Aspects of Motherhood in the Poetry of Marilyn Hacker

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This essay will make a close reading of a selection of poems written by the poet and essayist Marilyn Hacker which explores the relationship between motherhood and lesbianism. The poetry is analyzed from a lesbian feminist view that uncovers how lesbianism can be used to politicize the construct of motherhood. The four poems that will be read contain passages where the poet relates to her experiences of motherhood with a lesbian sensibility. The analysis accounts for the political subject positions that lesbians can take account of in their writing. The study has found that in the poems, lesbianism becomes a creative force that can deconstruct the patriarchal hegemony of motherhood.

*Keywords:* female sexuality, lesbian criticism, Marilyn Hacker, motherhood, poetry
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Introduction

No one is born a woman, but all are of woman born. Womanhood and motherhood are central concepts in our experiences as human beings. To study how motherhood is experienced is to study a crucial part of the human condition. Poetry can be regarded as a great tool to come to terms with cultural concepts, and for that it will be studied. Lesbians can be said to have a unique relationship to the area of motherhood, both as daughters as well as mothers. The study of poetry by lesbians as it relates to motherhood can bear significant value to how one can conceptualize this cultural construction.

This essay will look at the relationship between poetry, motherhood, and lesbianism as expressed in the poetry of the poet and essayist Marilyn Hacker. The purpose of the essay is to explore the aspects of motherhood in Marilyn Hacker’s poetry with a point towards a lesbian feminist way to relate to motherhood. Because the lesbianism of authors through history is often forgotten it can be necessary to focus on the lesbian aspects. The lesbian theoretical positions establish a specific relationship to the study which can surface expressions that give meaning to the studied poetry.

First there will be a background of feminist considerations of motherhood, bridging the topic with lesbian theory and finally analyzing how the aspects of motherhood are considered from a selection of Marilyn Hacker’s poetry. Each poem will be analyzed separately through a close reading where one can find the poem’s individual significance. However, as poems often follow certain leitmotifs, so to extend the understanding of some individual poems one may need to read how they may be connected to others. When one considers motherhood, one can look at the different ways that this is approached in the text. That is from the different ways to relate to motherhood, which the poet addresses from positions of being a mother and being a daughter. Because of Hacker being open as a lesbian it can be valuable to analyze the aspects of motherhood from a lesbian theoretical point of view. The experiences that Hacker has with motherhood and her reflections of these experiences arguably do come from her experiences as a lesbian. Thus, the text will make use of lesbian theories on writing, as well as lesbian theories of motherhood to make sense of how motherhood and its nuances appear in the poetry of Marilyn Hacker.
Background

Before addressing the main theoretical course of the essay some general points about motherhood should be addressed. The psychological and sociological perspectives that conceptualize motherhood can provide a ground to answer some aspects of motherhood that can appear in Hacker’s poetry. Interrogating Motherhood by Lynda Rachelle Ross analyzes the nuances of motherhood in contemporary society in the context of mothering. As she writes, motherhood is a complex area that women enter through different means of experiences such as class, ethnicity or sexuality. While motherhood is often regarded as a joyous experience that is to be celebrated in contemporary western societies, there are complications for plenty of women to experience motherhood as a completely positive experience (Ross 9). Lesbians generally come to terms through different societal relationships than heterosexual people in reception of motherhood, both in relation to being mothered and mothering. The cultural context makes motherhood an important part in children’s development and emotional wellbeing, as stated by Ross (16). This in turn does put pressure on mothers to be a beacon of perfection in the light of society.

Referring to notable lesbian feminist scholar Adrienne Rich, Ross writes regarding distinctions of the motherhood realm, namely mothering and motherhood. From Rich’s point of view motherhood is the male-centered bond that functions as the oppressive institutionalization of womanhood. Mothering, on the other hand, is a female-centered relationship for the mother, one that seeks to empower women (Ross 10f). This distinction can be valuable when discussing how motherhood is approached in the poetry, as Hacker is deemed to have feminist ideals implemented in her poetry, one can assume that this is part of her consciousness that affects her writing.

Marilyn Hacker and her Poetics

Marilyn Hacker, poet, essayist, and editor, was born from Jewish parents in the Bronx in New York in 1942. As Farwell has written about Hacker’s “Love Death and the Changing of Seasons”, plenty of her poems often appear to openly express her lesbian sexuality, that do not shy away from explicit sexualized imagery (Farwell Heterosexual 109). Furthermore, as Farwell has commented in her analysis of “Love Death and The Changing of Seasons”, her poetry is often written formalistic, which acts as subversive against patriarchal forms of writing (Farwell Heterosexual 127). From this one can
consider how Hacker’s poetry follows a particular line of lesbian expression that sees the openly lesbian expressions as valuable. However, the choice to write formalistically makes her stand out from other lesbian feminists.

Mary Biggs has written on the political visions and its appearance in the poetry of Hacker. The points that she makes can create a way to find some understanding of the poet for further analysis. One way that the poets have been understood by Biggs is that Hacker’s poetry is from her own words, feminist. However, Biggs also takes the step to invent another vision of what Hacker’s feminism may be, which she argues becomes her own form that Biggs calls femin (Biggs 1).

Femin poetics, as Biggs writes, is “sexed, gendered, and political, yet also individualized, and fully free and unpredictable in almost all of its aspects” (Biggs 2). Ultimately this poetic form functions as a bridge between particular and universal, with political implementations. However, this definition can be argued to function as a lesbian form, as will be shown later. Calling this kind of writing femin can be problematic, for it can take away the lesbian influences of the text. However, what Biggs points toward is an approach to Hacker’s poetry that can be valuable to explore. Regardless of how one may agree with Biggs own conceptualization, the fact remains that she provides readers with an understanding of Hacker’s poetry as colored with political implications, which are important to bear in mind when one approaches Hacker’s poetry. This text is going to consider the feminism of Hacker through a lesbian feminist point of view.

