

The Archive of Disagreeable Women

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I am not a disagreeable woman. I am polite enough. I am sweet enough. I am good enough at asking questions. I am particularly good at asking men questions: at seeming interested when they talk about themselves, at saying just enough about myself to make them feel as if I am sharing something secret with them, something that makes them special. I don't know how long I have been this "agreeable", I only fairly recently realized how very accommodating I am to men. How much more harshly I judge women. How much more intimidated by them I am.

I am deeply, wildly, endlessly, envious of disagreeable women.

I therefore surround myself with them. Much to these women's chagrin and annoyance I will politely listen to the lonely man's woes while he sits too close to me, uninvited, in the bar. I sit through discomfort and annoyance and more often than not outright offense and fear in order to keep these men comfortable and feeling wanted, useful, and charming. I will quietly allow a "feminist" male to tell me back what I've just told him as if it was his idea. And up until very recently, I allowed (often much older) male colleagues mortifying and degrading touch before daring to call them out in front of peers. This is, in part, what I mean by "agreeable".

I am troubled by myself, but that is a source of crucial inquiry and is marked by an awareness that this lack of ease with myself is remarkably similar to that of women generally. The anxiety is not unique to my character and not unattached to the rest of the world. Being any kind of unmarked person (this includes basically everyone but a healthy, white, straight, western, male)

gives one certain insight into the experience of the “other”. I am digging for that insight and eventually, for what to do with it. I position myself as follows:

I am a woman. I am an artist.

I was raised in a heteronormative, liberal, affectionate, and present two-parent household.

I am cis and white.

I am well educated and well traveled.

I am privileged in more ways than I am not.

These circumstances do not, as I believed for so long, mean that I should be, above all else, “happy”. My first identifier listed above is the most important one, both to me and to the rest of the world, although for different reasons. That said, I am deeply aware of my status as a privileged member of *the group*. That group being *women*. Kimberle Crewnshaw explains, “Dominant conceptions of discrimination condition us to think about subordination as disadvantage occurring along a single categorical axis...this single-axis framework limits inquiry to the experiences of otherwise privileged members of the group” (265). This is to say, when we think about the discrimination of women, we are picturing women who are otherwise privileged: white, healthy, straight, middle or upper-middle class, western, and white. They are me. I do not concede that this position is a positive one for myself as a woman or a feminist or a human. As long as this “single axis” exists, the inherent connectivity of experience is negated and we as subjects are weakened if not invalidated entirely. My personhood, and that of women of color, disability, non-normative sexual orientation, or any other intersection of oppression, cannot be conditional. As long as any is conditional, all are conditional. I say this not as a disclaimer, but to impart the importance of minoritizing: the importance of positioning myself in my own experience, in deep and honest connection with the experience of others (Deleuz and Guattari, *A Thousand Plateaus*). It is from this position I write this document, and reveal my thoughts on my artwork as if to share a secret. That is to say, an object that is contingent on its container. A secret cannot exist on its own, a secret needs its box (286-289). The artwork will not reveal all

of these things, it will share and keep from person to person, place to place—as it should. This document removes the secret’s box, making it no longer itself. This revelation demands a vulnerability of myself, like sharing a secret -- transforming it into something new -- always will.

Dear Kay,

I hope this note finds you well. I know it's been a little while since we've exchanged notes. A lot has been happening around here I thought it would be a good time to drop you line! I don't mean my birthday, don't worry about missing it, it flew by and was a joyous occasion! The sun is shining and spring is finally upon us!

