote in the first person, and their work relied upon autobiographic details from the poets’ everyday lives. My poetry certainly employs the first person “I,” but I cannot go as far as to say that my work is straightforwardly autobiographical. Though I use my everyday experiences as resonant sources



for my poems (as Richard Hugo would call them in *Triggering Town*), I have never experienced what some of the speakers in my poems do. I do not view my writing as therapeutic. While I do view everyday life as the triggering subject for my work, I do not rely on autobiographic details to populate it. Instead, my poems are filled with conjured images and created experiences. My work is not confined by autobiographic details about my personal reality; but rather, I use moments of life to depict larger truths about the collective world around me. My autobiography is what fuels my poetic imagination, fills me with the necessity to write, and yet I move past it. Instead of viewing my everyday life as a confinement to my work, I view it as a source of inspiration, a jumping point to leap into metaphors and lies. I believe that through the use of metaphors and the employment of many different speakers, my poems reach towards the universal and portray a decentered sense of self while remaining grounded in everyday life experiences. And this is precisely how my poetics differs from confessionalism – whereas in confessional poetry, the speaker of the poems can be linked to the author herself, the speakers in my poems are not me; instead, they are constructed personas from experiences, lies, and imagination. Sometimes they bear a resemblance to my actual life, as in “Chocolate Sundae” (75), and sometimes they do not, as in the “Mother of Sweet Texas Onions” (67). For me, the truths in my poems do not depend on me sticking strictly to the genuine details to my everyday experiences. Instead, meaning depends on the emotional and universal truths revealed in my poems.

My work builds upon the foundations of the Confessional poetry tradition. Like the confessional women poets that came before me, I too write poems charged with emotion about once taboo subjects: a woman’s body and her sexuality. Like the confessional poets, I draw on the experiences of everyday life to trigger my poems, and I trust emotion over logic to guide me.

However, I also differ from the confessional women poets of the 1950's and 60's, whose poems some critics have interpreted as upholding stereotypes of female archetypes of identity. As discussed before, Anne Sexton's poetry has been criticized as functioning to uphold the whore or monster archetype. Critics have read her poetry to depict the women in her poems as being sexualized, overly passionate, and mad. For example, in her poem "Her Kind" Sexton associates herself with "a possessed witch," "dreaming evil," and "out of mind." The figure in Sexton's poem, the witch, can be read as upholding the archetype of woman as a monster, a being ruled not by the mind; but rather, her body. Because she is ruled by her body, the figure cannot be trusted to act rationally. In my poems, however, I challenge and deconstruct the whore archetype, broadening the discussion and depicting her in a more complicated manner.

In poems such as "Adan y Eva in the Rio Grande Garden of Eden" (46) and "Original Sin" (48), I depict the 'whore' stereotype (Eve) not as a foolish woman with an overdose of passion (and perhaps a little madness that inevitably plagues all women who play the whore), but rather, a calculating and conscious figure who decides to bite into the apple, defy Adam/Adan, and be banished from Eden. After all, perhaps Eve didn't really like Eden in the first place, always behind her man and "a veil of fronds"..."unnamed / a hidden bloom in the prickly Rio Grande Garden of Eden" until she bites into that apple and makes a name for herself (46). Eve is seen as a being following not only her body and passion, but has her own rationale for her rebellion. In this sense, she is governed by both her passion (her body) and her own mind (instead of the mandating logic of Adam, or Eden). Therefore, my Eve does not uphold the whore archetype as a woman who is overly passionate, ruled by her body, and possibly a little mad.

Perhaps most significant, however, is that while women confessional poets had to exercise great courage in opening up once taboo subject matter, I can merely take for granted that they wrote about the female body and sexuality, and follow in their footsteps. I hope that my poetry can, like Sexton's, continue the poetic discussion of gender roles. The speakers in my poems embody different identities – from the vulnerable to the powerful. Through these speakers, I weave a manuscript together that illustrates the many facets of life experience and identity.

### **Confessionalistic Poetry**

*“You owe reality nothing and the truth about your feelings everything”*

- Richard Hugo, *Triggering Town*

Confessionalistic poetry is a burgeoning field of poetics, and not much has yet been written about it. It has also been described as “Post Post Confessional.” I believe that my own poetics can best be described to exist in this realm. Rachel Zucker, a contemporary poet and critic, describes the current climate of Confessionalistic poetry to be something different from autobiographical verse. Confessionalistic poetry tends to “reach towards the universal” and does not stick to autobiographical facts only. Instead it pulls bits and pieces of experience together. It is not afraid of the personal, because, as Zucker writes, in the end, the self is really all we have.

What I find comforting about the term Confessionalistic in regard to my own poems is that it is not quite a school or a movement of poetics – it has no rules or codes or even identity that verse conforms to. Instead, as Zucker writes, Confessionalistic refers to a “degree or tonality” of a poet's confessional qualities. Confessionalistic poets build on numerous foundations of poetic tradition. Obviously, they draw influence from the Confessional poets of

the 50's and 60's in their utilization of the personal, their commitment to feeling and emotion, and their risk taking, as do my own poems. Confessionalistic poets, however, include only moments of autobiography – maybe just a snippet of the poet's life and the rest of the poem is filled instead by her imagination. In addition, Confessionalistic verse draws upon influence of post-modern poets in that the self in the poems is depicted as decentered, which will be discussed in more detail later.

In "Chocolate Sundae," I draw from personal experience and create an "I" persona that is me, and at the same time isn't (75). I invent certain details in service of a greater truth about ethnicity and class. In the poem, the speaker is reminiscing about a teenage romance gone wrong. The reader can infer that the speaker is white (based on her father's "blue eyes" and her own "blonde hair"), and either of middle or upper class to the point where she doesn't worry about the prices of food. The other character, "Johnny" or "Juanito," whose mother has "dark fingers" and makes "homemade tamales", is likely the son of working class immigrants, and while the two teenagers are not troubled by their ethnic differences (in fact, maybe they're a little amused by them), at the end of the poem the reader learns that the relationship will not last because of class difference. Juanito is embarrassed by his "emptied wallet" and leaves the speaker "yearning for something more." Therefore, it is not the skin color that creates a wall between human relationships and prevents a meaningful connection, but rather, the color of money. That's the ugly truth displayed in the poem – an ugly truth built up by a series of beautiful lies (lies in the sense that they are not autobiographically true to the poet herself).

In regard to the resonant sources of my poetry, Richard Hugo's quote from *Triggering Town* accurately depicts my viewpoint. My poems are drawn from my human experiences, experiences as a girl, a woman, and a cultural insider/outsider on the border in the Rio Grande

Valley. However, my poems are not solely autobiographical. I do not stick to the 'facts' - instead, I trust my poetic inclinations to rearrange things, to imagine, to leap, much like the Confessionalistic poets. My life and my experiences are simply the triggering subjects. For example, in the poem "The Mother of Sweet Texas Onions" the speaker in the poem is a former agricultural worker (67). I have never spent a single day working a manual labor job and have never worked in the sun picking onions. Yet, I draw from my own personal fears of failure, of grief, and from the landscapes around me (I live in a rural area with onion farms and ranches); from the people I daily see and weave these experiences together to create a poem existing both in the realm of beautiful lies and a terrible, hideous truth.

Another example of this is the "La Pulga Beauties," where the speaker assumes the voice of a grapefruit at a flea market stand (35). In using images like, "feeling the eyes of the hungry," "fingertips asking if the hands that bloomed me were rough," and "fingers long to unbutton, to slit / open the rind," the reader is made to think of the grapefruit as a body instead of a piece of food, perhaps as a prostitute standing in plain view of potential customers. Of course, I have neither experienced being a grapefruit nor being a prostitute, but this poem did come from feeling vulnerable, naked, and objectified by the stares of men. In this poem, I use the emotion of feeling both fearful yet powerful to imagine what a grapefruit feels like in a busy market. In this way, my emotions and everyday experiences trigger the poem, but do not populate its entirety. If I were to stick strictly to the autobiographical truths of my life, I believe the poem wouldn't be as interesting or original.

Based on the historical evolution of poetic texts, we can see that Confessionalistic verse draws not only from the confessional tradition, but also from post-structural philosophy and post-modern criticism of blurring boundaries of genre, the public and private dichotomy, and the self.

As Zucker writes, "...the Confessionalistic poet risks more.... she is willing to undermine the boundaries of self. Often, she is writing at the frayed edge of the genre in the busy interstitial space between neurons." Again, going back to "La Pulga Beauties" discussed above, the narrator in the poem is both the self and isn't. She is both public and private, in the sense that the poem reaches both towards the universal emotions and the personal details. Therefore, it is in this burgeoning and evolving space of poetics that *The Ripening of Mangos* most accurately exists.

## **Philosophical and Formal Concerns**

### **Post-Structural Philosophy and Post-Modern Poetry Styles**

In regard to the philosophy that informs my work and the forms I choose to write in, my influences come from an array of sources. As previously discussed, my work can be described as a form of Confessionalistic writing; however, like Confessionalistic poets, my work is informed by a multiplicity of influences. One of these influences is post-structural philosophy. And while "poststructuralist theory" is recognized to inform "post-modern literary conventions...with pastiche and fragmented syntax in an attempt to convey the decentered self (Brown, 304), my work is clearly quite different from this particular style (which will be further discussed in more detail). Although my work does not take formal influence from post-modern poets (more specifically, L=A=N=G=U=A=G=E poets), like them, my work is informed by post-structural philosophy.

Post-structural philosophy is difficult to define, perhaps because of the very nature of the thought. I will attempt to give a brief, but certainly not all encompassing, description. Post-structuralist philosophers seek to deconstruct reality to describe our understanding of truth as a "decentered universe" where one cannot "know where we are, since all concepts which

previously defined the centre... have been deconstructed, or undermined” (Berry, 60). In this sense, truth is described as fluid, precisely because our understanding of the world is based on language, and we are “not fully in control of the medium” (Berry, 62). The meanings of words are dependent upon the meaning of their opposites, and truth becomes a relation rather than an absolute. As Nietzsche (a predecessor to post-structural philosophy) said, “there are no facts, only interpretations” (Berry, 61).