Theory

Lesbian criticism

The theory that will be used for this essay is lesbian literary criticism, as Marilyn Farwell has approached it in her works, which have ties to Adrienne Rich and Monique Wittig. Lesbian criticism evolved from the lesbian feminism of the 1970’s. Some of these figures include Lillian Faderman, Audre Lorde, Adrienne Rich, and Monique Wittig. This current of feminism sparked a new way to conceptualize writing which led to a surge in new ways for women to write and express themselves. The theory consists of perspectives on lesbian existence and experience as key components in the establishment of the political force of lesbianism. This lesbian perspective takes on a political approach which considers the lesbian writing to write against a system which
seeks to repress the strongest bond between women, that is lesbianism. Writing through a lesbian feminist point of view is to write against the patriarchal system that has historically hindered women from writing. Women can write against their oppression by not complying to societal structures by centralizing women in their writing.

By applying a lesbian perspective from the political feminist perspective on lesbian literature, one can say that one respectfully analyzes the text from points of view that are part of the lesbian author’s identity. It can give the text its own agency as well as giving more ground for lesbian perspectives. A problem that may occur is that not every text that one can consider lesbian has the same ideas of lesbianism as others. Thus, some parts may be overlooked as they express lesbianism outside of the theories that are considered. There is also the problem that some text may focus on other aspects rather than lesbianism. However, as lesbianism is part of our experiences, lesbian elements can be considered as something that affects the text. One poem may express a very open lesbian statement and then it is clearly containing lesbian sensibilities, but some may take a subtler form and that subtlety may still have lesbianism in it.

Lesbian analysis from the radical feminist view considers the relationship between the author’s sexuality, and the expressions of this in the text. The point of sexuality is however, more than just a sense of being, it also finds itself in opposition towards patriarchal value systems. Lesbianism can function as a political stance, through a community of women. When reading texts by lesbians it can be important to consider the functions of lesbianism and the importance of it to the author. As Faderman refers to Rich, one ought to consider the sexuality within the text. By not considering the lesbianism in Rich’s poetry and universalizing the love that she expresses, her relationship towards women is taken away from her. Only the lesbian feminist can fully understand what is said in the poem (Faderman 409). However, this point that a text should be explicitly, and particularly lesbian is contested by writers such as Wittig, who claim that the text can have lesbian potential in the political sense while still not being explicitly lesbian (63). With all that said, it can be important to consider the approaches a lesbian perspective if one finds it written by a lesbian. As poetry addresses the human condition, there may be more than just lesbianism that is dealt with in the poetry. However, lesbianism bears significance for ways to conceptualize the human condition, and therefore plays an important role in establishing a meaning of the poetry that will be studied.
The theory for this essay is focused on the radical lesbian feminist thinking that considers the political aspects of lesbian existence. Two influential thinkers in this line of thought are Adrienne Rich and Monique Wittig, whose writing has later been developed by Marilyn Farwell. One can consider the ways that lesbian existence, and experience is conceptualized to establish the political functions of lesbianism in texts. Two notable authors in this area are Adrienne Rich and Monique Wittig, who both have perspectives on the political functions of lesbianism, but with some differences. These differences later form nuances that form the grounds of Marilyn Farwell’s considerations of lesbian analysis.


Adrienne Rich’s essay points to some important ideas that exist within the lesbian feminist tradition. In the essay, Rich critiques the lack of lesbian perspectives in feminism and points toward heterosexuality as a coercive system that forces women to become heterosexual, which is rejecting a natural drive towards women, as a part of an oppressive system. Rich argues that every woman could become a lesbian, in a political sense, which she calls the Lesbian Continuum, a sphere in which women can unite against the politics of heterosexuality.

Referring to Nancy Chodorow, Rich points to the centrality of the mother as an important psychological factor in the construction of sexuality. She agrees on the idea that the mother is a primary source in establishing relationship of love for women, that lesbians appear to recreate, but because of stigma, these feelings have been repressed. While Chodorow may have given legitimacy to lesbianism, this is not enough according to Rich. As Chodorow argues this primary bond between women gives reason to why lesbianism can be a natural sexual preference. While Chodorow gives lesbian existence a rationalization, Rich contests this point and argues that there is no preference since all women are drawn to this bond (Rich “Compulsory” 638). Lesbianism is not just a preference, but something that is innate in every woman which has been systematically repressed by men, to grant men structural power. She further critiques Chodorow who views lesbianism as reduced to a choice away from oppressive men, while Rich would argue that all relationships with men are formed through oppression. Rather it is up to women to realize the primacy that is to drive towards lesbianism. Furthermore, she suggests that heterosexuality and motherhood are part of a
political institution that has led to the subjugation of women (Rich “Compulsory” 638). Motherhood then is something that is forced upon women to operate within the spectrum of men. However, removing men from this area and centralizing women can become a way where women can seek liberation form the patriarchal institutionalization of motherhood.

Rich coins two terms in relation to lesbianism, namely lesbian existence and lesbian continuum. Shortly, lesbian existence is the historicity and contemporary prevalence and construction of lesbian lives, while the lesbian continuum is the bond, and desire, to women-identified experiences between women (Rich “Compulsory” 648). These two stands in relation to each other as lesbianism becomes the ultimate expression of the lesbian continuum, while heterosexual women may find themselves drawn towards lesbianism through it.

All women belong on the lesbian continuum. Through this realization it is up to women to organize and prioritize women to fight against patriarchy. When it comes to writing one can consider how a woman writer positions herself in the relationships with other women and traces a positionality on a lesbian continuum. It is also of importance to recognize the potential of the mother role as the primary bond between women. A bond that has been severed by patriarchy.

“When We Dead Awaken” (1972) Adrienne Rich

Another of Rich’s influential essays deals with the aspects of writing for lesbian women. As women, and lesbians, have been denied agency to expression through history, Rich advocates a form to envision the lesbian feminist potential of writing. The idea that Rich proposes in her essay is to write through re- vision. This comes with some implications as to re-read older texts to re- vision the meaning of it, as well as the potential for a writer to re-imagine boundaries within texts, an important strategy for women who write. One must transform the realm of reality into a realm of fiction (Rich “When We Dead” 7). As history has silenced women in history it is a task for women writers to reclaim the positions that has been barred away from them. Because of the silencing and removal of stories by women, there is plenty of room for one to imagine spaces beyond the constraints of patriarchal hegemony.