I've been thinking about all of you a lot lately. I was just scrubbing out the bath the other day and I got to thinking. I'm quite worried about you, dear Kay, and I've had a wonderful idea! The thing is, since you've been staying in the old house, you've let it go to shambles. It is, quite frankly, an embarrassment to the family and it needs to be dealt with. If we are ever going to sell it, or even if you are going to stay there—you need a good home. A tidy home a tidy heart, I always say. Think of how a good cleaning would feel, a fresh coat of paint. I'll even bring our new electric lawn mower! The cord is a bit of a pain but you get used to it. I'm going to come down and we'll do a full overhaul! Just us girls for the week, cleaning and giggling, just like when we were kids and oh it will be just grand! Now I'm sure you are a little resistant to this idea but sometimes you just have to buck up and do a thing. Mother would just turn over in her grave to see that lawn. It will be so good for you. Sometimes things just become clear (although I don't know how anything can be clear to you in all that mess! Ha!)-I'm coming. The last week in May I thought. There are a few little things to tidy up around here before I can get away. Won't it be just wonderful? Just the two of us!

Hugs!

Elizabeth

The Work

I make performative sculpture and installation in order to put people together in a space to face ourselves, each other, and our histories, our multiple points of connection and departure that make up the ever-changing identity of a social world. I make this work to explore cultural, collective and individual memory; I make this work to effect change by exposing unnoticed positions of power. The body of work here is titled *The Archive of Disagreeable Women*, (herein referred to as *TAODW*) and exists somewhere between sculpture, stage set, and performance art. Imagining the work set up in a large exhibition space (or any large space really), the viewer would approach a tableau of a front yard. The “yard” and its contents embody the first “woman” archetype, or circumstance. The work initiates a domestic space, both interior and exterior—house and yard—through which the viewer moves. Each domestic scene (yard, deck, kitchen, bathtub, etc) is a story of a specific “disagreeable woman”. Throughout the work, the viewer is prompted to engage physically with his/her surroundings, often in compromising ways. In each tableau, there is information that is impossible to access without, for instance, lying on one’s back, or kneeling on the ground, head bowed and posterior in the air. At one site the viewer must bury his/her face in the lap of a bare-legged woman in order to see what is hidden beneath her chair. While the sites vary in content, their tone remains one of quiet, uncomfortable, haunting. The scenes and objects are familiar: tablecloth, bed sheets, bathtub, wallpaper, antique chair, and exist in a timelessness that so many homes make up — something from the grandmother’s generation, objects leftover from college, a trendy light fixture, the newest major appliance purchase.

Girls,

I'm sure you've seen the news. Maybe it's a good time to get together. Lizzie thinks mowing the lawn at the old house is going to get her out of this mess. I know we aren't the best at gatherings but it seems the old girl has backed herself into something of a fix. And it really has been too long. She's coming the last week in May. Be here on Monday. It's important. I'll put clean sheets on your beds. Don't bring kids (obviously).

Love,
Kay

The physical position of the viewer is significant as he/she becomes acutely aware of him(her)self, body, and who may or may not be watching. This condition of self-consciousness, attending to how one looks while looking, is crucial to the artwork in that it is a position in which women exist constantly—a position to which men generally remain ignorant. John Berger explains this condition of self-consciousness in *Ways of Seeing*:

She is almost continually accompanied by her own image of herself. Whilst she is walking across a room or whilst she is weeping at the death of her father, she can scarcely avoid watching herself walking or weeping. From earliest childhood she has been taught and persuaded to survey herself continually. And so she comes to consider the surveyor and the surveyed within her as the two constituent yet always distinct elements of her identity as a woman. (212)

Beyond revealing the highly distracting position of being conditioned to be self-conscious—how am I to focus on what I am seeing while also focusing on what I look like while focusing?—Berger brings up another crucial point: the splitting of the self into two distinct and ever-present identities: the hypothetical “viewer” and the imagined “viewed”.

Lizzie,

If you bring that fucking lawn mower to this house, I'll put the cat in it.

See you in a few weeks.

Love,
Kay

P.S. I wrote the rest of the girls. They're coming.