In terms of understanding texts, post-structural critics advocate the deconstructing of texts and the dismantling of the sources of textual power. To deconstruct a text means to break down the barriers between the signifier and the signified (or the author and the reader). The text, rather than being constrained by an authoritative authorial meaning, is “free by its very nature of all such restraints” and it is up to the reader to produce a meaning (Berry, 64). Meaning is something that is liberated, liquid, and loose.

The post-modern poetry movement was influenced by this philosophical movement, and one branch is the L=A=N=G=U=A=G=E poet (which is a branch of post-modern poetry, though this term is somewhat troublesome because its use denotes an outsider looking in. While I argue further that I am neither insider nor outsider, using this particular term is problematic for me, though it is the most recognized term for this school of poetics). The L=A=N=G=A=U=G=E poet seeks to depict language as fluid, and challenges our conventional interpretations of words. Following in the footsteps of the modernists, many of these poets use “repetition, rhyme, and syntactic fragmentation” to defamiliarize and undermine the linguistic certainties and power structures of traditional poetics and place words within a “new, more liberating framework” (Brown, 301). L=A=N=G=U=A=G=E poets, like Confessionalistic poets, acknowledge that the elusive speaker behind the poet is not fixed, and they use language to deconstruct the self and

portray it as fragmented, decentered, and discrete. For example, Gertrude Stein (a modernist poet whose work greatly influenced the more contemporary L=A=N=G=U=A=G=E movement) in *Patricarchal Poetry* writes “...Was it a fish was heard was it a bird was it a cow was stirred was it a third was it a cow was stirred was it a third was it a bird was heard was it a third was it a fish was heard was it a third” (Brown, 45). Here, Stein uses fragments of language to show meaning as fluid. After reading the word ‘fish’ so many times, the reader’s understanding of the meaning breaks down. He or she no longer associates the sound ‘fish’ with the meaning of the word ‘fish’. ‘Fish’ becomes something fluid, and the reader constructs their own interpretation of the passage.

### **Post- Structural Philosophy and Feminism**

Post-structural philosophy also gave birth to a branch of theoretical feminism. Theorists such as Judith Butler and Julia Kristeva attempt to show that, like our understanding of the decentered universe, our notions of gender are also based on language and therefore cannot be relied on as pure. In her book *Gender Trouble*, Butler writes that the very subject of feminism, the term “women” is problematic because it is “produced and restrained by the very structures of power through which emancipation is sought” (2).

Julia Kristeva goes on to describe two different aspects of language: the symbolic and the semiotic in her essay “The System and the Speaking Subject”. Symbolic language is associated with “authority, order, fathers, repression and control” and it “maintains the fiction that the self is fixed and unified” (Barry, 123). The second type of language Kristeva describes is the semiotic, which is associated with poetry as opposed to prose, and is characterized by “displacement, slippage... which suggests... a much looser, more randomized way of making connections...



everything, that is, entailed in the post-structuralist view of language” (Barry 123-4). It is these qualities that feminist L=A=N=G=U=A=G=E poets display in their works to distort not only the surface of language, but our conventional notions of gender as well.

Contemporary poets such as Susan Howe, Harryette Mullen, and Adrienne Rich draw on both feminist and post-structuralist theories to create a poetry that depicts gender as decentered, as post-modern poets more broadly did with our conventionalized interpretations of language. These poets use the fragmented language to also depict feminine identity as something that, like meaning, is decentered and much more complicated than simple archetypes. Through the use of pastiche and fragmented syntax, these poets are able to defamiliarize the reader, leaving them to stand on the grounds of meaning they themselves create.

Adrienne Rich illustrates the multiplicity of identity through the poetic forms she utilizes. She writes in her poem “Planetarium”:

A woman in the shape of a monster  
a monster in the shape of a woman  
the skies are full of them

a woman    ‘in the snow (1-4).

Here we see Rich employing formal and structural experiments to depict the female identity as discrete and deconstructed.

### **How These Lofty Theories Influence the Work of Katie**

In utilizing formal experiments by playing with fragments of language, feminist post-modern poets are able to deconstruct the binary nature of gender. However, there are other poetic techniques that also achieve this. Formally, my work is very different from poets like Adrienne

Rich, even though I admire her greatly. I work within the conventions of language, lineation, and syntax; yet, my work still depicts the multiplicity and fluid nature of gendered identity. For me, it is possible to work within the conventions of our language, to use its richness and tradition to portray a state of fragmented identity, to create meaning in my poetry, and to make my readers participate in the construction of a fluid gendered identity. In this sense, while our formal choices are very different, our philosophical roots are essentially the same. In my poems, I construct multiple speakers whose identities do not conform to the binary definitions of gendered identity, neither virgin nor whore.

For example, in the first section of the collection I depict a deconstructed virgin identity. In the poem “The Cornfields Outside Santa Rosa” I introduce the reader to a speaker who is neither a good girl nor a whore (41). She is quiet, only parting her lips “when called upon” and “speaking in the whisper of wind blown corn silk.” She follows instructions, does what she’s told, and yet she’s lonely, longing for human connection as she sits at night watching “the clouds drift alone... eating breakfast leftovers -/ sitting between the stalks until dark.” At the end of the poem, we learn that she’s given in to another pressure to taste “the sweet pollen of another tongue” and she “swelled/like maize in October.” Is the speaker a good girl, or is she a whore? It is up to the reader to piece together the fragments of identity to decide. Perhaps, however, she is neither. The speaker does not conform to binary definitions of gender, but instead exists in a complicated and deconstructed state of identity. Throughout the entire poem, however, I do work within the conventions of language, writing in complete sentences and utilizing conventional meaning attributed to words.

Other contemporary poetry movements argue that they, too, can deconstruct the binary constructions of gendered identity through various poetic forms. On the opposite end of the

formal spectrum from L=A=N=G=U=A=G=E poets exist the New Formalist poets. These poets revisit traditional forms such as the sonnet, villanelle, sestina, haiku, and others. Annie Finch, a New Formalist poet I deeply respect, utilizes these forms to also depict the fluid nature of language. She writes, in her essay on “Coherent Decentering”:

It seemed to me the strongest strategy was to work within the honestly conventional and artificial constraints of language, twisting and turning their qualities to my advantage, rather than to pretend that those constraints don't exist... (Brown, 305).

Finch's New Formalist poetic style differs from my mine as well. However, I agree with her that indeed – we can work within the constraints of language, to accurately depict the self as fragmented, decentered, and deconstructed. In other words, what I'm aiming to do with my poetry is portray the feminine identity as shifting.

What I'm aiming to do is employ many different speakers whose identities do not conform to a binary definition of female identity. Identities are illustrated with a multiplicity of sources, drawing from place, the land, class, culture, nature, sex, gender, and the relationship with the divine. In turn, these are the resonant sources of my poetics. Therefore, while my work is neither directly influenced by the L=A=N=G=U=A=G=E poetry movement with its experimental use of poetic form and language, nor does it follow in the New Formalist tradition, I do draw from their philosophical roots. Like them, I aim to depict identity as something that is fluid and multi-faceted.

## On Content and the Feminist Genealogy

As previously discussed, I draw influence from both the confessional poetry movement (in terms of style) and the philosophical concerns of Post-Structuralist feminist poets. However, in terms of content, many of my poems can be classified as revisionist myths. Alicia Ostriker, in her book, *Stealing the Language*, advocates the writing of “revisionist myths,” or rewriting myths from a modern female’s standpoint. Myths are what tell the stories of our past, what we look back to in order to build our identities. They are “our own faces” and we must explore them. Ostriker writes that it is important to “deviate from or explicitly challenge the meanings attributed to mythic figures and fairy tales” in order to revision “myths that once functioned to subvert women to a resonant source of female strength, identity, and power” (77). Revisionist myths are representations not of what patriarchal societies feared and objectified in women, but instead representations of what women find both divine and demonic in themselves. The poems in *The Ripening of Mangos* challenge female archetypes of identity. In many of the poems, I revise the female figures from traditional tales such as Eve, Salome, and Little Red Riding Hood.

Revisionist mythmaking is nothing new. Poets have been retelling myths for centuries, making changes and revisions both subtle and huge. As Ostriker points out, Romantics like Keats and Shelley revised myths, as did early modernists such as Yeats, Pound, and Eliot. Women poets, too, have used revisionist mythmaking to discuss topics that might otherwise be taboo. For example, in her poem “Niobe in Distress for Her Children Slain by Apollo,” Phyllis Wheatley describes the merciless acts of Apollo, who methodically murders each member of Niobe’s family. When he “sends a second dart” that kills one family member, Niobe cries out to him “My life, ye gods celestial! Spare!” And though Apollo hears her, it is “too late, for had sent the dart” to kill the next member of her family (152-157). Here, Wheatley shows how life can be

utterly merciless at the hands of gods. Herself a Christian slave woman, she could not express emotions such as anger and frustration towards her fate directly. However, through using revisionist mythmaking, Wheatley employs the voice of Niobe to show how unjust fate and the patriarchal society can be to women, particularly of Wheatley's race and class.

As Ostriker points out in her essay "Women Poets and Revisionist Mythmaking," this technique continued to be employed by women poets throughout the nineteenth and twentieth century. Poets like Emma Lazarus, Adelaide Crapsey, Edna St. Vincent Millay, and Margaret Walker all used revisionist mythmaking to explore different themes, and to push for social change (214). Though Ostriker's essay was published in 1986, the trend continues today. Since the 1960's, however, revisionist mythmaking has become an even more commonly used tool for women poets and has become particularly prevalent with poets like Anne Sexton, Margaret Atwood, and Ai.