As one is to read poetry by a woman, this line of thinking can serve the reading to consider how women writers operate within a language system that is not
designed for them. A strategy for women writers has been to imagine beyond the boundaries that the language system has placed on them to create subject positions in which the patriarchal structures cannot operate within. For Rich this comes with centering women as the core subjects of the text, both as the reader and the voice as well as writing free forms of poetry, which cannot be bound by patriarchy. The struggle to generate a voice to be heard is a crucial issue for women writers. What Rich suggest is not, however, always followed by every woman writer. But the topic of revision as a strategy of writing against a system which silences women’s voices is something that has appeared to have an impact and it is important to consider how a woman may use this in her writing.


Wittig considers the gendered realities of lesbians in her essay “The Straight Mind”. In this essay Wittig writes that gender identity is reinforced primarily by the structure of heterosexuality. Womanhood is deeply rooted in heterosexuality. The consistency of heterosexuality is rooted in the constructions of gender. The nonparticipation of heterosexuality in turn creates an existence outside of gendered class positions. One way to use this approach is to consider the ways in which sexuality and gender are interplayed.

One important aspect that Monique Wittig points towards in the essay “The Straight Mind” is to deconstruct what it means to be a woman. A valuable idea of consideration in the essay is that according to Wittig womanhood is a construct only made possible through heterosexuality. Heterosexuality is a system that enforces differences of categories of sex. These differences appear as a force that sees itself as the universal form, where in terms of differences, the dichotomy of love is formed in ideas of man or woman. Whereas homosexuality then breaks this difference and becomes inconceivable within the straight mind (Wittig 28). Homosexuality becomes a break from the coercive system. The break from womanhood leaves Wittig to conclude that “Lesbians are not women” (Wittig 32). The lesbians are formed to deconstruct the very gendered system of thought that appears to constantly surround us.

In conclusion, Wittig points towards womanhood as contextualized through a system that forcibly establishes gender through heterosexuality. To consider gender as class is valuable to consider in a lesbian reading. From this point of view,
lesbianism can function as a breaking from the heterosexual class system of gender. Lesbianism becomes a way that deconstructs perceptions of womanhood, for capturing one’s identity within womanhood as a lesbian is something that very likely will cause some troubles. Alternatively, lesbians become able to view gender outside of a system of coercion.

“The Point of View: Universal or Particular?” (1980) Monique Wittig

While Rich claims that lesbian writing ought to be exclusively lesbian, Wittig argues there is potential in making the reading universal, rather than particular. In Wittig’s essay she points to the challenge for minority writers which is to have their voice heard, to be listened to from a point of oppression. For marginalized people it is desired to break away from the conditions of marginalization, which does require some strategies in writing. Wittig proposes that one removes one’s position, but at the same time removing one’s position could hinder the potential to be understood from that position. This issue can be argued to be central for lesbian writers as to make their experiences understood and heard from their position while also be able to reach out those who are not, without sounding essentialist, of the same substance.

Wittig contests the point that there is a particular form for women. The essay puts the idea of a women’s language and writing into question and furthermore the statements made by Wittig can provide a critique regarding the universal woman reader that Rich presents. Both aspects have valid points and have a use in analyzing the material.

Wittig argues that the most effective lesbian text is a text that on the surface appears to speak to a universal reader. One way that one can make a text universal is as proposed by the author is to remove gender as it can be a form to escape the constraints of the realm of gender, which becomes a way to make a text by women read as a text available for anyone. As Wittig refers to the writer Djuna Barnes one is to suppress gender markers to establish a sense of universality. For, as Wittig writes, the feminine is the marked gender while the masculine is the general. Thus, removing gender markers as a female writer is to remove the gendered constraints, which results in a lesbian point of view according to Wittig (60f).

To have a text being explicitly read as lesbian can hinder its political impact. A text that is not polysemic can lose its politics as if it can only be for lesbians,
then the lesbian ideas cannot move forward Wittig argues (64f). To make the text universal is one of the ways to reimagine the system of writing and breaking out of one’s position of marginalization. To realize the lesbian potential of the lesbian text as Wittig suggests is to reshape the discourse of the text rather than making the lesbian in the text explicit. The multiple interpretations of signifiers would rather be where a text can reach its lesbian potential. Rather than explicit statements of lesbianism the topic of lesbianism can be found in the use of language and the play on semantics. Taking on a position that is both universal and particular becomes a way to fully realize the political force of a lesbian text. Thus, one can disintegrate the signifiers that create a hierarchy of gender.

In conclusion, a strategy for lesbian writers, and other marginalized writers, according to Wittig is to write as if the text is universal that would force the non-marginalized reader to enter the marginalized world, thus ensuring a position of power for the marginalized writer. A question for this essay then is to look at how the text may be using these aspects in the textual formations. One ought to argue whether the text is to be read as a universal subject or a particular subject. This can come down to the openness or closeness toward the authors lesbianism. When the text speaks openly the textual power and analysis from Wittig’s point of view may be less functional. However, when the text does not openly express lesbianism one can consider how the text can still have a lesbian politics within it. It can be argued that it is important to consider this way of writing for when it comes to a covert approach to lesbianism in some poetry one must consider the textuality. Something that Farwell later refines, based on Wittig’s writing.

_Heterosexual Plots & Lesbian Narratives_ (1996) Marilyn Farwell

Lesbian writing is related towards one’s perspectives on what lesbian is. One point to take into consideration is of the lesbian as the creative force, that gives women who love women a certain position of power. However, to make sense of how this type of power is formed one needs to identify how the lesbian is taken into the world of writing.

Marilyn Farwell can be said to reconceptualize dichotomies between lesbian perspectives. The text summarizes notions on lesbianism that can provide tools to analyze a text from the lesbian view. Her writings raise questions of how to understand a literary work as lesbian from various approaches. It starts with the ways of
viewing narrative and moves on to ideas of the lesbian subject. The different perspectives that can be found can serve this essay with ways to approach a lesbian text with a lesbian mindset. Farwell bridges different lesbian perspectives together into one coherent theoretical standpoint. In her work she conceptualizes a lesbian narrative, and a lesbian subject position that has been a core of the work of lesbian theoreticians.