Viewer, viewed, and the space between: splitting of the self, humanizing the archetype, and the impossibility of separation

In kindergarten I had a down coat, it was teal with pink polka dot lining. During recess, I refused to zip my coat up. At five, I was afraid of looking fat while running around outside with playmates in subzero Iowa temperatures. This is not an uncommon or particularly remarkable tale, one often cited in discussions of young women's body image issues. It is noteworthy for this document however because it demonstrates the strength of that splitting of the self: my insistence, as a small child, to sacrifice comfort because of my awareness of being viewed. This knowledge was echoed by my tendency to fiercely hide my make-believe games in order to avoid the (perceived) judgement of adults. This self-consciousness came early and strong and in spite of ferocious attempts by parents to quell it. It is because of this condition that I now write this document in a busy café: the belief that I am being watched and judged keeps me on task. I play the role of the "deeply focused, studious woman" in order to trick myself into my work.

Lacan's notion of the "radical split" echoes Berger's with an important distinction. Juliet Mitchell paraphrases,

His subject is not an entity with an identity, but a being created in the fissure of a radical split. The identity that seems to be that of the subject is in fact a mirage arising when the subject forms an image of itself by identifying with others' perception of it. When the human baby learns to say 'me' and 'I' it is only acquiring these designations from someone and somewhere else, from the world which perceives and names it. The terms are not constants in harmony with its own body, they do not come from within itself but from elsewhere. (5)

Dear Kay,

I'm in the middle of a huge deal. Her timing always was grand. I think I can get it closed by Friday and then it will be a good time to get out of town for a few days. The imbeciles in this neighborhood (going on and on about "green space"--as if this town doesn't have enough parks?) will be out in spades. It will be too late of course, the deal's going through finally---despite their moans about my "unwillingness to compromise". Nitwits. Anyhow, once the papers are signed I can put it in the lawyers' hands and get out of the way for a few days. I can't even pick up my mail without being accosted in the post office. Don't these people have anything better to do?

Looking forward to seeing all of you, even under the circumstances. She'll need a lawyer. Does she know that?

-Jennie

Lacan's perspective varies slightly but crucially from Berger's in that it is non-gendered and considered necessary to personhood. That is to say, in Lacan's mind, there is no perfect whole that could exist in another society. *TAODW* rests on the notion that humans are not isolated individuals but manifestations of self, other, circumstance, and history—which holds up Lacan's notion of context being necessary to individual identity (one needs the world to know the self and the two are therefore inexplicably bound). I also hold to Berger's view that the woman is taught to survey herself, becoming both subject and object, causing a splitting of the self *unique to her gender*.

The Archive of Disagreeable Women, asks the viewer to perform in the artwork in which he or she is engaged. In order to delve into the entire contents of the work, the viewer must inhabit a physical role in the story unfolding: the child playing under the table for instance, or the mother lying awake in bed. In this way the viewer becomes the "split woman", a witness, and an entity inextricable from his/her surroundings, embodying both Berger's and Lacan's respective notions of the fragmented self.

Furthermore the "sets" or artworks themselves are fragments. They are pieces of several wholes: a house, a history, many disparate histories, many disparate homes, divided not by walls but by swaths of negative space and imagined distance—possibly filled with other artworks, objects, or architectural obstacles. In the end and in their means, they make up an impossible archive of characters and stories, regularly shifting.

My Darling K,

I'm sitting outside, under a wide, weary, cottonwood. The leaves shimmer silver and make the most beautiful sound in the breeze. It is hard to consider such darkness in the shade of such enchantment. I've been in the studio for weeks, I moved the old futon in there, trying to work something out. It's getting close I think, maybe it's something about us, about Lizzie and Mom. I'm not sure. I've been thinking of them lately, even before I heard. Poor, sweet, Lizzie. Maybe it's the spring, I think of mother in spring. Maybe it's the spring for Lizzie too, maybe it was just too disappointing. Spring is always disappointing, great expectations that always fail. Perhaps the heartbreak of the cold spring was just too much for her. Have you spoken with her? I'm sure she's been writing you too. She wrote me asking about Jack and I. Giving advice, something about paying more attention to my family. Treasure and miracles and taking it for granted and all of that. I'm never sure what to say when she comes at me with that. So I haven't said anything, I need to write her. I know. I will. But maybe it's best to just wait.