Revisionist myths have some characteristics in common. First of all, they exist not in the dichotomy of public and private, but instead on the "personal-communal continuum" (Brown, 78). The "I" in these poems is both representative and personal at the same time. A revisionist myth seeks to point out what is both personal to the speaker, the character in the myth, and at the same time common to the universal experience of women everywhere. For example, my poem "Sweet Salome" (40) depicts a traditional Biblical figure, the young conniving Salome who seduces her step father Herod and requests the head of John the Baptist. The tale is personal because it is told in the first person, by Salome herself. In addition, in order to imagine Salome's voice, I looked to my own personal past experiences of being an adolescent girl and the power one has in the act of seduction. However, the poem is also communal in that it depicts a familiar Christian tale and speaks to the very universal experiences I imagine a character like Salome

would have felt – a lust for power and human connection. In this sense, I sympathize with the character and depict her as neither a chaste angel (which, she never really was) nor the monstrous conniving whore. I imagine the motives behind the actions of a “fifteen year old girl” who just drifted to Herod’s palace, “the weed/that came hidden in the bouquet” (40).

Second, revisionist myths reverse the traditional hierarchy of mind over body. As Ostriker writes, they “reevaluate values... particularly those most enshrined in occidental literature” (Brown, 78). The language in the poem is rich with emotion rather than logic, and the corporal rather than the conscious. Looking back to “Sweet Salome,” I focus on the emotions that drive her actions in addition to images of physical sensation and the body. For example, in the second stanza Salome states her desires while describing her physical body:

I wanted power wrapped tight

Around my fingers like gold ringlets

Of hair, to taste midnight breath

The warmth of skin against my back (40)

In describing the emotions that drive her actions in terms of her body, I am reversing the hierarchy of favoring knowledge over emotion, and the spiritual over the physical.

Third, these myths are not nostalgic. What woman would want to look back at the times of, say, Ozymandias, as Shelley did and wonder, “Wow, yeah, being treated like property really was the way to go!”? Instead of representing history as a “decline or bemoaning of disjunctions of past and present,” revisionist mythmakers argue that the past and present are essentially the same. When writing the poem “Sweet Salome,” I imagined what a contemporary Salome

situation might be like. Is it possible, today, in our evolved society, that a step-father would be seduced by a teenage stepdaughter, and shower her in ‘gifts’ in an attempt to unsing the “heat of [his] shame and lust” (41)? I venture to say, this could easily happen (though, the head of a prominent religious figure would unlikely be given as a gift to the young girl, which is why I simply describe it as a “simple rose/severed from the freshest garden”).

And lastly, these myths also often experiment with form because, as Ostriker notes, “new meanings create new forms” (Brown, 78). While my poems are not written in poetic form, they do function to create new meaning. The characters in my poems, in particular, Salome, are revised. The dichotomy is removed, and Salome, instead of being a two-dimensional figure that reinforces stereotypes, becomes a figure of empowerment, empathy, and a multi-faceted female identity.

In *The Ripening of Mangoes* I employ other voices of traditional mythical characters from fairy tales, myths, and the Bible. Like revisionist mythmakers, I find these voices to be particularly empowering in that I am able to revisit and challenge the roles women played in the patriarchal tales. In the collection, I revisit the story of not only Salome, but also Eve and Little Red Riding Hood.

My version of Little Red Riding embodies a complicated and deconstructed portrait of female purity. The original tale functioned as a “cautionary lesson of fallen womanhood” with the red color a symbol of shame and vulnerability (Hillard, 26). However, in my version of the tale, the red can instead be seen as a symbol of both sexual empowerment and of society’s fear of female sexuality. For example, in “What They Told the Girl with Bite Marks on Her Lips,” the tale of Little Red Riding Hood is retold by a speaker (society) in a rather exaggerated manner

(32). The girl is told the cautionary tale, and told to heed the warnings of the fallen women before her (as she steps out into the forest “littered/with the fallen poppy petals, shed like scarves/from spring’s early blooms”). The speaker keeps reminding her, “Didn’t you hear the story?”, and the phrase is used as a refrain. However, the contemporary Red does not heed the warnings, and in fact doesn’t even really care. We learn that she experiences pleasure and can assume she doesn’t experience the shame the speaker is trying to impose on her. In this case, the red hood is symbolic of the fear of the demise of the entire virginal identity, which seems to be crumbling beneath Red’s little “black buckled shoes” (which function to suggest a puritan kind of virginal identity). At the end of the entire section, my Red skips out willingly, not forced out by a predator, and not rescued by a male hero or the “burly huntsman.” Instead, she chooses to cast away the identity of virgin, and she steps barefoot into the dandelioned woods of experience outside her door. Like Rowson’s Charlotte Temple and Castillo’s La Loca, the virginal persona fails to define the complexity of female identity. In my retelling, it only gives Red desire, longing, and the blisters of a Pollyanna identity that didn’t quite fit.

In the second section, several poems function to revise the Biblical character of Eve. In “Original Sin” the Adam and Eve story is retold (48). Instead of being tricked into biting into the apple, this Eve contemplates, desires, and eventually gives in to the lust of biting into that alluring orange. In the end of the poem, she doesn’t care about the consequences due probably to her “overdose of passion” as Alicia Ostriker comments in *Dancing at the Devil’s Party* (3). She is not remorseful and does not regret her action. In fact, the very act of defiance is empowering to her. Instead of depicting Eve as the victim of Satan’s trickery, I depict Eve as having made the decision to stray from the constraints of proper female identity.



As noted previously by critics of confessional poetry, simply depicting the opposite side of the dichotomy would be to reinforce it. In showing Eve as conforming to her historical identity as a sexy, irrational being is equally problematic as showing a Little Red Riding Hood who conforms to the archetypal virgin identity. Therefore, in “The Garden of Dresses,” I introduce a new Eve (52). She no longer lusts for the forbidden fruit, Adam, or another man, but instead for material things. The speaker in this poem is completely obsessed with designer dresses – she denies herself “the taste of pomegranate” (which is interesting because pomegranates are a very sexy fruit) in order to fit into this dress. Instead of denying herself the taste of fruit on her lips for Adam (which we all know she didn’t do), she denies herself the pleasure of fruit instead in an attempt to maintain the perfect body. The Eve in this poem is not ruled by Adam’s mandating logic. She is instead governed by her own materialistic lust, her own desire for more – to be thinner, more beautiful, and wealthier. In the end of the poem, Eve is left alone, reaching to satisfy her desires. She calls for Adam, but does he come? We’re not really sure, but we do know that Eve sure spends a lot more time lusting for this dress than for an actual human relationship. Adam’s just an afterthought – a nice set of fingers to help finish the job and zip her up at the end of the night. In this sense, I portray this version of Eve as equally as problematic and unsatisfied as the Little Red Riding Hood virginal archetype in the previous section. It is only when Eve sheds this persona and embodies a multi-faceted identity that she will transcend the whole archetype.

Therefore, like the revisionist mythmakers that wrote before me, I use traditional characters from well known stories to deconstruct notions of female identity. In retelling the story of Eve, for example, in her own words, I am able to reimagine her role in paradise lost, and the same goes for Salome and Red for their roles in their respective traditional tales. Instead of

using these tales as tools to further subjugate and objectify the female body, I hope to turn them into tales of empowerment – tales that depict the female identity as something complex, multi-faceted, and rich.

### **On Structure**

*The Ripening of Mangos* is divided up into four different sections. Each section's speaker is meant to convey an identity centered on gender, sexuality, class, and place. The poems utilize both erotic undertones and the natural vocabulary of the wild world outside the neatly swept home. The first two identities I interrogate and dismantle are the virgin and the whore. Section three employs voices of procreation. The fourth section discusses the mixing and blurring of cultural roots.

In the first section, *Germination*, I introduce my readers to a new perspective of the virgin/angel identity. While many of the voices in this section are that of adolescence, an age where society tells girls to be chaste, proper, and pure, the speakers and subjects of these poems are hardly virginal. However, they're not victimized, either. In conforming to this identity, the speakers in these sections either come to harm, such as the speaker in "The Cornfields Outside Santa Rosa," who compares her situation to that of a "mangled pile amidst the mud," (43) or objectified as in "La Pulga Beauties" (35). There are also two poems in which the speaker addresses her shoes as in "Black D'orsays" (36) and "To the Woman Who Wears Those Cute Stiletto Shoes" (38). In both poems, the shoes are painful and represent an identity that doesn't quite fit. They cause the speaker's body to become "blistered and bubbled in protest" (36). It is only when the shoes are taken off in private that the woman "succumbs to the pleasure" of not wearing the tight good girl identity (38). In the end of the section, the speaker tells a tale of "The

Foxtailed Girl” (or perhaps she’s just a particularly dangerous and prickly plant) who decides to cast away the veil of the angel identity and skip out into the woods, barefoot, without the rigid shoes of an identity that simply doesn’t fit (44).

The second section of my collection, *Blooming*, depicts a different female identity – that of the whore, the temptress, the silly sexy irrational Eve. She is separated from meaning, engaging in pleasure for pleasure’s sake. The poems in this section, while indulgent in the erotic, also depict an unfulfilled desire – the desire for real human connection. In the second poem “How Do Clams Make Love?” the speaker wonders how clams can love one another through a closed casing of shell (47). This is similar to an emotional shell that many of us build around ourselves to keep protected from the outside world, with its predators, pains, and losses. At the end of the poem, the speaker admits that she could never “love like a clam” who waits for someone else to open the shell and “taste the soft soul inside.” Perhaps the shell that keeps not the physical bodies but the souls themselves apart and disconnected from one another is the logical world that causes reservation and discourages wild and untamed emotion. The speaker expresses longing to be rid of this shell, but of course, that would be a very dangerous thing for a clam to do.

In the poem “Breakfast with Fur” the reader is introduced to the notion of female pleasure (50). The ladies in this poem are in pursuit of pleasure, but are trying to do so in a dignified way. However, they end up coming across as pretty ridiculous, raising their “little pinky in anticipation” for Sir Earl Gray’s kiss, and thoroughly enjoying their “bristly forbidden cocktail.” In short, these women want pleasure, and care much about their appearances, but more about the pursuit of pleasure. In this sense, they pose a complicated whore image.