The lesbian narrative can be regarded as a divided subject matter. There are many different perspectives both regarding the positions of lesbians as well as how this idea of a lesbian takes place in the text. Farwell mentions two different approaches to functions of lesbian narratives and uses both to forge an analytical tool for lesbian narratives. One is focused on the political lesbianism of the text that is drawn from Rich’s theories. In this form Farwell points out how the text itself can function as a representation of the lesbian subject based on the author’s relationship to lesbianism and how the author can use their lesbianism to create a political text. The second aspect takes on the lesbian subject as a disruptive element in the narrative. Both aspects can have value to find ways about lesbian subjects in the texts. Some of the aspects will be presented and later the vision that Farwell takes.

Beginning with the first approach that takes on the ideas of a conscious political form of lesbianism as the most meaningful expression of a lesbian type of text. The lesbian feminist approach to lesbian narratives and lesbianism is described by Farwell as “a disembodied, nonsexualized political stance regulated by a uniform and essentialist identity of woman and lesbian” (Farwell Heterosexual 10). Furthermore, as stated by Farwell, narrative is a way to enable representations of lesbian characters. It looks at the political in the text in relation to the lesbian, that seeks to identify lesbians in the text (Farwell Heterosexual 10f).

The second approach views the lesbian subject in opposition to the first definition offered by the classical lesbian feminists. As Farwell writes the postmodern lesbian is “defined as an embodied and sexualized figure, whose performative identity is never fixed and who therefore allows for a diversity not incorporated into the lesbian-feminist definition” (Farwell Heterosexual 10). Moreover, this views the lesbian as a destabilizer of functions. As Farwell writes, disruptive elements that destabilize heterosexual codes play an important role to a lesbian narrative (Farwell Heterosexual 11). Where excepted narrative patterns of how attraction between gender functions, lesbianism disrupts the expected narrative where it decontextualizes patterns of love.
Farwell argues that the approaches do not have to stand in conflict with each other and creates a bridge between these perspectives. In this she claims that narrative does work as a text which holds representations of being, but it is also in changeable positions. In most cases, lesbian textuality becomes realized through breaking the patterns that hold narrative. Farwell proposes a thought pattern that connects to the idea of the lesbian subject that is and has been positioned against coherent heterosexual narratives (Farwell *Heterosexual* 14f).

Farwell lifts an important aspect of the lesbian feminist conceptualization of the lesbian subject through the lens of an autonomous woman. Lesbians from this point of view create a woman who is free or creating freedom from men’s claim over women. To claim a lesbian identity is to liberate oneself from men. Poetry serves as a function for this possible creation of the independent self (Farwell *Heterosexual* 87f). Ideas of the lesbian narrative can be used in poetry that has more forms of rhetoric as the perspectives that Farwell point to shows the approaches to text by lesbians. One may use the expressions that the lesbian feminists use to indicate how a lesbian writer may write. That a lesbian writer may express her lesbianism in relation to what theory states, either directly or indirectly, the way it is expressed can come with different meanings. Or one may look at the elements of disruption that exist within the structure of the poems as they may indicate lesbian elements of the text.

Ideas and images of mothers and motherhood remain non-uniform among lesbian perspectives. In some cases, one can trace how the Mother can remain as a central figure in the formation of female bonding, as if the mother serves as a primary erotic image that lesbianism is drawn from. As written by Rich the mother is the primary supplement for a lesbian love among women and men, which is taken from women by patriarchy, while lesbianism becomes the way to recover this motherly bond. As Farwell writes “Women writers have exhibited a strong and ambivalent relationship to the image of the mother as one who both creates- births- and nurtures an imaginative product” (Farwell *Heterosexual* 10). The mother has functioned as an important figure in writing that is like a primary source of love. However, there are other perspectives on the conceptualization of motherhood as Farwell brings up other points to mind in one of her essays on lesbian concepts.

Another text by Farwell that text discusses more in detail on the topic of lesbian writing is found in the essay “Towards a definition of the Lesbian Literary Imagination”. The essay provides further clarity when considering lesbian texts from a lesbian perspective. In this essay she accounts for the lesbian creativity that appears in lesbian writing where lesbianism functions metaphorically. Just like the lesbian subject is a question of definitions so is the lesbian metaphor. The lesbian on its own can function as metaphor, but some metaphors by a lesbian can allude to lesbianism.

The role of the mother makes its appearance in the lesbian creative metaphor. This concept of the lesbian metaphor which establishes creative energies for women writers, draws on concepts of motherhood. The primacy of the mother-daughter relationship is a source of creative energy Notably this relationship can be explored in poetry by lesbians addressing issues of motherhood. The lesbian, realized in motherhood becomes a position that can turn inwards to the central bond between women (Farwell “Towards” 14ff). As this study is focused on motherhood this line of thought has an important function in the considerations of motherhood as a signifier of creativity.

The lesbian currents of writing decenter men from the place of writing and revise the positions of women from margins to center (Farwell “Towards” 19). The lesbian metaphor opens the relationship of women to bond with women, to become a place of liberation, to surpass the control men have over women (Farwell “Towards” 20). To uncover the metaphor’s function would be to pay attention to writing as a place to widen autonomy for women. The knowledge of Hacker’s lesbianism gives area for interpreting the poetry from this lesbian mindset that centers women, however there are other instances of it, as she does in some poems write to men. However, due to the lesbianism of the author one can consider the element of the metaphorical lesbian as a force that appears in the poems.