I will come. Jack will be furious, but I've come to find his frustration endearing and even affirming. Who am I if not Jack's derelict wife and Charlie's absent mother? Jack thinks I should find this painful, he tells me that he misses me, asks me how I can be so indifferent to my own child. I don't know how to answer this. I am supposed to feel this connection, a great, fierce, attachment that just isn't there. They are lovely, mysterious strangers whose house I sometimes sleep in. They have one another, they are too thick to penetrate. And honestly, considering Lizzie--well, is there any in between? Is it Mary that's doing it right? Mary will drown us all in love and guilt, is that as good as it gets? Exhaustion and soccer games and those awful little organic lunchables? Even Lizzie's ferocity, her madness born of love seems foreign and admirable. Romantic even. She tells me she just wants me to be happy. What does that mean though? Does she think of herself as happy? Is she doing it right? Happiness seems so small. What if I want possibility?

I will see you soon. It has been too long.
You are my heart.

All my love,
Sylvie

The Archive

The title, *The Archive of Disagreeable Women*, seeks to complicate the notion of the Archive. Feminist and performance theories regularly question the notion of the “exhaustive” archive. Diana Taylor defines “archive” and “repertoire” in terms of the mode of dissemination of information. The traditional archive is made up of written texts, recordings, and other traditional forms of documentation that favor the literate, western, and monied. The repertoire consists of spoken language, performance, prayer, and other embodied practice. The repertoire represents then the illiterate, the overlooked, the undocumented. The “strain” between these two terms is significant in my use of the term and, like Taylor, I draw from both modes of collecting cultural memory in order to come to a greater understanding of our histories (The Archive and the Repertoire, 24-29). Anne Cvetkovich in some ways assumes the melding of the two terms from the very beginning. She explains that because of the “unspeakable and unrepresentable” nature of trauma, it demands a new kind of archive, one that is made up of the largely ephemeral material of personal testimony, emotional objects, and undocumented histories (An Archive of Feelings, 7-8)—at least in part what Diana Taylor refers to as the repertoire. “In its unorthodox archives,” Cvetkovich writes, “trauma resembles gay and lesbian cultures, which have had to struggle to preserve their histories” (8). These unusual archives, therefore, not only serve to document what was before perhaps unsaid, they also reflect in their very structure the hushed cultures she seeks to represent. In redefining “archive” Cvetkovich embodies her subject rather than imitating. Both of these women brilliantly challenge the power structures implicit in the practice of archiving. I name this collection from that point of challenge.

Dear Sylvia,

I hope this finds you doing so well! I'm just been thinking of you so much lately. If you've heard anything from the other girls, don't you believe a word of it! They are such gossips. Everything is just fine. I took care of all of it. I'm really writing to talk about you. All this nastiness has got me to thinking about you and how worried I am. If I may be frank, I think you need to be a little more concerned about your family. Jack is such a wonderful man, and I just don't feel you appreciate him. If this mess I've had to clean up has taught me anything it is that a good man, a good family and good home are hard to come by! Think of Charlie, such a miracle of a little boy, and when we all thought you would never have children. God has graced you with such a beautiful family and it's like you don't even care. You haven't sent a picture in years, I don't even know what he likes anymore. I send the gifts and who knows if you even give them to him. I'm sorry to be so blunt about this but I just really think it's very important. Jack needs you, he is your husband and he needs you and Charlie deserves a mother. Maybe Charlie could come stay with me for a few days so that you and Jack can have some time to yourselves to work things out. It would be great fun! I know, I know, now might not be the best time, I'm sure there will be some messiness around here for a little while but soon. I think it would be fantastic and I would just love to have him. Such a smart boy that one, smart and strong like his daddy. Just think about it. It's time to get your priorities straight, Sylvia. Maybe it's harsh but it's true and no one else is going to tell you. I'll be going to visit the old house in a few weeks, Kay has written to tell me you will all be there. Good. I'm glad you all are coming to help me out with the house. It is, after all, all of our responsibility. Can you believe how she lives in that place? I don't know why we had to keep that old dump anyway. Maybe we could have Jennie talk to her about property values. She always did listen to Jennie. And the mouth on her! You should have seen the note she sent me after I offered to come help her with the house. Of course she was grateful but such vulgarity. Mother would have smacked her face for that mouth. You know I would never judge but how is she going to ever have a family with that sort of lifestyle? As I told her, tidy home, tidy heart. Can you imagine allowing her to be around your Charlie? I just worry about her so. Don't worry about bringing a thing, I'll get everything in order. Do you have someone to watch Charlie while you're gone? I can call someone. There are plenty of good babysitting agencies in the city. I'll go ahead and get in touch with Jack and set something up, you just let him know I'll be taking care of it. Don't you worry. See you very soon!