However, simply depicting the opposite of the dichotomy would still function to reinforce it. Conforming to the whore identity is equally as problematic as the virginal identity, and I depict this in *Blooming* as well. For example, the speaker in “In Defense of Vanity” finds her lust both empowering and problematic at the same time (49). While it causes her to no longer desire objectification from men, the steams of pleasure she receives are barren of the fleshy warmth of human contact. After all, she is only gazing at her reflection in a mirror! Another example of the problematic nature of the whore identity is the Eve persona, as discussed before, particularly in the “Garden of Dresses” (51).

So if embodying the virgin or whore identity doesn’t lead to fulfillment, to happiness, and fails to completely describe female identity, what else may be available to women? The third section of the collection depicts voices of the mother – call her the Virgin Mary if you’d like, or any other mother who has sacrificed and at times felt a failure. The first poem of the section, “August 19, 2010,” is probably the most directly personal poem (59). The speaker wants to recapture the giddy lust that causes irrational moves, like running away and marrying someone you’ve only just met. It is a rejection of logic, of rationality, and a celebration of the passion behind every utterly stupid and beautiful action. In the end of the poem, reality sets in as it always does. Logic and rationality prevent the speaker and her lover from conceiving in an uncertain and dangerous world. Sure, it’s the right thing to do - but flowers bloom and eggshells crack in spite of gunshots and the heavy thump of combat boots.

There are several different voices of motherhood throughout this section. The mother is neither romanticized nor criticized. Each speaker here is a failure and hero in her own way – the speaker in “Betty Crocker” rejects the stereotypes of recipes and designs her own life, communes instead with God to create one cacophony of a cake (63). “Santa Rosa of Lima” is the mother

who gives and sacrifices, and is both ugly and beautiful (66). In “The Dance,” the mother’s heroic feat is simply a triumph over the grief of not conceiving at all (69). The closing lines of the section, “I find myself ripe/with nothing/but words and words” show the dissatisfaction and at the same time utter joy in being ripe with nothing, only words (71). Identity is complex and cannot be rooted only in one aspect of existence.

In the final section of *The Ripening of Mangos*, gender and sexuality no longer take center stage. Instead, we see gender and sexuality in the context of other power relations, such as class and ethnicity. And while we see gender’s intersection with other power constructs throughout the entire manuscript (for example, in “The Cornfields Outside Santa Rosa” we see gender’s intersection with class and ethnicity, and in “Upon Hearing Bruno Speak Spanish” gender intersects with language), in the *Transplanting* section, gender is even more saliently contextualized within these other power constructs. This contextualization functions to show gendered identity not as archetypes, but a complicated tapestry of power relations interacting with one another to create a deconstructed sense of self.

Some of the poems in the *Transplanting* section come from actual experiences of me growing up in the Rio Grande Valley. I feel that identity is closely tied to place and culture, and through these poems I hope to reflect that. One example is the opening poem to the section, “Baptism at the Iglesia” (72). This poem depicts a young girl (ok, she’s pretty much me as a child) being baptized into a new religion. However, in the poem, it becomes evident that she is not just being accepted into a new religion (Christianity, I grew up in a non-Christian home but was baptized as a child in an all Spanish-speaking Baptist church, which is the experience this poem comes from), but a new language, ethnicity, and entire identity as well. In the beginning of the poem, she is described as being very ‘white.’ Her skin burns “in the sun/blushed red and even

sometimes blistered,” and her ears only let “chunks/ of Spanish in” (as opposed to her native English). It is only when this girl willingly dives into the water and is cleansed that she is able to emerge, a “blurred image” herself. She is neither white nor brown, American nor Mexican, English nor Spanish, virgin nor whore. She emerges as something else, a deconstructed identity that transcends boundaries of the dichotomy and archetypes, a being that, “wrapped in the arms of a preacher,” is kissed clean and able to embody an identity that is fluid, like the water she was baptized in.

Another example from the *Transplanting* section where a singular identity is transcended is in the poem “The Common Denominator of the Afternoon Manicure.” I depict an “ethnically awkward” scene of two white women getting their nails done in a Vietnamese nail salon by an immigrant from Mexico (77). In the poem, everyone is uncomfortable because of the thick ethnicity in the air, the languages being flung, mixed, and not really understood, and of course – the air conditioning isn’t working. Here, I paint culture as something fluid, a series of relations between people, instead of a rigid border where one must stand on either side of an artificially constructed wall. In this sense, the poems in the final section of the collection function to transcend notions of female identity and cultural stereotypes. The women are not virgins, whores, or identified solely by their status as a mother. By bringing the intersection of other aspects of identity (such as class, language, and place) in the poems of this last section, identity becomes multifaceted and based on a series of interactions of different aspects of self, rather than based on one singular role one must play in society.

## Limitations and Future Goals

In the future, I would like to further explore writing in poetic form. The opening poem of the collection, “Not the Sonnet You Dreamed of,” is written as an imperfect sonnet (to address the imperfection of the body). I hope to further explore poetic form in the future (31). The works of New Formalists Annie Finch and Molly Peacock have inspired me to begin working within the conventions not only of language, but within poetic form as well, and to take on the challenge of depicting the decentered, deconstructed female self within carefully constructed form. Like Edna St. Vincent Millay, I want to put chaos into fourteen crafted sonnet lines (Brown, 210). This would be another form of resistance, turning patriarchal forms upside-down and taking control into my own hands.

I understand *The Ripening of Mangos* is not a perfect manuscript. Writing poems that accurately depict a complex female identity is difficult – there is always going to be something left out, something more to write, and while I’m just beginning to grasp the power of poetry to deconstruct identity and stereotypes, I hope to further explore its power to transcend stereotypes and portray a new female voice that goes beyond archetypes of virgin, whore and mother, beyond the boundaries of class and language. In this manuscript, I’m only writing from the point of view of a middle class, heterosexual, white woman living on the border between the United States and Mexico. However, in my poems, I illustrate different facets of identity interacting with one another, portraying the personae of my speakers as fluid and deconstructed – with the facets and angles of identity interacting with one another. I hope these poems – while rooted in the dusty soil of the Rio Grande Valley, can reach towards something universal, something ingrained in the identity of all of us – a yearning for connection to humanity, the earth, and the divine.

## CHAPTER II

### POETRY

#### Not The Sonnet You Dreamed Of

“I’m not the sonnet you dream  
of, so sorry”, these chopped lines  
whisper, naked on the clean  
sheets before you. The eyes

of the willing pierce the frail  
vener of each stanza and climb  
down - peak to couplet. Each exhale  
caresses the imperfect line

breaks, heavy breath atop  
rolling piles of language. Eager  
tongues slice though thick caesuras - stop  
to taste slow syllables. Reader -

stick out your tongue to taste the creator. Sweat  
dripped from her fingertips as the bones set.



## GERMINATION

### What They Told the Girl with Bite Marks on Her Lips

It started when Little Red Riding hood stepped out  
into the dark wood, her black buckled shoes

displacing spring's first fallen leaves.

*Didn't you hear the story?* The wolf smelled her

skin and pollen breath amidst the thick midnight  
air. He lured her in with a curl of canine tongue, plucked

her blushing petals, and ate her center whole.

But she was lucky, the huntsman heard her moan

and snatched her body from the jaws  
of that big bad wolf. *Didn't you hear the story?*

Then why did you part the night air  
with your naked flesh? Cast away your veil

of petals, unlatch the front door? The tale  
was carried on hurried breaths to reach

your little ear, a warning. But still you opened  
up and let him see the moonlight

reflecting off your bare shoulder. The fang marks  
on your lips tell me the wolf

is after you. The hickies on your neck  
tell me you're guilty, too. The ground is littered

with the fallen poppy petals, shed like scarves  
from spring's early blooms. Step gently

with your buckled shoes, and pray  
a burly huntsman will hear your cries, too.

The Girl Who Opens the Door

You never bothered to count the rings  
That wrapped around my body

A tender clam inside a shell, never bothered  
to study the soft skin that surrounds my eyes

For the footprints of years flowing through me  
like plasma, necessary and warm when freshly

pumped from the heart. And so when I opened  
the door for you, let your thick body

through the threshold of my childhood  
home, questions were never asked. All I knew

is that your skin made mine tingle – and my peeking curves  
made your eyes burst to life like thistles underneath a blanket

of heavy rain. And so you came in - a barrage  
of sunbeams, Barefoot wine, trembling tongue. Never

mind the ash that dripped from the tip of your cigarette.  
Never mind how it rested in a fine nest of my fox colored hair.

## La Pulga Beauties

I lay here with my sisters, naked skin to naked skin - we're on display  
this Saturday at La Pulga, feeling the eyes of the hungry

sliding across our yellowing shine. They search me for bruise  
and blemish, fingertips asking if the hands that bloomed me were rough,

or if I fell too soon and grew bitter inside. Fingers long to unbutton, to slit  
open the rind, to touch. But until they reach into their pockets, pull out

the last of their coins, these men can only imagine the hues:

Yellow – she's been picked too soon. Too pink and she's already bitter.  
The red flesh tastes the sweetest. But they won't know

until I'm opened up, my pith peeled away – tossed to the floor,  
and the bare center of this Rio Red *toronja* blushes in the sunlight.

Black D'orsays

Before you loved my feet – D'orsays  
I lusted to fill you.  
Your leather - I wanted  
to caress the soft white  
of my feet. I wanted  
to sway my hips to the clicks  
of your heels. I wanted  
your vamp to wrap  
around my toes tight  
and never let go. I wanted  
to feel my sweat against your skin  
to never take you off.

My feet – blistered and bubbled  
with protest – bound and mangled.  
And yet tomorrow, when I dress  
I'll long for you - D'orsays

and return. But once I break  
you in, your fine leather and lace  
giving way to the curves  
of my feet, I'll toss you – D'orsays –  
to the back of my closet  
and move on to another fiery pair.