The text will make use of the theory to consider how conceptualizations of motherhood and lesbianism come to effect in the poems. To achieve this the essay will make use of a close reading of the text where one can consider the lesbian subject, and lesbian metaphor as Farwell has put it, in relationship to the textual components. This can take form in expressions of lesbian existence, as either overtly or covertly. Where one may find conceptualizations, or reconceptualizations of gender and how this in turn
relates to motherhood. The form of the lesbian continuum can often be discussed as the relationship that exists between women, as well as viewing women as a form of community. Gender can find itself conceptualized through different means when one considers the lesbian as a creative force one can consider the possibility to move beyond the heterosexual conceptualizations of gender and revise the signifiers of gender. Each poem can address these topics differently, and some may be left out, but each topic can individually come to mind for a lesbian analysis. By observing how lesbian themes, political visions and experiences are put out in the poems of motherhood one can find how passages can merge motherhood and lesbianism together, where the institution of motherhood may be envisioned anew through lesbian sensibility.

The poetry of Marilyn Hacker

The poems that will be analyzed are taken from the collection Selected Poems 1965-1990 (1994). The selected poems for analysis will be taken from the collections Taking Notice (1980) and Assumptions (1985) for these collections come from a period where the focus on Hacker’s poetry appears to be directed towards experiences of motherhood. Both with her experiences with being a mother to Iva, and how it is to be a daughter herself. Each poem will be analyzed separately to find how they establish certain relationships with motherhood and how this can become realized through lesbian feminist thinking.

Mary Biggs comments on the period of feminist writing which the poetry of Hacker is situated in. This type of poetry generally had functions such as revision, to voice those silenced by history (Biggs 1). Furthermore, feminist poetry often celebrated the world where women could allow themselves a free range of expression, celebrating the connections between women (Biggs 4). Poetry from the feminist vision is a poetry of revision, that creates areas where the public and private spaces contain a political motif of becoming a voice for women. The vein of feminist writing that Hacker takes part in is to be taken into consideration when analyzing the poems

“Taking Notice” (1980)

The collection of poems titled Taking Notice come with a range of poems that go into the personal life of Hacker where plenty of poems are addressed to her daughter. However, the focus will be on the sequence of sonnets which carries the name of the
In the sequence, one is met with a poet who takes notice of her conditions, which deals with questions of her life as lesbian, as a mother, and a lover. In this poem one can trace how lesbian experiences create a poetic potential that openly address issues of a feminist who is a lesbian. The poem moves through experiences between different managements of relationships, as seen from the private space with her lover, as the life with her lover and daughter, and the private life with the daughter. While focusing on motherhood the lover in the poem plays an important part in the experience of motherhood. The main points of this poem can be traced to consider aspects ranging from removal of identity, and erasure of women’s history, and explorations to resist this, from the position of a mother, and a lesbian. The history of women is taken into account in reflections of motherhood.

The poem opens with an epigraph from Adrienne Rich’s “Twenty-One Love Poems” which follows “two women together is a work / nothing in civilization has made simple” (qtd. in Hacker 129). This serves the themes of the poem as reflections on the existence of women in a certain bond, as affected by society. An argument to be made is that in this poem Hacker investigates her own situation as a mother and observes how her lesbianism is part of it. Further one is met with the reflections of the poet and her role as a mother as met with aspects of daily life. The reader is met with the work that women go through as lovers and mothers, which is not a simple task. The problems that one is met with can serve the reader in a way to recognize the work and problems that motherhood comes with rather than viewing motherhood as a pure sense of bliss.

The poem is overtly lesbian. As one can read by the poet’s commentary on homosexuality. As with the fifth stanza which talks about how her sexuality is often denied by men, while male homosexuality is not as one can read in the lines “if a man sleeps with men, and women, he’s queer […] Anyone’s love with women doesn’t count” (Hacker 131). It comments on the way in which lesbians have been removed and silenced through history which this poem appears to write against. And as one can read in how she creates the relationship with her lover, the poet will hopefully not be forgotten. As the poet is openly addressing a lover who is also a woman she is denying the chance for readers to ignore their type of relationship: a lesbian relationship. As the following lines express: “only your cheeks’ epicene ivory/ makes us the same sex” (Hacker 132). It marks a position of the lesbian subject. Furthermore, in the poem one can read the lesbian subject moves in between spaces of being a mother, and a lover in
the events that unfold in the poem. She moves between two kinds of women through a sense of community. The movement between the relationships the poet thinks about can be a way to place her lesbian experience into her experience of motherhood. The openness to her sexuality is an important factor in the construction motherhood. To not forget that she is a lesbian, even though she has had children with a man, she has realized her lesbianism. She is gay and a mother. She is not straight when she mothers, but she meets similar struggles like most mothers, in how to be a good mother.

Another point to consider is the community of women, and the ordinary lives of women. She takes herself into a community of women and makes her experiences part of every other woman’s story. As the opening lines in the thirteenth stanza go “No better lost than any other woman/ turned resolutely from the common pool/ of our erased, emended history” (Hacker 133). The subject positions herself within the common experiences of women. An experience that is made into a political realization of how women are often removed from history.

As she finds herself with the everyday lives of womanhood and motherhood she will also come to struggle with how one is to parent. This is addressed in the first lines of the poem. However, some of the problems that she may think of may be problems specifically for her. For example, one can take account of how her daughter seems to peer into femininity; “My child wants dolls, a tutu, that girls’ world made / pretty and facile. Sometimes. Sometimes I/ want you around uncomplicatedly” (Hacker 129). These lines interweave the spaces of motherhood and love. Which works to create a situation where the poet approaches the area of motherhood in relationship to lesbianism. While she may reflect upon some issues with her daughter embracing a constructed idea of womanhood, which be something one may want to reject, she turns to her lover and creates a feminine space. However, one can pay close attention to the wanting that appears. Her child wants dolls and pretty things, while the poet wants her lover, which creates a combination of spaces. Furthermore, one can read how lines tend into the realms of motherhood with the lines “mother and daughter both, I see/ myself, the furious and unforgiven” (Hacker 133). Her experiences with being mothered ultimately affect her experiences as a mother. Moreover, she sees the political aspect of parenting as expressed with the line “the child punished into autonomy” (ibid.). While she may want her child to become a liberated individual she recognized that it is as if she is forcing her to be free, which appears as a contradiction. By raising the issues of experience with parenting the text can appear to problematize the functions of
parenting. The mother wants her daughter to be a free individual, yet the institution of motherhood may hold the potential back.