Hugs!
Elizabeth

P.S. We should all be sure to bring our favorite PJ's! Wouldn't that be such fun?

An archive is traditionally considered the exhaustive collected material on a particular subject. The archive is a totem of power and authority—it denotes an impossible certainty. The stories I tell in *The Archive of Disagreeable Women* are not untold, they are not explicitly silenced histories. They are the stories that have ever so quietly leaned so far into the wallpaper as to become one with it. They have become invisible in their ubiquity. They are the soft and seemingly innocuous transgressions of the everyday. I use decidedly open-ended narratives to breathe life into the archive. These artworks are living documents, they change with every installation, every exhibition space, every interaction. My great hope is that they *become*.

Becoming

Becoming is a notion I came across in Gilles Deleuze and Felix Guattari's *A Thousand Plateaus*. "The tree is given in the seed...The developmental or organizational principle does not appear in itself, in a direct relation with that which develops or is organized..." (266). This is as close as Deleuze and Guattari ever come to outright defining "becoming". The beauty of this text is that the rhythm of the words, their texture, are the entry points for the reader's interest and inquiry. This text builds not a straightforward tower, or even a rhizomatic web, but something more akin to a multi-story house. There are no simple definitions, no hierarchies of information, no hard facts. The text is not a generic form conveying its content, but embodies it and unfolds upon the reader uniquely, slowly, and entirely. This is my hope for *The Archive of Disagreeable Women*. The work asks that the

viewer spend time with it, allow it to hit on multiple levels and cycle back upon itself to feed and further the content: “A line of becoming has only a middle” (293). *Becoming* as a practice of understanding is integral to art, both in its making and consuming, “...becomings-molecular of all kinds, becomings-particles. Fibers lead us from one to the other, transform one into the other as they pass through doors and across thresholds. Singing or composing, painting, writing have no other aim: to unleash these becomings” (272). *TAODW* is meant to come together slowly and with force. It is meant to give us a space in which to communicate and experience that for which there is no perfect language. One of the most important dimensions of *becoming* is its stubborn refusal to define or state. *Becoming* renounces the authority of a(n) (patriarchal) archive without sacrificing conviction.

The Archive of Disagreeable Women takes the form of a house and operates much the same way I consider *becoming*. Each idea (to use Deleuze and Guattari’s examples: love, woman, man, child, war, drugs, secret, story) moves throughout and changes, creating new relationships in each space. Ideas, along with people (viewers) move through and take with them not only their own histories and understandings, but also the information from the room before, the story they just encountered. The passages one must traverse to get from one “room” to another silently collect and shift. Deleuze and Guattari use the secret, to describe the space of becoming. The secret changes in each room, becoming a word, an idea, an object, an actor, six letters, a history, etc, depending on its location. “The secret has a privileged, but quite variable, relation to perception and the imperceptible. The secret relates first of all to certain contents. The content is too big for its form...or else the contents themselves have a form but that form is covered, doubled, or replaced by a simple container...whose role it is to suppress formal relations” (286).

The secret is made up of form, content, context, object, subject, history and we come to know it only by considering it in many of its “rooms”.

Let us now consider further the house, the archive, and the stories.

