Leslie Scalapino – Isolating Desire and Identity from the Public Gaze in Way and “A Sequence”

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Abstract
Leslie Scalapino's poetry articulates a feminist identity grounded in her speakers' articulation of their sexualities. These speakers, however, defy deconstruction or essentialism because the desires they express are ultimately inaccessible to readers. By denying her readers the opportunity to be voyeurs to private experience through difficult poetic voices, negative utterances, and contradictory uses of aesthetic space, Scalapino protects intimacy and personal experience from the invasion and denigration of the public sphere.

In the particular area of sexuality, for instance, I assume that most of us know the following things that can differentiate even people of identical gender, race, nationality, class, and “sexual orientation” – each one of which, however, if taken seriously as pure difference, retains the unaccounted-for potential to disrupt many forms of the available thinking about sexuality.... To some people, the nimbus of “the sexual” seems scarcely to extend beyond the boundaries of discrete genital acts; to others, it enfoils them loosely or floats virtually free of them.

Eve Sedgwick, Epistemology of the Closet

Judith Butler states that “the foundationalist reasoning of identity politics tends to assume that an identity must first be in place in order for political interests to be elaborated and, subsequently, political action to be taken”1. Her ensuing argument, however, is that there need not necessarily be an agent of action behind a course of action; rather, agents of action can construct themselves through a course of action2. Leslie Scalapino, in her poems way and “A Sequence” from That They

2 Ibid., 142.
FOOTNOTES

Were at the Beach, epitomizes this argument. Scalapino constructs a speaking identity through her poems, and this political agent defies "conventional representations of the female subject by depicting and reassessing the alienated or isolated position of that subject within the political sphere." The ultimate irrepressibility of Scalapino's subject transposes onto her primary subject matter, desire. By valuing desire, Scalapino equates it with the identity of her political speaking voice: both defy the public intrusion of interpretation or voyeurism. Her 'private' configuring of identity and desire "isolate[s] intimate, personal experience from the public sphere."4

Imagining Absence – Rationale, Negation, and Space

The Speaker

Acknowledging that identity politics are fraught with attempts to essentialize and hence demystify and depreciate, Scalapino assumes transience as a means of escaping public observation. Often, moral authority on feminist principles has hinged on a superficial cocooning of women into established categories. Hence, "there are strong political motives for obscuring any possibility of differentiating between one's identification as (a woman) and one's identification with (women)." The agenda of categorization "is a false dilemma that accepts and thus perpetuates a rigid either-or logic." The reality of fixed categorization is then "something to be undone, requiring a person to situate herself in an impossible or apositional space, outside of the self and outside of society." Scalapino's speaking voice in her poems is the predominant way in which she enacts impossible – or transient – philosophy and refuses to be pigeonholed.

In "The floating series" of way, for instance, Scalapino's poetic speaker conveys utterances in the third person: this is an objective narrator, conspicuously absent, uninvolved, and unspecified. This anonymity allows the narrator to observe multiple and similarly unspecified characters in the text; "the man" and "the woman" are equally anonymous "people." Scalapino's narrator, situated outside of him-or-herself and of society as Lagapa suggests, can voyeuristically comment

6 Ibid., 61-2.
8 Lagapa, "Disontological Poetics," 49.
on the sexuality of others thanks to the apositional identity of anonymity. A near-sociological describer of intimacy, the narrator observes “a man entering / after / having / come on her [the woman]” and is somehow privy to the information that “that / and / the memory of putting / in / the lily pad or the / bud of it first, / made her come”\(^{10}\).

In “A Sequence”, Scalapino’s narrator is equally situated outside of described situations. The voyeurism of this narrator is in some senses doubled, as rather than directly describing intimate moments, the voice describes a female character’s recollection of her own sexual observations. “She heard the sounds of a couple having intercourse,” the poem begins, reflecting way’s preoccupation with clinical observaions in continuing on to discuss the female character’s “puberty… organs and skin”\(^{11}\). Both way and “A Sequence” divulge intimate situations, yet the participants in these moments are never defined. In this fashion, “the structure of signification, the rules that regulate the legitimate and illegitimate invocation of [the pronoun I]” are denied, as Butler extols: because Scalapino does not name her subjects, her poetic voice cannot be named\(^{12}\).

**Negative Utterances**

Another means by which Scalapino’s poetic self enacts transience and escapes designation is the use of contradictory utterances to negate self. Disontology, or a state of non-being defined by her attempts to avoid essentialization, is for Scalapino “something that must be spoken or performed through language, [hence her] deliberate adoption of negative and contradictory speech patterns in her poetry “as a way of enacting a state of ‘not-being’ in the world”\(^{13}\). This contrary language “rejects the grammar, syntax, and punctuation that make thought meaningful through subordination and coordination,” thus enacting her poetry’s transience through contradictory utterances\(^{14}\).