Furthermore, there are problems of the family ideal. In the fourteenth stanza one can read how the poet deals with the issue of family in the lines “And I shout at Iva, whine at you. Easily/we choose up for nuclear family” (Hacker 134). These lines show certain troubled aspects in the relationship she has as mother and as lover. It openly addresses faults one can make as a parent, while commenting on the heterosexual nuclear family. As when they experience problems, they fit into the idealized family, that they would otherwise be regarded as not belonging to.

Moreover, the problems that the poet encounters, one can argue that these issues are specifically lesbian, while also universal to most parents. This can become a way for the poem to normalize lesbian parenting while also pointing towards a different type of potential with how one can parent. One can read it as a way how patriarchy has affected the parenting role, but the problems are reflected openly in thoughts that would go against images of a perfect mother. They are struggles and work and while one can recognize the work that it takes to parent one can also recognize that this parenting has the potential to go against patriarchy.

Finally, the text deals with plenty of the work of being a mother and issues surrounding it. But the openness of these issues allows readers to understand the work that comes by being a woman. Conclusively, the poem has a centrality of women, commentary on the life of a lesbian, as well as a mother. While highlighting the work that it takes to be a woman, and the patriarchal oppression that conditions their existence one can find ways where a path away from these conditions come forward. The lesbian can disrupt the hegemony as she positions itself in the space of lover to a woman and mother. The text recognizes how motherhood functions as an institution, even for lesbian parents. It realizes the politics of motherhood as reinforced through patriarchy. The text becomes a realization of not forgetting the forces that are at play in the lives of mothers. But in the centralization of women one can also recognize the work against patriarchy within the space of motherhood.

“Towards Autumn” (1985)

In “Towards Autumn” one can look at some lines that explore the relationship between motherhood and the lesbian community of women. In this community, the poet deals
with friends, lovers, mothers and daughters. Motherhood in this poem is realized through thoughts on her daughter, and her mother. The form of the poem is a sestina whose end words are: daughter, friend, bread, mother, lover, and myself (Hacker 139). These end words can be said to be components of what shape a community of women and the experiences that are found within. Each stanza can form a unique positioning of relationships that forms a general form of a lesbian community where explorations of motherhood can be found, in the struggles and daily lives of women who share their lives with other women. The topic of gender as a concept is not explored in this poem, but markings of gender and relationship to women are what plays an important role. But there are no direct confrontations with the semantics of gender.

Lesbian existence appears to take a subtle form that is realized in the centralizing of women rather than openly stating her lesbian sexuality. However, as one can notice in the text the lovers of the subject are women, who are lovers to other women (Hacker 139). This constructs a centrality of women which takes form as the emergence of the lesbian continuum where the lovers are found. While sexuality is less overt in this poem than in some others, the appearance of the erotic lesbian space can still be found. One can argue that the poem touches upon themes of sexuality through a leitmotif in Hacker’s poetry that uses the domestic space to express lesbian sexuality. As the poem makes use of this imagery it can be exemplified through “We take coffee- and teapot, mugs, jam jars, bread/ inside, wash up. I’ve work, hours by myself. / Beyond the kitchen in her room, my friend” (Hacker 140). The domestic space is, as Farwell has analyzed in “Love Death and the Changing of Seasons”, a place that expresses an erotic bond between women. Through imagery of daily life, the intimate experiences of women are put forward in lesbian poetry (Farwell Heterosexual 131). Thus, the domestic area that appears in the poem can function as another expression for the specific erotic bond. While the patriarchal system enforces the domestic area as a site of oppression one can read how Hacker transforms this into a room outside of patriarchal control. Motherhood can then serve outside of patriarchal value systems.

Another important point to consider is the relationship with the daughter as found in a lesbian context. An example of this is how the poet is thinking about writing to her daughter where she writes “Thinking of her is like thinking of a lover/ I hope someday grow to be a friend” (Hacker 139). This can textually mark a special kind of bond between women that is specifically lesbian with a centrality towards another woman. However, a lover may not fully be fit for a daughter, but it can mark the
intensity between the mother and the daughter. But the daughter can become a part of the community of women with the mother. Which one can argue is a bond only made possible in a lesbian context.

Moreover, one can look at the relationship to the mother in the poem as someone she has a broken relationship with, for she could not make friends with her as she states in the poem (Hacker 139). To befriend the daughter then becomes an important part for her as a mother. The poet’s relationship of motherhood often turns into herself. But also, with the women she creates a community which becomes a place where motherhood is bound. She may have lacked the possibility to have a meaningful relationship with her mother as she appears someone outside this community. It may well be due to this nonbelonging to the community of women that problematizes the relationship between them. For it is through the community of women that are central in the poem, she can establish ways to make friends with her daughter. With this there are the reflections of motherhood, and the spaces of female struggles. The lesbian continuum realized in the community of women plays an integral part in the potential to constitute a motherhood where the bond between mothers and daughters can be one of love and friendship.

In conclusion, the poem demonstrates the potential to make politics of the lesbian community. The meaning of lovers and friends are unimaginable in a male heterosexual setting, where lovers are objects of desire and the other, thus the lesbian motherhood can function as a deconstruction of heterosexual hegemony. The lesbian can turn her own motherhood to creatively invent a space where love is a place of community, a locus of women’s bonding. Motherhood is made into another area of bonding between women against patriarchy.

“Mother” (1985)

The poem titled “Mother” deals with reflections on aging and loss of her mother, as well as difficulties in the experiences of grief. Identity rooted in the relationship with her mother is reflected upon during this period of grief. The parts of identity that the text deals with are related to sameness and difference. The poem appears to take on non-open expressions of lesbianism, but one can trace certain lesbian elements within the poems that are realized through lesbian experience. In this poem she observes the mother’s past and how this can affect her. Her mother, silenced by history can be given
a voice through the lesbian point of view. First gender appears through a reflection of sameness and difference to the mother. The gendered difference notably comes through a difference of sexuality.