1

A note on the archive: Many of these works have not yet been made and are included in this document as necessary parts of the whole. These works are noted with an asterisk ().

1. *The Front Yard: The Crazy

Too many potted plants, some dying, some grown over so that the pot is an accessory of the plant thriving in the ground. An old couch, soaked through and dirty, sometimes with a dog perched atop. Bowling balls in overgrown grass. Tattered stuffed animals in trees. So many birdhouses—broken and abandoned. Knarled Flox and Black-Eyed Susans. This yard sprawls out in every neighborhood, the site of ghost stories and parental warnings. The woman who owns this house is the spinster, widow, the mysterious single (old) woman. Everyone had one growing up. For my father, this woman was Bicycle Annie. He remembers that Bicycle Annie gave him a kitten, stopped beside this small boy in winter and produced a tiny kitten from the folds of her many coats. In my childhood, this woman's name was Kay. "Crazy Kay". Among adults, she was the butt of jokes about "hard living" and the D.A.R.E. campaign as well as the source of the sternest warnings from parents who otherwise let us roam free day and night. I was not to go into that yard. And I didn't. I was an *agreeable* child: if I was told not to go there, I didn't. The tales were so effective (of course embellished by older siblings and neighbor kids) I wouldn't even walk on that side of the street. I have still never walked directly in front of Kay's house, but that house fascinated me. It was beautiful, somewhere between the tumbledown chateau of fairytales and a haunted house. The beads hanging in the trees with the stuffed animals. The flowers, the chairs that didn't belong. It was beautiful and enchanting and begged for make-believe. But it frightened me too, my desire for something so obviously deemed "bad" by those that I trusted most was terrifying. The atmosphere of this yard illustrated the wrong association with "happy objects" (Ahmed, 21-49). Her lawn wasn't mowed, house not painted, garden not tended, things were outside that should reside inside, there was strange detritus where there should have been a select few lawn ornaments. "Happiness is attributed to certain

objects that circulate as social goods. When we feel pleasure from such objects, we are aligned; we are facing the right way. We become alienated—out of line with an affective community—when we do not experience pleasure from proximity to objects that are attributed as being good” (Ahmed, 41).

Kay’s yard demonstrated a non-normative relationship to what the rest of her community deemed happy objects: cut grass, clear of detritus, particularly curated lawn-ornaments, pruned trees free of stuffed bears, appropriate weather-proof lawn furniture, and perhaps most importantly: a husband.

This scene, including a front door, is the entry point, the outside looking in—a point of transition, one must cross this threshold in order to experience the remainder of The Archive. The viewer must choose to enter, a choice I offer in kindness, one that has not been afforded the women who make up this body of work.

2. The entryway: The Unnamed

Just past the door, framed in empty space, a woman is seated on an antique, frayed, and foul-smelling chair-top, fixed atop a plywood box. The viewer must kneel and peer between the woman's bare legs to see into a hole in the chair-top revealing a picture book. The viewer must get quite close to the body perched atop the chair, so close that his/her face must touch the bare skin, moving the face around against the legs in order to decipher the contents hidden within. The image, on the page of the book, mirrors the seated woman: a figure with legs spread--this time a man--holding the hand of a beautiful young woman. The text is the familiar introduction to a fairytale: a rich merchant with many children, all of whom he loved. But the youngest, she was the sweetest and the prettiest and her elder sisters were jealous and mean. These unnamed, jealous, older sisters are of interest to me, not because I think they are secret heroines necessarily, but because of the indignity dealt them before the story begins. They are older: bad. They are not *as* pretty: bad. They are jealous: bad. They resemble in many ways the "feminist killjoy", perhaps more specifically the "angry black woman"—*there is nothing these unnamed must do to kill joy*, "You can be affectively alien because you are affected in the wrong way by the right things. Or you can be affectively alien because you affect others in the wrong way: your proximity gets in the way of other people's enjoyment of the right things, functioning as an unwanted reminder of histories that are disturbing, that disturb and atmosphere" (Ahmed, 67). These women are never allowed to act, disagreeably or otherwise. Their very existence is ugly, it reminds us of difficult histories, failed relationships, and complicated notions of home, family, and identity.