Dear Ricky Martin

Did we – chisel your body with lustful stares into the desperado of our desires? Did we slip you chicken pills to watch your biceps bud like breasts? Did we sculpt curves into your mocha skin, mold you into our Latin lover? Did we swathe you in hot wax, rip up your deepest root? Did we shake your bon-bon to the rhythm of our dollars? Did we scrape your dirty knees raw? Did we shove our nimble tongues into your open throat? Did we shower you in panties to erase traces of sin? Did we snap bones – bind your dreams like women’s feet? Did we starve off your lust, leave you emaciated like a super model’s ass? Did we stretch your skin straight? Did we sell you back when you began to sag? Did we

Ricky?  
Did we?

## The Girl Who Wears Those Cute Stiletto Shoes

I hear the clicks of your heels announcing  
your presence every day. You pass down the hall,  
head tilted up, back straight, smile perky, and feet –  
in those peep-toed stiletto shoes, shining black  
with rigid curves. You stuff yourself into those shoes,  
balance all day long on the apex – while your skin  
burnishes with each step into smooth pink blush,  
you wear like stigmata –  
or hickies.

As you paint your face with pleasure, my eyes  
are on you and your shoes. I know

Some mornings you must wake –  
sore and clearly not in the mood

for another day of tender aches,  
yet you pour yourself into this union

– and you beam, showing the pleasure  
those forceful heels bring with each step.

I know that you'd like me to think  
that those are the only shoes you'd ever wear –

but underneath your desk a secret hides. I know  
you kick those stilettos aside and slip your wiggling

toes into another pair, succumb to the satisfaction  
of cheap gray flats.

## Sweet Salome

I drifted to your palace  
on my mother's autumn winds, a single  
florete of dandelion snow –  
your stepdaughter, the weed  
that came hidden in the bouquet.

And, like a fifteen year old girl  
I wanted power wrapped tight  
around my fingers like gold ringlets  
of hair, to taste midnight breath,  
the warmth of skin against my back.

I watched you dance for me,  
Herod – day and night, your toes  
on my petaled fingertips, your eyes  
on my body as I shed veils one at a time.

When the seventh drifted to my bare feet,  
you forgot just who I was - not a curved  
dancing body begging for your tongue,  
but the daughter of your lovely new wife.

Your promise rode atop  
your heavy midnight breaths –

*Anything you want, my sweet Salome.*

I imagined your head resting on my pillow,  
your eyes closed, face falling into smile  
as you slept.

Instead – I asked for a simple rose,  
severed from the freshest garden,  
the purest one you have.

So here we are, father –  
the morning after.



Your stare is thick with desire  
and shame, hidden fingers  
wanting to feel the untouched  
skin beneath my golden chain.  
In this moment - our flesh enmeshed  
by your eyes, you belong to me.

When the platter slides across the table,  
your faithful promise kept, I'll go back  
to being your bitter dandelion. I'll hang  
my freshly cut rose upon my bedroom wall  
to dry out with the fleeting memories  
of power's taste on your midnight promise.

But you'll keep the image of my naked stem  
swaying to your palace winds – forever  
singed with the heat of shame and lust  
onto the back of your eyelids.

## The Cornfields Outside Santa Rosa

I towered over them all -  
like the tallest stalk in the cornfield,  
body stretching as each node grew  
smooth and green. I remember walking  
through the crowded 6<sup>th</sup> grade hall –  
seeing only the silky tops of hair  
pulled back with pink barrettes,  
air thick with breath and the smell  
of Ariel - hearing only the giggles  
of garbled gossip below me.

But I was a good girl –  
the custodian's daughter.

My lips parted when called upon -  
I spoke in the whisper of wind  
blown corn silk. I came to school  
with sunrise eyes to wait  
at my teacher's door for breakfast –  
she'd let me tuck seconds  
into my backpack as she'd tell me:

*Stay in school – speak English only  
in whispers, and stay away  
from naughty boys.*

I'd smile and nod, the tips of my ears  
capturing words between strands  
of fresh green silk. I'd stay until late –  
scrubbing classroom floors, searching  
wastebaskets as I took them out.

But as I grew longer – ears  
tightly covered by layers  
of years – long yard sale dresses,  
light green leaves to cover the thin  
stem of my body that grew new nodes  
each day - my cheeks began to redden  
at the kind words of older boys. My ears

took in their words, fibers of silk yellowing  
in the sun.

As I'd sit in the cornfield on the outskirts  
of town, dusty pink backpack at my side –  
I'd forget all she told me.

The thick pollen air tasted sweet  
on the tip of my tongue and my roots  
dug deeper. I'd watch the clouds  
drift alone – eating breakfast leftovers –  
sitting between the stalks until dark –  
lurking out late at night – skin blending in  
with the shadows – me – alone  
with dreams, sunset, stars.

When the wind of midnight whispers  
brushed my silky hair aside, my ear tasting  
the sweet pollen of another tongue –  
the corn silks curled into kernels. I swelled  
like maize in October, yellow  
and ready for harvest.

The sun still rose and fell on the school  
Without my brown eyes watching.  
I'd hear my mom whisper:

*No se, no se*

when they'd call and ask for me.

Out my window, I'd watch the cornstalks grow  
taller towards the sun, their silk catching  
rays of light and blowing in the autumn wind.

Each year I watch it happen all over again,  
the corn plants grow tall, apex silk  
catching sunrays – I watch them bloom  
until their golden center opens like lips  
in nervous smile. And I watch the combine  
pull the stalks down until they crumple -

just a mangled pile amidst the mud,  
tender ear and husk plucked and taken.

## The Foxtailed Girl

Wet nose to the ground,  
he sucked in the woodland scents:  
Wet cedar, earthy moss,  
loose clover petals.  
And – like canines do –  
he followed the trail she left  
with her black buckled shoes.  
When he heard the hum  
of bees wings singing her presence,  
he stopped to smell the flora  
and came upon one rare shoot,  
soon to split open in bloom. Wolf

imagined what must surely hide inside:

*Silene Virginica*, her cherry  
colored petals folded tight  
within a casing of red, a flower  
so rarely anymore seen  
in these dandelioned woods  
of weeds. He plucked  
what must rightfully be his.

His tongue opened the bud,  
casting the hood to the flowered  
bed below his feet. As the ruby  
foxtailed locks emerged,  
catching sunlight as she shook  
them loose - wolf never thought  
what else could hide behind a veil:

upright foxtail of thorns that cling  
to canine skin. He never thought  
that in the morning he may be left  
with nothing but an empty hood,  
a pair of black buckled shoes,  
and a set of foxtail thorns  
embed into his skin.

And as the barefooted Red flower

Floats through the woods,  
Earth and pussytoe blooms  
Between her toes – tasting  
happily ever after with a red  
petaled tongue on the feet  
of passing monarchs - perhaps  
the now swollen tongued  
and bloody nosed wolf howls:

*Beware the wild foxtailed girl*

## BLOOMING

### Adan y Eva in the Rio Grande Garden of Eden

No matter the taste of the tongue – this story  
doesn't change. The garden was glorious

before the fall. Adan watches the pecan branches  
reach up the tree's trunk from a crabgrass bed, aloe

awakened. He feels the wind curve the thick stems of Indian  
blankets, and watches the pads of cow tongue cactus split

open at the bean pod flavor of mesquite. The faceless  
Eva awaits, fading into the backdrop of paradise. She stoops

behind her Adan – his wild chest hair, his open  
mouth grin, behind the swaying palm leaves,

shielding her eyes from his erect Adam's apple. It begs  
Eva to cast away her veil of fronds, to show her face,

to take a bite. But until her bare toes mingle  
among the blue sage brush – the crown-of-thorns

masking the pink spines of devil's head, she'll stay unnamed,  
a hidden bloom in the prickly Rio Grande Garden of Eden

## How Do Clams Make Love?

They love entirely  
closed – their soft bodies veiled  
behind years of rings. Inanimate  
letting love flow  
through the current –  
how is it that she's always  
downstream to receive him?

But I could never love you

like a clam – building years  
of rings to censor me from you  
just a warm shell waiting  
for someone to pry open -  
to taste the soft soul inside.



## Original Sin

You glow in my palms  
orange embers scorch  
skin- my fingers dance  
shy around you, touching  
your blossom bathed  
surface. You kiss  
like sunburn, begging  
me to strip  
away your rind

So I oblige –

digging thumb into navel  
tearing away the glowing  
casing of flesh, peeling piece  
by piece until you're just before me  
naked and exposed, yellow flesh  
still shining through white fibers –

lustrous. Your body unfolds  
in my hands bending  
with my fingers. Your flesh  
opens, blooms into petals.  
I bring you to my lips - taste you  
acid and sweet, pockets bursting  
then dripping on lips.

I know I've done it again.  
But I don't care -  
my lips still blush and pucker  
with the taste  
of you, my original sin.

## In Defense of Vanity

I have to touch you  
because seeing isn't enough.  
Press your stiff surface against this pile  
of flesh - make my skin blush  
with the chill of your touch – bathe  
me in your bitter breath  
of dusk. I'll beg  
you to never peel your eyes  
away from mine and to gaze  
at the miracle of my body  
folding into your eternity  
of reflections. When I reach  
to you and you reach  
deep into me - your empty  
echo fills me with the barren  
streams of pleasure. Soon my lust  
to be an object  
of lust fades like the chill  
under my sweating palm.

## Breakfast with Fur

When Picasso remarked that anything  
could be covered in fur – Oppenheim obliged,  
skinned the Chinese gazelle - removed flesh  
from bone so speckled hair could cover elegant  
teacups and elegant ladies could enjoy breakfast  
with fur. Now we sip sir earl gray,  
pour his full body into a neatly trimmed cups,  
(blood and all things undesirable removed)  
manicured as to not turn the stomachs  
of us ladies –

so elegant. Now pour him  
from a teapot and he'll swirl  
into the speckled fur. Add a dab  
of honey - you can lick  
the hair clean. Stir him with your flesh  
covered spoon, and watch the whorl  
of brown breath steam for you  
in a hairy spiral. Wrap  
your delicate fingers around his fleshy love  
handle, and lift him from his bed  
of fur – bring him to your lips, ladies  
ever so delicately and raise your little pinky  
in anticipation for his heat to kiss  
skin. Taste

his hot breath before moisture meets  
mouth – meet him with a little secret  
tongue – but don't let the other ladies  
see you enjoying your sir earl gray.  
Look as though you thoroughly don't care  
for this bristly forbidden cocktail  
or know how to feel any sort  
of pleasure.