With her mother’s death the possibility to understand and bridge experiences for the poet is no longer available. To understand the distance between the poet and her mother is now only found in memories of her past as expressed in the first stanza. However, the functions of the mother, as found from lesbian theoretical viewpoints, can create a force of creativity that can revision the history of the mother.

Beginning with the topic of gender, one can consider that the realm of gender is considered through how she is becoming like her mother. The text connects the two into a realm of sameness. Through certain rhyming schemes and lines, one can read how the poet connects herself with the mother, as exemplified by “I was born when she was thirty-eight.” “I’ll be/ thirty-eight in November” (Hacker 142). As well as the connection of the end of two lines “I’ll be […] she” (Hacker 142). These end words can suggest that there is a level of sameness. She explores the emotions of becoming a mother, and in this she goes through emotions of becoming like her mother which are experiences most women go through when entering the realm of motherhood.

The themes of difference may be expressed in the different ways in which they have related to men. It appears that the poet takes on the functions of patriarchy in how women are shaped by it. “Thirty-one-motherless teenaged, serving/ father, time black-frocked Macy’s deserving/ Jewish daughter” (Hacker 142). The rhyme that relates to her mother can serve as markers of the patriarchal relationships that affect women, where women are considered servants of men. Further down the line the poet expresses how she “invents freedom at the bank” (Hacker 142). This passage can tell that while her mother may be someone who has been like a servant to the structures of patriarchy, she has the potential to invent freedom.

The last stanza explores a consideration of the lack of connection between the mother and the poet. In turn this can be resulting in a creative spark where the lesbian can turn the creativity towards the mother. As they could not really get to know each other the poet turns to imagining stories of her mother, as marked in the poem “I invent stories she will never tell” (Hacker 142). These stories that her mother cannot tell may be stories about lesbianism, as later in the same stanza one can find passages that can mark lesbian experiences, and how family members deal with them.
On these experiences of lesbianism, one can point to the emotions of loss that parents go through. Laura A. Markowe has written about the emotions that parents go through when their children have disclosed information of them being a lesbian. Grief and loss are commonly experienced in this moment (Markowe 41). “I was fatherless; she was motherless/ I thought I was motherless as well” (Hacker 142). This can touch upon the experiences of loss that the mother has dealt with, but the poet turned them to her mother. In other words, she is granting herself the possible experiences that the mother went through by giving the mother lesbian experiences. This is followed by lines that form a dialogue where it may appear that the mother is talking about her own lesbian experiences:

The mother says, “when I was twenty, I…”
The daughter, “I Was … I never thought you…”
“My best friend …” “I was afraid. Tell me why…?"
“... I was afraid […]” (Hacker 142).

One can argue that this dialogue is for the poet to create ways in which the mother can express lesbian experiences by mentioning how she could have had romantic experiences with another woman (Hacker 142). Although hidden, one may argue that by giving the mother lesbian experiences, the poet can connect with her mother. However, with the ellipsis there can be an indication of a sort of impossibility to express the lesbian through language from her mother’s side as she belongs to a different generation whose lesbian experiences have been hindered by patriarchy more than the poet. It can mark the differences in how they have been affected by compulsory heterosexuality, thus marking a difference between the two.

Furthermore, one can consider the ellipsis as marking the ways that lesbianism has been made unimaginable. This line of thought can be found as Wittig points out that to the straight mind the lesbian is made unthinkable as alternative to maintain the heterosexual system (Wittig 25f). The conversation appears to connect some similar experiences between the mother and daughter, but some lines that could clearly state that her mother has had lesbian experiences are absent. Her mother has been so damaged by the patriarchal world that she cannot tell lesbian stories, at least that may be what the poet wants to tell us.
Finally, as the poem that is exploring the relationship of Hacker’s mother and herself, by considering how she and her mother’s history may be similar she can come to understand her mother and come to terms with their relationship. However, there are problems in figuring the mother’s past out as she can only look at the mother’s history through fragments. She allows herself the creativity to revision her mother’s life. Moving between lines of giving a voice to a mother who has been silenced in history to give her a space in a larger community of women she can give her mother a narrative away from patriarchal oppression. In conclusion, one can find that the poem can be a way to come to terms with the mother as hindered by patriarchal structures and placing her within the lesbian community. The poem can add clarity to the destructive force of patriarchy that institutionalizes patriarchy.

“Mother II” (1985)

This poem that is from the same period as the first poem named “Mother” takes on issues of gender and emotions of becoming a mother. One can observe how the construction of gender is in some ways unstable and this instability can be linked to the poet’s own sense of being a mother. The poem can be read as asking questions how motherhood is tied to gender identity and how this is tied to the oppression that women experience. Furthermore, the poem can be observed as reflections of gender identity which is a place where the lesbian subject takes form and can creatively reimagine.

From a sociological point of view, one can consider how lesbian mothers relate to gender. Ross writes that lesbians tend to struggle with parental identity due to the difference of parental roles (Ross 110). This parental identity problematic appears with the question of positionality that Hacker has. The elements that can potentially destabilize gendered arrangements yet having to deal with the everyday struggles of parenting are questions that problematize parental identity for lesbians (Ross 110f). This can give some points to the relationship of gender identity and motherhood that appears in the poem. Moreover, one can look for instances in the poem that can be pointing towards how lesbian theorists have approached these questions.

This can turn to the accounting of gendered experiences that occur in the poem. Beginning with the first line, which can be said to regard the topic of positionality as a locus of gender. The concept of positionality as formed by Audre Lorde in Farwell is an unstable construct that is reproduced in the social matrix in
relationship to others (Farwell *Heterosexual* 95). While the first line can be considered to conceptualize women as formed in relationship, the following lines can be seen as a way to showcase how womanhood is in positionality. It opens questions to where gender identity can be formed, and how the relationship towards her mother offers a certain effect on gender identity. As the lines follow “No one is ‘woman’ to another / woman, except her mother” (Hacker 146). This line brings in the connections that one has with one’s mother when one is a woman.