Scalapino’s interest in “A Sequence” epitomizes her preoccupation with ‘not-being’. The female character observed by the narrator is defined by precisely what “she” is not: “during puberty her own organs and skin were not like [others]…”\(^{15}\). Her dissimilarity is noted in relation to others when “her body [does] not resemble [the] adults,” and her parts are “not [the organs of leopards],” making her have a “sense of difference between [a male] and the others”\(^{16}\). Apophatic definition receives similar attention in way, where the women described are ‘not

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10 Ibid., 66.
12 Butler, *Gender Trouble*, 143.
13 Lagapa, “Disontological Poetics,” 42.
14 Huehls, *Qualified Hope*, 150.
16 Ibid., 113.
in the immediate setting”\textsuperscript{17}; a couple’s intimacy is noted as occurring “with him not having entered her yet”\textsuperscript{18}; and “other people aren’t aware” of “people who’re there already”\textsuperscript{19}. In both poems, an immediate retraction of detail occurs just as readers get their bearings, and this technique of disjunctiveness is another means by which Scalapino avoids categorization, denying readers and a larger public the opportunity to access an intimate private.

\textit{Space}

Negation of self continues when one considers the aesthetics of space in Scalapino’s work. In the sheer amount of text on the pages of her work, Scalapino is simultaneously barely there or overpoweringly present; empty space dominates the page in \textit{way} yet is drowned out by solid text in “A Sequence”. Negative space in Scalapino’s work is “an important way of negating subjectivity, for she recurrently represents the self as empty” and this space, impossible to describe or categorize, is “one that rejects common conceptual categorizations”\textsuperscript{20}. Likewise, the framing of text, particularly in \textit{way}, evades comprehension because of the multiple directions in which it can be read: “logic tells us,” as Huehls writes, “that vertical and horizontal, simultaneity and duration, are mutually exclusive, but Scalapino’s writing aims to prove otherwise”\textsuperscript{21}. The scattering of text boxes on the pages of \textit{way} can be read top-down or left to right, each with distinctive meaning. These are language frames, which “take the form of small windows of text that Scalapino finds congenial to exploring our experiences of the present moment; [they are] individual, disparate acts of perception, as though in cartoon-sized boxes”\textsuperscript{22}.

While in \textit{way} space is so pervasive that readers can get lost in its expanse, the converse strategy is employed in “A Sequence”. Solid walls of text, few paragraph breaks, and minimalized margins dominate pages in “A Sequence”; here, the scarcity of space is such that there’s ‘no room’ for reader relations. Both strategies work to structure Scalapino’s poetic meanings as “infinite in number rather than structured by either generic constraints or the more basic linearity of a definable beginning, middle, and end”\textsuperscript{23}. Infinite meanings created by space (or lack thereof) in \textit{way} and “A Sequence” function homogenously with Scalapino’s poetic speaker and her predilection for negative utterances – all construct a speaking identity that defies

\textsuperscript{17} Scalapino, \textit{way}, 65.
\textsuperscript{18} Ibid., 67.
\textsuperscript{19} Ibid., 68.
\textsuperscript{20} Lagapa, “Disontological Poetics,” 45, 47.
\textsuperscript{21} Huehls, \textit{Qualified Hope}, 148.
\textsuperscript{22} Frost, “Signifyin(g) on Stein,” 28.
\textsuperscript{23} Ibid., 26.
conventions of self and other in order to avoid categorization and subsequent essentialization.

Enacting Absence – Desire, Performance, and Audience

*Intimacy and Ignorance*

Scalapino’s discussion of intimate relationships and desire are, in her work, as sacred and potent as the speaking voice she strives to have evade the reader’s understanding. However as Frost states, Scalapino interrogates the politics of the erotic, employing allusions to what she calls "the erotica genre" in refigured forms. Sometimes she redeems and "re-genders" erotic fantasy itself... and sometimes she uses a deliberate dead-pan to critique the mechanism of disengaged or voyeuristic "watching" on which some pornographic images depend.

This dead-pan tone, previously discussed as mimicking a sociological or clinical voice, highlights a concern with voyeurism that plays a significant role in Scalapino’s discussion of desire and sexuality: extolling their inexpressibility in vague and incomunicable terms.

Negative utterances previously discussed in terms of their ability to proclaim non-being also play a prominent role in the expression of desire. With desire though, the process of non-definition enacted in order to express it raises questions about the possibility of expressing it at all. This strategy is a form of negative theology, or, as previously expressed, apophatic definition. “Just as Christian negative theology suggests that language fails in its attempts to define or articulate conceptions of God—whose being is thought to be beyond human apprehension and articulation,” Scalapino’s poetry suggests that language fails in communicating the sacrosanct realm of intimate relationships and desire, where “indirect speech is necessary to describe the sacred.”