## The Garden of Dresses

I step across the threshold of Eden  
into this eve's paradise. The light  
illuminates the blushing temptations,  
hanging from branches above. Long ago

I denied myself the taste  
of pomegranate on my lips  
and let my flesh give way  
to rib bone, so I could stand  
naked, in front of my own gaze.  
I reach up, pluck a piece  
of little black paradise  
from the vine. It bursts  
into bloom as the zipper opens

and invites me inside.  
I pull the silky skin across  
my body, up my sanded toothpick  
legs, empty hipbones, hourglass  
waist. And that forbidden fruit  
caresses my flesh covered bones.  
My nipples perk as silk  
glides over, and I slip my shoulders  
inside. I stare at how we look  
together – my Louis Vuiton  
wrapped tight around  
me, and I can't help but long  
for closure. I grasp at the zipper,  
just out of reach.

*Adam –*

I call,

*I still need you  
to zip me up.*

## That Sort of Woman

My car turns on with an absolute groan.  
She needed the touch of a man. I'm alone,  
- just me and her in this parking lot.  
I sigh, here we go again.  
I pop open the hood - walk over;  
I'm begging to God that no one  
I know will see me inspecting the intimate  
parts of my car.

I study her, knobs everywhere, tubes everywhere,  
each a different color. I see a familiar handle,  
green and inviting. I reach with my manicured  
hand and make contact with grime. I slide my fingers  
across it, and gripping tight. With a little tug,  
the dipstick dislodges from... wherever.

Her oil is clean and clear, I think.  
I don't dare touch - that juice  
from some deep mysterious depth.  
I give up, trying to wiggle it back  
into the hole. And my car waits, to feel  
my touch again – the satisfaction of touch  
on the precise spot.  
I see a circular blushing knob,  
I wiggle it, throw my weight  
into my arms. It dislodges  
from the hinge – leaving me holding  
the filthy red cap in my hands.  
Underneath my fingernails, I notice  
a touch of grease – evidence  
my hands were inside.

I peer down the hole that's left open.  
It looks empty, deep... familiar.  
From underneath the driver's seat, I grab  
the half full bottle of power steering fluid,  
open the cap. I bring the mouth

of the bottle to the empty hole  
underneath the hood, and pour the liquid in.  
My car gargles with pleasure,  
liquid disappearing down the hatch.  
I pick up the blushing knob again, and tap  
it into its rightful place. With a tug,  
it fastens and I wipe my forehead  
of the little beads of sweat that emerge  
from such work. She's left me smelling of sweat,  
my hands colored with hickies  
of grease, and now all I want to do is shove  
my key into her ignition and get on with life  
like a man.

Just as I reach up to grab her dusty hood  
with my rough hands, I hear a voice.  
Oh no.

“Katie!” Ah, I've been spotted.  
A co-worker.  
“Everything ok?”  
she asks as she passes by –  
clicking her heels with each hurried step.  
I nod –

“I didn't know you were that sort of woman,  
who knows a thing or two  
about what's under the hood of a car.”

Feeling the hot blood  
Rushing to my face –  
I pull the hood down with a slam.  
I wipe my graying hands off on each other,  
a little cloud of dust forms around me.  
I breathe it in deep.  
I step over to the door, open it up,  
and plop my ass down with a sigh.  
I shove the key into the ignition.  
She starts right up, fluid, easy, and grateful  
for the job my hands have so diligently provided –

grateful that I am that sort of woman.

## The Blue Moment

A kiss is a breathing moment  
when two draw into one  
to share their tender ends...

but this kiss birthed  
from the blue  
of the moment. When nose  
in nose two shared warm snot  
and saliva – a moment  
When she reached into him –  
her tongue germinating  
from mouth – ever reaching  
for the sunlight in the back  
of his throat – parting the red  
lips of his paralyzed  
face like a miracle. She tried  
to swallow him  
whole. In one carp-like  
gasp she searched, reached,  
longed, unsatisfied –  
with empty cadaver  
eyes open in dying

desire. Sometimes  
even the sourest  
of kisses can taste  
like healing.



## Upon Hearing Bruno Speak Spanish

I'm sitting in the passenger seat of our car, you, as always at the wheel. Where we're going, it really doesn't matter. My eyes fixate on you – you driving and your lips embracing our mutual words. They're words that were formed somewhere deep inside of you, and your nimble tongue has carved them clean – just for me. They emerge from the embrace of your mouth, still hot with breath, and enter into my waiting ear. Your words slip into my grasp, and I engage you in the dance, our own private jazz of conversation. Soon there's nothing but your hot words between my body and yours, and we're gone – gone in this ecstasy of words and bodies, tongues and ears.

Until – your phone rings.

*Hello? Que paso! Que esta haciendo!*

You proclaim, and your words don't enter into my eager ear. I watch you form words for someone else, words that my tongue cannot touch, words that I can't swallow. And soon your tongue is dancing with another tongue, and all I can do is watch. I can't jump in, it's not a threesome. It's only you with your hot words and our lawn guy, Jose, on the other end of the line.

## My Shadow Watches

She hates the way I lay  
before him – the orchid  
waiting to be plucked  
from the earth, to be hung  
and dried. She hates

how I'm inanimate  
Without him – like a subject  
Without her predicate. She hates

me because I don't  
throw him to the ground  
grab my destiny  
in my hands. Instead I wait  
for him to give it to me.

I'm a slave to his pleasure,  
she thinks. She scoffs  
when his lips touch mine.  
When his tongue passes  
through my hot lips, she rolls  
her shadowed eyes. She hates

when I wrap my arms around his horizontal  
body - when I run my hands  
through his hair. She hates

the feeling I get when he whispers  
to me in my ear - the warmth between  
us - she tells me it's just sex  
and that I'm nothing,

just his cheaply bought whore.  
But when I'm feeling his breath  
steaming on my neck - I don't hear her. I close  
my eyes so I don't see her.  
She still watches me as I wait  
for him to reach just a little further -

when he finally touches- with one motion -  
She looks away.

She doesn't see my eyelids  
wrinkle, my body shiver. No,  
She can't watch because by now  
it's too late. I'm already his and my shadow  
disappears somewhere into the moonlight.

I don't see her again until long after  
he's kissed my forehead and held me  
into the morning's virgin hours.

## RIPE WITH WORDS

August 19, 2010

On my 18<sup>th</sup> birthday I ran away with an older man

who promised, and I believed in the color of skin  
stretching into smile. We drove north

through the warmth of the Texas winter – through the brown  
landscape sliced by the early ashen blossoms of Spanish  
daggers, until the ground whitened into snow. I remember his first  
gray hairs emerging from his cleft chin - the Spanish that spilled  
from the split of his tongue. I remember believing in the heavy beats  
of hearts as he begged the judge:

“Marry us, marry us today”

because maybe tomorrow the snow will fade  
into the brown winter grass underneath. But I believed

in molding life from the fleeting moments  
of snowflakes on eyelashes. Now, years later

my body lays still next to his, and I hide  
underneath covers, watching the evening news –  
men in combat boots cross over eggshells of peace  
into the Kuwaiti desert. I watch the soldiers’ faces fall  
into smile, hoping their seeds of heavy words  
spring to life in the womb.

While Bruno studies the bank statements, sprouting fresh gray hairs,  
I study the way those hairs curl at the first folds of tired skin,  
wondering when our next mistake will bloom  
into a shining yellow yolk across the expanse  
of our lifetimes. The boots crunch down

onto American dirt. While the flag of victory is waved,  
he too pulls away –  
before the blood stops flowing,  
before the shells of mistakes crack  
underneath the weight of combat boots and passion,  
before the golden yolk can seep through the cracks  
and opens into life. We just watch our shining sun  
sag into the Tigris.

To The Star Gazer

Underneath the thick blanket  
of black, we stand in waves  
that lick the flesh of our bare  
soles – and he tells me  
tilting his head skyward  
that he's gazing  
into yesterday – a miracle

of photons floating firm through ether  
*no, it's not nothingness*  
to be sucked into the black  
holes of his eyes -  
the event horizon where nothing  
escapes and time  
just stands

still. When I ask him:  
*then, how is it possible*  
*that I can see eternity*  
*in those cold dark stars?*

...all I hear is the sighing  
of the waves.

## Eros

There's a reason why I pinch your ass  
as you open the refrigerator and ask,  
"What's for dinner?"

Why, when reaching for the ketchup,  
The back of your hand slides across  
My chest. Why I undress slowly  
in dying sunlight - hoping to catch  
your hurried glances. Why bodies sigh  
when they're together, inching closer  
for closure, the bare skin of your belly  
against mine. It is so we can feel immortal

for a moment – our fingers interlocked  
staring into the dead white gloss  
that covers our eyes.

Betty Crocker

An artificially green apron rides the curves of my body  
As I stand like a bimbo, twirling my hair  
In front of the pantry idly staring

At God. He's sitting there in the back of my pantry  
Behind the flour, behind the sugar  
and I wait for his answer, twirling my hair.  
But God is silent. He is cruel.  
His lips are still.

On the bottom of my pantry  
dusty, sits Betty Crocker.  
I pull her out  
Open to her pages -

"Golden Caramel Cake,"  
she begins.

Caramel is soft, sweet and slow.  
Caramel lingers on your tongue  
Sticks to you like a lover's sweat.  
But it doesn't release.  
Its milky sweetness is intoxicating.  
Caramel sneaks into your nostrils  
Caramel sweetly, slowly,  
Sufficates.  
Caramel creates  
An unsatisfied, forlorn housewife  
Making false love to him  
Every night.  
I can hear my lonely silent screams  
Behind my smile  
Inside that can of milk.

I shutter at the thought of a caramel cake.  
No no, tonight I will not dance with caramel.