Next, there is the body as a possible locus for gender identity. As Hacker marks the body she connects her own sense with her mother’s body. Through this one can consider how the body operates as a space between the two. For the mother’s body can be argued to appear in a natural form in the poem. One can argue that in patriarchal society the female body in its natural state is often taken as monstrous; however, his poem seeks to remove the disempowered forms of the body. The body is praised regardless of what it is. This can be due to the lesbian context of the body, which would empower the female body in its natural state.

Furthermore, lines touch upon gender as performance, which can lead to a different lesbian reading. As in the lines suggest a reading which “Naked or clad/ to me, she wore her gender” (Hacker 146). These lines point to areas in which the topic of gender is not located in the body nor the expressions one carries. One can argue that there is a play on signifiers of womanhood with images of the body and clothing. This play could become a way to realize a subject position that is both dealing with experiences of essentialism as well as a deconstruction of the essentialisms of experience. There are both images of the essential being of womanhood that draws lesbians together while at the same time the textual markers are destabilized.

Furthermore, the historicity of oppression that women have experienced is commented on in some lines. This can draw the locus for womanhood into a shared history of oppression. One may find commentary of how womanhood appears rooted in a history of oppression in the lines “her individual complex/ history curtained off by sex” (Hacker 146) Womanhood becomes an area in which women have been oppressed, where to be a woman is to be oppressed. Which is commented on in later lines as something that she has sought to reject only to fall into it again (Hacker 146f).

Finally, the poem turns toward the daughter which give a conclusion to the accounts of gender. The relationship with her mother being bridged into her relationship to her daughter forms a revision of gender. The final lines express a certain tone of her
position as a mother to her daughter which connects the experiences she has had with her mother and placing these in a new context. The lines follow:

Am I “Woman” to my water-
dwelling brown loquacious daughter,
corporeal exemplar of
her thirst for what she would not love? (Hacker, 146).

The lines raise questions of the reflections that have been made in turn of gender identity and its positionalities. One may look at the question as if she will become the marker of gender that functions to oppress women. Finally, the last part can be argued to go back to the topic of positionality. In this case the position is reimagined from woman from mother to daughter into woman from daughter to mother. She is shifting the place of location of womanhood and the signifier of it. It can provide a particularly lesbian reading based on what Farwell writes on the topic of positionality. As she writes “The lesbian is, however, less defined by her physical attributes than by her positioning toward other women, one woman’s focus, primary focus, on another has its own creative results” (Farwell Heterosexual 93). Indeed, one can argue that this is the function that the poem creates with the survey of gendered relations that later turns its focus to the relationship between Hacker and her Daughter. The text can be said to be re-envisioning the positions of womanhood by applying the “Woman” in a different form of positionality in relation to her daughter. The question asked in the final line may seem to be asking whether she will repeat the cycle of womanhood unto oppression as a hopeless destiny, but due to the different positionalities that are established there is a chance to break from it.

In the end, as the poem moves on with reflections of gender with a lesbian awareness that reaches a point that reconsiders positionalities of womanhood. One may notice a place where the poem is attempting to break free from gender, as by never concluding a locus for gender. At the same time gender appears as a center of a dialogue between women. The poem destabilizes gender as marked through the final line which creates a reimagination of the position of womanhood. The focus of womanhood is shifted from the position of being a daughter into the position of being a mother. In the repositioning, the locus of gender is used to establish a new meaning of woman through her relationship with her daughter.
Conclusion

One can begin by summarizing the poems, the functions they collectively operate within. One can begin by stating that while the poems are often overtly lesbian, they tend to hold a more universal application towards the common experiences of women. The poems can, however, form a lesbian centered reading as well. One could claim that they are both universal and particular. The poems that direct attention to her daughter Iva tend to be more open about the topic of lesbian experience while the ones focused on her mother tend to have a less apparent vision of lesbianism. However, most poems move with the lens of a lesbian creativity. From the poem *Taking Notice* one can read how the poet addresses the problems that patriarchy creates for her as a mother and a lover. How the work that women go through to mother and to be lovers need to be recognized. It touches on the struggle that women face. *Towards Autumn* address the bond that exist between women, as lovers, friends, and mothers, as well as daughters. The community as placed within the lesbian continuum creates a space where women can form meaningful bonds, outside of the patriarchal context. In *Mother* the poet addresses the fragmented past that she has to deal with when thinking about her mother. A woman whose narrative has been taken away from her through history, but through a lesbian revision, the mother can get a new kind of voice. Finally, *Mother II* also address the fragmented space of womanhood. The areas of gender are explored in terms of how one’s life is shaped by gender as an outside force, and something that inevitably falls upon oneself. The construction of gender becomes disrupted through lesbian creativity and the experiences of motherhood are made possible to reimagine for the poet as a mother. All in all, the poems form a nuanced imagery of motherhood, in relationship to lesbian existence.

In conclusion, one can consider how the poems that have been studied can show how the appearance of lesbian elements reimagine the relationship towards motherhood. Problematic aspects are touched upon, but the issues appear central in the ordinariness of motherhood. A way to realize these lesbian elements has been to consider textual allusions towards lesbian viewpoints. The subject position of lesbian is important to contextualize these lines. In the poems, the lesbian serves as a creative re-inventor of gendered problems that hold women back. While the mother figure may cause problems to textualize a complete lesbian bond, Hacker liberates motherhood from heterosexuality through a lesbian context. As a mother herself she can form
lesbian bonds, even with the problems that may come with the work within it. While she expresses some fear in the position of motherhood as a site of oppression she expresses the potential of lesbian communities as well. What Hacker offers to her readers is a nuance of the work of motherhood, an understanding of the complex relationships that mothers experience. To conclude, the lesbian awareness of Hacker turns the poetic form into a space where motherhood becomes a space of female agency. It is the lesbian and her creativity that creates a force of liberation for motherhood, transcending boundaries that patriarchy has forced upon us. Each relationship that the lesbian takes to motherhood, as mother or as daughter, tackles the issues but ultimately directs the issues to the structures that are part of the issues, realizing the place of action. Thus, the lesbian subject, as she opens herself to the readers, creatively repositions motherhood from a site of oppression to a site of action.
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