The disorienting effects of indirect speech also allow Scalapino to integrate the performance nature of desire into her work – terms of reference between subjects in her poems are discussed in bewildering metaphors. “The terms of significance” between characters in way “are denied to the reader... various people and objects are written into relation with each other, and the poem implies a certain desire to have the constellation of people and objects mean something significant.” However, even after completing “The floating series”, readers are

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24 Ibid., 6.
26 Huehls, *Qualified Hope*, 139.
simply left with an account of a "he" and "she" engaged in an anonymous act of intercourse using "lily pads" and "buds" rather than identifiable erogenous organs²⁷.

Defamiliarization of intimacy through disorienting metaphor is an agenda equally present in "A Sequence," where some characters have "the features and organs of leopards," and others are "compared... to plants"²⁸. These metaphors "function as codes for sexual experience," and this codification results in readers being "kept at a deliberate, perhaps infuriating, distance"²⁹. This is an exclusion of comprehension for readers of these metaphors, but Scalapino is quick to point out that it is disparity rather than exclusion that is important: "the force/erotic attraction is based on the dissimilarity... of [a character's] location"³⁰. Importantly, "there is no exclusion of pleasure... although it uses negative space, the intention is not to exclude... so one would be free to have 'actual' pleasure and beauty somewhere outside the frame" of the public³¹. Exclusion for Scalapino is not intended to deny others their own non-essentialized subject position, but merely to alert readers to the fact that such a place can exist and it is best created by a paradigm of privacy or unknowing.

**Audience**

This invokes Eve Sedgwick's observation that, in desire's realm, "the fact that silence is rendered as pointed and performative as speech... depends on and highlights more broadly the fact that ignorance is as potent and as multiple a thing there is as knowledge"³². The potency of incomprehension, thus, signals the importance of the audience to Scalapino's work - "reader relations... [are] sites of definitional creation, violence, and rupture in relation to particular readers, particular[ly] [in] institutional circumstances"³³. Readers are key to Scalapino's work, for her transience depends on readers' inability to interpret her, "engag[ing] in a careful practice of focused attention due to the complex and abstruse nature of the poet's writings"³⁴. Their ultimate exclusion denies them information; readers are not privy to the 'private' realm of desire, and thus the subject matter defies understanding.

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²⁷ Scalapino, way, 65-97.
²⁸ Scalapino, "Sequence," 115-16.
²⁹ Frost, "Signifyin(g) on Stein" 7, 9.
³¹ Ibid., 195.
³² Sedgwick, Epistemology, 4.
³³ Ibid., 3.
While the incomprehensibility of Scalapino's work is evident in the negative affirmations and apophasis discussed earlier, there are further ways in which her writing "prevent[s] a reader from insinuating any exterior meaning or knowledge into a given relation".35 Ambiguous punctuation in the form of dashes (or a complete lack of periods, as in way) and an affinity for unpredictable subordinating conjunctions maintain a multitude of interpretational possibilities for relations amongst poetic characters in Scalapino's work, replacing transitional parts of speech that would provide a relational framework for the author's subject matter. These dashes, furthermore, along with repetition of narrative elements from myriad points of view, mark the stuttering or faltering of speech before the inexpressibility of desire. Desire, "producing a state of ineffability... defies understanding and... seems to inspire only contradictory utterances and statements of incomprehension" 36.

Punctuation, contradictory diction, and unintelligible parts of speech are formal techniques that "resist political and linguistic overdetermination" as well as reader comprehension 37. Equating master narratives with a thematic level of understanding that Scalapino seeks to avoid, Mchale continues:

It is by such operations of fragmentation, interruption, dispersal, and juxtaposition of narrative elements... that [she] staves off master-narratives... Such poems have in common what might be called a 'killed virus' approach, whereby 'minor' narratives [of extended metaphor and discrete occurrences] inoculate against master-narratives 38.

Scalapino's texts are about attending to personal perception while denying would-be audiences, voyeurs, or evaluators the opportunity to perceive for themselves and categorize or otherwise diminish the value of the distinction between public and private. Her readers' ultimate confusion, therefore, is of paramount importance to constructing a speaking identity that defies convention.

An Intentionally Unclear Ending

Scalapino defies subjugation and communicates the inexpressibility and importance of private desire via an undecipherable speaking voice constructed through her poetics. Her use of negative spaces and the

35 Huehls, *Qualified Hope*, 140
38 Ibid., 257.
utterances they catalyze function as a critique of the publicity and exotericity surrounding identity and intimacy; they become a way to express desire itself. The incomprehension of her poems, then, “finds its political analog in a version of feminism unmoored from predetermined terms and choices”39. Scalapino employs the strategies of an unreadable poetic voice, negative utterances, juxtapositional use of aesthetic space, desire, and refusing audience access to her work in order to construct an identity from which to extol the importance of—and inherently value—access to a private realm in which to enact intimacy. Thanks to her tactics, as Eve Sedgwick would say, the nimbus of ‘the sexual’ enfolds Leslie Scalapino loosely, essentially floating virtually free of her just as she floats free from classification, essentialization, and demystification.

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39 Huehls, Qualified Hope, 136.
Works Cited