God winks at me  
In the back of my pantry as I put down



The sweet condensed milk. I turn  
Off the burner and change  
My mind.

The grandfather clock reminds me  
Of the clock inside me ticking.

Betty suggests I try her  
“Quick Pineapple Upside Down Cake”

Sweet, juicy and exotic -  
Pineapple is the cake we all want to bake  
But no woman in her right mind  
Has the guts to make.  
Risky,  
At first bite he is sweet and loving.  
Quite the gentleman:  
He won't even go to your thighs!

But too much leaves your mouth soar.  
And before you grow tired of pineapple,  
Pineapple grows tired of you.  
Tall, dark and handsome  
Pineapple grows out of town  
And comes here to end up  
In the cakes of many different women.  
He winks at me with a sly smile.

And I am too wise.

A taste of pineapple is delicious  
But for an entire cake  
Pineapple just isn't right.  
It leaves my apron smelling of sin  
Although he has only penetrated  
My mind.

With much strength I slam the can  
Unopened down.

The stars peek through the darkness now.  
Confused, I stand in my old kitchen;  
God continues to smile  
Silently.

Betty Crocker's cookbook rests  
Old and crusty  
On my tiled countertop.

She is useless.  
I can't seem to follow  
Her old fashioned recipes.

I am lustful.  
I want it all

My own cake would become nothing  
But a cacophony of flavors  
In chaos  
Chiming beautifully  
Out of tune.

## Santa Rosa of Lima

Coming down her winding roads –  
into her sunrise, Santa Rosa  
beckons with her open arms.  
Her beauty blushes like watermelons  
spilled across her roads, and her people  
wave – they all know your name. Watch  
for awhile – the paint dancing off houses.  
She’s your mother, you know, Santa Rosa –  
she wears all your shame across  
her pregnant belly and the smell of tortillas  
perfumes the air and the summer’s heat is nothing  
more than her kiss on your cheek.  
She welcomes you home with her singing  
Spanglish, voices like church bells at mass.  
She’s naked and raw, exposed and unknowing  
of her beauty.

But – come an outsider,  
and across her blushing face  
glides a virgin’s veil of colonias  
and rot. Her head hangs low while  
the rust eats away at her scarred face.  
The smell of her standing water fills  
the thick air, and summer’s harsh hand  
beats upon her dusty roads. She’s silent –  
naked and ugly, covering her beauty.

## The Mother of Sweet Texas Onions

*Spring and early summer is the season of risk  
for conceiving a child with birth defects,*

Years ago - I would bend with the horizon  
to lift the sun dried Texas onions, and years ago  
my child was conceived in March –  
the wrong month, planted deep inside the womb  
too late, like a lazy farmer's onion seed. The days  
were too short, already growing longer  
as my belly swelled with the bulbs  
beneath my feet, but when the dusters  
glided between the tired fields and the sun  
we all stood aside. I knew that onions

*the leading cause of infant mortality.  
The reason appears to be that the pesticide load*

grown properly will have flesh sweet  
enough to eat raw, and won't cause  
the tears to flow. The skies were clear  
and there was no rain to wash the residues  
of yesterday clean. I remember the naked skin  
of my belly flaking against the stalks.  
We waited for the tops to fall aside, exposing  
the fat bulb underneath. We had to let them dry  
in the sun, but the sweeter the onion  
the quicker it spoiled. With onions, I knew  
that trouble bloomed when the bolts flowered.

*is highest in the air, the water, and elsewhere.*

They'd reach up towards the sky and smile  
violet and white, unfolding like a body  
eager for sun's tongue. Beneath the surface  
the bulb rotted. Once an onion flowers –  
there's nothing you can do. Chop the stalks  
for salad. Forget

*The result: a statistically significant association*

*between the rates of defects for babies  
conceived between April and June  
and monthly concentrations of nitrates,  
atrazine and other pesticides*

the sweet bulb underneath.  
But when I felt

*spina bifida; circulatory, tracheal, gastrointestinal,  
urogenital and musculoskeletal anomalies;*

her bolt kick against the walls  
of my flesh, I didn't know that babies  
were like onions, and when planted  
in the wrong month –they too will flower.  
She was born after the next season's seeds  
were placed into the earth. Her eyes had no layers  
of flesh behind them and were tearless. Texas onions  
don't make you cry. You can eat them like apples,  
and when properly cared for by the tired hands  
of many, I've heard they can yield quite a profit.  
She was born with stubby roots,

*cleft lip; adactyly (missing hands, fingers, toes and the like);  
clubfoot; and Down syndrome*

no toes. She was a million dollar baby, sugary  
with a short shelf life. And me - I've washed  
my hands clean with the years that flow past,  
but in Texas the residue still sticks to your skin.  
I remember her eyes each time I drive past the fields –  
swelling workers still bend with the horizon and onions  
still flower in the setting South Texas sun.  
I watch them blossom each year into mothers  
of sweet Texas onions.

*"But if you are unlucky enough to conceive in certain months, we can make predictions about the  
outcome."*

## The Dancing Woman

Her body bends in the gasps  
of wind that blow past as she mounts  
the cold, empty table. She rips  
away the layers of bark for each witness -

a plate of enchiladas delivered  
to her doorstep, and off go her heels.

They lay in the corner – footless,  
watching the calloused soles stomp  
on the marbled table top, leaving leafprints  
of proof as they fall. A phone call –

*is she going to be ok?* No, her hair

comes down in waves, knotted  
and kissing her waist. A ring of the doorbell,

*they've come to pray for you, hermana.*

Now comes the shirt, the jeans, the bra,  
the panties, all tossed into a limp pile. Her body  
heat rises from her creation – nothing  
but a sallow monument.

As she dances - her voice thunders in the hum  
of fronds, and all eyes are on the toothless smile –  
the rose lips that sliced across her dimpled trunk.  
Her breasts hang above, the heavy heads  
of widows heaving a prayer to the wind:

*please carry my smallest of seeds home.*

## A Taste for Autumn

Watch the pigment fall from her leaves, unlocking  
the shades of September that rush over her – first  
the green fades into yellow, the hue of an afternoon  
sunbath. The years crown her trunk with furrowed bark,  
hiding the rings that poured through her upright branches.  
Then comes the orange, the navel color of sunset  
when the leaves begin to loosen like the skin  
around an unguarded smile – rows of ants fleeing  
the crevices of bark, the split of the trunk.  
When the leaves turn red, chlorophyll escaping  
between her teeth in October sighs, her last acorn  
slips into the breeze. It falls down to a bed  
of unbuttoned catkins, the scent of spent pollen  
and drying leaves rising at the season's final thump.

Oaken woman, don't you know that tongues  
don't reach around the broad trunks of grown oaks?  
That insects won't trickle up your bark, burrow  
into your crannies, seek you – unless you smell  
of pollen and spring? Today there is no taste  
for the earthy ciders of autumn, no fingers longing  
to slide across the thin skin of November clavicles.

If you're looking for some advice, maybe you're not -  
I would tell you to cling to the chlorophyll that still runs  
through your veins - wear Chanel sunglasses to hide  
the empty crows' nests in your foliage. Blast your heater  
through December. Plant daisies no matter the month.  
Douse yourself in the bottled blossoms of never-ending spring,  
Vera Wang's *Princess* carries the pleasant scent of youth.

And, oaken woman, if all else fails –  
lipo those rounded hips and head south,  
floral bikini tucked into your suitcase.

## Just Words

We all step to the cadence of man  
in tandem, one by one  
as he beats  
his drum to the ticks  
of his watch and I listen –  
thinking it's the heartbeat

of God - I'm stepping to His pulse,  
flowing through His Merlot  
veins like seasons. In spring  
I blossom with flowers  
white like stars – stamen reaching  
toward the sun  
ripening in October  
Demeter's glory - full  
to the belly with seeds,  
nectar – my flesh a ruby  
red.

I find myself ripe  
with nothing  
but words and words



## TRANSPLANTING

### Baptism at the Iglesia

I had always loved the way my skin burnt in the sun, blushed red and even sometimes blistered. I loved the way my ears would only let chunks of Spanish in. I grew to love the feeling of wrinkled hands upon my blonde hair, hoping to catch a little luck from my locks. Sometimes, they'd even pinch the pinkest part of my cheeks, smiling a *viejita* smile.

So I didn't mind, standing in front of the congregation – after *acceptamos* Jesus Cristo in my... *corozon*, the preacher folded my scrawny white arms across my little girl chest and asked me for my... *testimonio*.

All I could say was *te amo Dios!* , let the water overcome me amidst the whispers and hushed laughter. *Es la gringa, no habla Espanol.*

*Que bonita...*

In *El Nombre de Jesus Christo*, I breathed in the thick water – emerged with hungry lungs, hiding my blue eyes behind squinted eyelids. On the waving face of water, a blurred image arose - a little body trembling, wrapped tight in an auburn towel and the dark arms of a preacher who kissed my forehead clean.

South on Hwy 281

Lord, what is it that I'm leaving behind?

In this Cabrio I'm racing  
south on 281 to a borderland  
I've learned to call home  
only after so many years  
of blending. My words  
still fumble atop my  
clunky accent in this river  
of language that flows  
freely like the Rio Grande.

Lord, what is it that I'm missing?  
Somewhere here along 281  
somewhere in the blurs of greens  
and browns – past the MERGE  
of Highway 37, somewhere  
in the sun drenched fields of dying grass,  
somewhere – I've given up  
and accepted my fragmented body  
separated by this wall – this way  
of being only halfway  
there.

## Town of Mistakes

The town was filled with people who make mistakes.

I spend my days there, chasing the sun  
with my beat up Mazda. The sky blushes  
orange as I come and go like water  
colored dreams – passing  
the barn that's city hall, police station  
and courthouse all in one, wood rotting away  
like promises. It probably looked like a dream  
years ago.

I used to think I didn't belong there,

with the working hands,  
the tired faces, the bare feet,  
the shamed smiles, and the sun's beaten  
red skin of children who grow numb  
long before they grow tall.

Soon my skin blushed blue, too, and eyes drooped  
proud. Soles grew tough and brown. Dreams  
fade away like the baby blue paint on the houses -  
sun chipped and beaten with a stern hand.

I was beginning to think that I was one of them.

## Chocolate Sundae

I didn't mind the way our fingers  
Interlocked to create a sundae, vanilla  
with a little hot mocha drizzled on top.

You didn't mind me calling you Johnny  
instead of Juanito, and I didn't care  
that you couldn't even say my last  
name.

I didn't mind when you came to my door,  
and my dad sized you up with his blue eyes  
and ordered me home a little early.

Or the way your mom ran her dark  
fingers through my blonde hair, dreaming  
of fluffy white haired babies. I didn't mind biting

into the corn husks that held tight  
the homemade tamales, and you didn't laugh,  
except maybe silently to yourself.

But when you took me to Denny's  
one sparkly night, we sat cozy together  
like teenagers do. I ordered like a fool –  
“a veggie burger please with those curly fries  
And a sundae – with tasty hot chocolate sauce”.

You just stared at your lap and said nothing  
for you, just maybe a coke.

You watched me eat my fill, swirling  
the ice cream together as it melted  
into a single colored slop, leaving much  
on my plate. You took the bill  
into your trembling hands, emptied  
your wallet onto the table, and we left  
Arm in arm, you – hungry yet satisfied,  
me – full and yearning for something more.

## Deisies Bloom in Fall

Along the northern riverbank  
Little Deisies bloom in fall  
Just one clean petal at a time  
Trying to wrap thirsty tongues  
Around awkward words. Sprinkled

like a daisy seed  
Bright and lonely – roots  
Severed. Grieving parents  
Across a language of water.

*Why do you speak in Español?  
What would your mother think?*

Words like fall's winds chill  
Homesick – dew  
Emerges from the Deisy's  
brown eye.

*I'm sorry Mees...  
I will try harder.*

Nervous smiles and broken  
Words Become *Good morning!*  
and *Hello!*  
*No entiendo –*  
*I can do it.*

At night the day's eye hides  
Inside the white petals.  
Deisy dreams  
of wrapping her mother  
tongue around Spring's southern fields.

The Common Denominator of the Afternoon Manicure

Hot air breathed  
down our necks  
as my mother  
and I entered  
The nail salon.

*What you like today?*

The Vietnamese man  
asked under a thick blanket  
of ethnicity.

*French tips for her*

my mom answered  
pointing to me,

*and American for me*

The man nodded deeply,  
the boldly golden Jesus  
around his sunburned neck  
danced with his movements.  
He pointed to a Mexican  
manicurist for my mom  
- escorted me to his own booth.

I sat as he began  
his careful work.

I sweat  
in an ethnically  
awkward silence.

\*\*\*

*What you doing?!*

he yelled to the Mexican

lady in his broken  
English.

*No, no good! Do again*

The Mexican manicurist  
rolled her eyes and r's  
in a curse underneath  
her mother's tongue,  
apologized in a tangy  
version of English.

My mother nodded,  
her face painted  
with German guilt  
and little beads  
of sweat.

The man doing my manicure  
continued his work, and asked  
me if I was:

*too hot*

but his words were spiced  
with Vietnamese  
and I couldn't uncover  
what he was saying -  
so I just nodded dumbly.

He got up and,  
praise our one  
common denominator,  
he turned on the AC.

The Double Murder

“Kitty!”

Speaking Spanish  
Morphing English  
In Thick  
Accented Innocence  
Dancing through  
Mistakes spitting  
Between red lips-  
Audible homicide

My name  
Slips sliding  
Off her tongue  
Fast and hot  
Too easy  
Desperate  
To be said.  
Kiddie....  
She tries again.

“Martha!”

Tumbles - Fumbles  
Atop clumsy  
Rose tongue  
Sluggish no  
Rhythm as  
I orally  
Slaughter her.

She begs  
For release  
My tongue lingers  
Just too long  
On the T  
Born deformed  
Like my overdone  
Quesadilla.



Marttaa...

I try again.

## Traveling West

Santa Rosa waves goodbye  
With her hot summer winds  
And her crumbling streets –  
Her watermelons blush red  
Spilled across her dusty roads  
Like road kill, mashed and baking.  
I drive into her sunset, my  
Back to her rusty face, her stench  
Of poverty – sewage and sweat  
On a hot summer's night.

I don't say goodbye  
To her yesterday's homes  
Or her pools of standing  
Water. No – I don't say goodbye  
Because I know that tomorrow  
I will thirst for her again.

## My Reflection in the Rio Grande

Standing here along the river -  
I want to jump  
Without thinking into the green  
muddy water.  
My white feet, clean and smooth,  
stand firmly at the bank –  
And I'm afraid to dive

Deep and whole into this flowing  
Language. Afraid my tongue will stumble  
Afraid my accent is too thick  
And that I will only sink.

This border does not belong  
to me.

This border belongs to those  
who aren't afraid  
of her muddy green waters,  
the spines of a nopal, the burn  
of the comal.

This border belongs to the hands  
that reach into her dusty earth -  
the bent backs and the browning necks  
burnt and sweaty.

This border belongs to the feet  
rough and dusty, the people  
with labored sighs.

This border belongs to those  
with roots like mesquites, bending  
in the wind on either side  
of the Rio Grande - roots  
that dig deep into the soil  
roots that come back  
even when plucked  
and tossed aside.

No, this valley does not belong to me  
Here - standing and afraid  
to baptize myself in her muddy waters.

## REFERENCES

- Barry, Peter. *Beginning Theory*. Manchester University Press, 2009. Print.
- Brown, Deborah, Annie Finch, and Maxine Kumin, eds. *Lofty Dogmas*. N.p.: University of Arkansas Press, 2005. Print.
- Butler, Judith. *Gender Trouble*. New York: Routledge, 1990. Print.
- Eliot, T S. *The Sacred Wood; Essays on Poetry and Criticism*. 7th ed. 1920. London: Methuen & co, 1957. Print.
- Hillard, Molly Clark. *Studies in English Literature, 1500-1900*. 49.4 (Autumn 2009): p945. From *Literature Resource Center*.
- Hugo, Richard. *Triggering Town*. New York: W. W. Norton & Company, 2010. Print.
- Kumin, Maxine. "How it Was: Maxine Kumin on Anne Sexton." Introduction. *The Complete Poems*. By Anne Sexton. New York: Mariner Books , 1999. N. pag. Print.
- Ostriker, Alicia. *Stealing the Language*. N.p.: Beacon Press, 1987. Print.
- Ostriker, Alicia. *Dancing at the Devil's Party*. N.p: University of Michigan Press, 2000. Print.
- Rees-Jones, Deryn. "Consorting with Angels: Anne Sexton and the Art of Confession." *Women* 10.3 (1999): 283-297. *Academic Search Complete*. Web. 14 Mar. 2011.
- Plath, Sylvia. *Ariel*. New York: Harper Perennial Modern Classics, 1961.
- Rosenthal, Macha Louis. *Our Life in Poetry*. New York: Persea Books, 1991. Print.
- Rushing, J.H. & Frenz, T.S. (1991). Integrating ideology and archetype in rhetorical criticism. *Quarterly Journal of Speech*, 77, 385-406.
- Simpson, Louis Aston. "New Books of Poems." *Harper Magazine* (Aug. 1967): 89-91. Print.
- Wheatley, Phyllis. "Niobe in Distress for Her Children Slain by Apollo". *Poems on Various Subjects, Religious and Moral*. Boston: W.H Lawrence and Co, 1887. 98.
- Yezzi, David. "Confessional Poetry and the Artifice of Honesty." *New Criterion* 16.10 (1998): 14-22. *Academic Search Complete*. Web. 14 Mar. 2011.

Zucker, Rachel. "Confessionalography: A GNAT (Grossly Non-Academic Talk) on 'I' in Poetry"  
*Poets*. The Academy of American Poets, 1997. Web. 14 Mar. 2011.  
<<http://www.poets.org/viewmedia.php/prmMID/5948>>.

## APPENDIX A

## APPENDIX A

### NOTES TO POEMS

“Sweet Salome” (page 38) is after Paris Bordone, *Salome Given the Head of St. John the Baptist by Herod*, 1979, oil on canvas.

“Adan y Eva in the Rio Grande Garden of Eden” (page 45) is after Jesus Urbietta, *Adan y Eva*, 1992, acrylic on canvas.

“In Defense of Vanity” (page 48) is after Pablo Picasso, *Girl Before a Mirror*, 1932, oil on canvas.

“Breakfast with Fur” (page 49) is after Meret Oppenheim, *Object*, 1968, sculpture.

“The Blue Moment” (page 53) is after Pablo Picasso, *The Kiss*, 1969, oil on canvas.

“The Mother of Sweet Texas Onions” (page 65) is after Robin Lloyd, "Birth Defects Tied to Season of Conception." *Live Science* 1 Apr. 2009: 26 Nov. 2010.

“A Taste for Autumn” (page 68) is after Susan Hoerth, *The Tree Lady*, 2005, colored pencil on paper.



## BIOGRAPHICAL SKETCH

Katherine Hoerth is a poet and teacher. She was born in Kiel, Wisconsin, and now lives near the Texas/Mexico border. She received her Bachelor's of Arts in English (2007) and a Master of Fine Arts in Creative Writing (2011) from the University of Texas Pan American, where she served as chief editor of *Gallery Magazine*.

Katherine has also worked as an English teacher in Santa Rosa, where she worked with recent immigrant students. Currently, she is an academic advisor and English instructor at the University of Texas Pan American. She is the author of a chapbook, *Among the Mariposas* (Mouthfeel Press, 2010), which received the Nuestra Voz prize for border women poets. Her work has appeared in various journals, including *Borderlands: Texas Poetry Review*, *Cold Mountain Review*, and *Front Porch*.

Katherine lives happily ever after out in the country near Edinburg, Texas with her soul mate, Bru Bru, and five cats.