3. The Bathroom: The Murderess

Quietly containing an unsolvable circumstance. How to clean up a living mess.

The viewer is confronted by flickering, colored light coming from behind a shower curtain. A bathtub sits atop a platform, surrounded by linoleum tile. The shower curtain is closed and the scene pulses with the low sound of an increasing heartbeat. The heartbeat stops suddenly and is followed by a moment of silence. In order for the viewer to see what is causing the flickering light behind the curtain, he/she must climb a set of stairs behind the bathtub. They climb the stairway in order to peer over the wall, seeing into the otherwise private and contained bathtub to see projections of film scenes—women performing domestic tasks: sewing, ironing, packing suitcases, washing dishes, dressing at a vanity. They are motions of control and tidiness, but also anxiety and fear. They are scenes cut from the following films:

The Babadook (2014)

The Stepford Wives (1974)

Thelma and Louise (1991)

Carrie (1976)

Bathory: the Blood Countess (2008)

4. *The Oven: The Artist

The oven refers to the female artist, those who have been considered selfish and cold for their dedication to their work and to their imaginations. The oven is set with surrounding accouterment from various time periods and stories. The viewer must open the oven door, and stretch his/her head well inside to make out the “hidden” component. This work confronts the knowing rejection of “happiness” in the service of consciousness, understanding, and imagination. We operate in a “moral economy of happiness” that makes the female imagination a bad thing. Female artists in particular have challenged this economy so that we might challenge “happiness” and the narrowness of its horizons (Ahmed, 62).

5. The Back Porch: The Businesswoman

This scene is the only one taken directly from a single (while archetypal) character. Jennie M. Conrad is a nearly forgotten part of a local history whose story is that of the “hard-edged business woman”. A successful Indiana hog farmer, she is written about by local historians and bloggers, all of whom pay special attention to her “disagreeable” qualities—her uncompromising nature, her inability to get along with her neighbors, her willingness to exploit natural resources for personal gain. For having had such an enormous impact on the local ecology and economy, history continues to write about her as a tabloid celebrity.

I wonder about Jennie Conrad, if it was her “unsociable” nature that kept her from traditional feminine spheres causing her to seek out more “masculine” business pursuits, or if it was her business savvy that was then read as the “ruthlessness” and “nastiness” that describes her today.

This scene in *TAODW* is an old porch made up of rotting deck boards. Viewers are positioned opposite each other with two pairs of headphones. One pair is on a long cord, allowing the viewer to stand and listen to a male voice recite records of Conrad’s hog sales, detailing the price, buyer, name of the hog, and physical make up. A female voice chimes in occasionally, “Make me an offer”. The other pair of headphones is on a short cord, so that the participant must be on the ground, face only inches from the deck boards. This physical restraint puts the viewer either on hands and knees, or laying down—a quick reference to livestock, hogs in particular who tend to lounge about or root around, noses to the ground. The audio is a contemporary country song called *Honky Tonk Badonkadonk*, which describes a woman, much in the same way as the opposite pair of headphones describes the livestock sales. The two listeners are thrust into a relationship not only with the content in the headphones, but with each

other, and the assumed content of the other's headphones, creating an uneasy and unavoidable power dynamic.

6. *The Mirror: The Witch

The witch is a loner. She is mysterious and uncontrollable. She is the teller of hard truths and, as throughout history, often healer or midwife. She has the reproductive control over the community. When we look in the hall mirror, to check our hair or pores, or simply to steel ourselves before leaving the house, we hope to see her. We hope she will tell us some unspeakable truth that will give us strength. The witch is complex and unknowable; she ushers in life and death and operates under rules beyond our comprehension. This is why we hate the witch, we need her and she does not need us, she will bestow truth upon us, life or death or sickness. She is unbound and operates outside of our laws of *happiness*.

7. The Bedroom: The Mother

The particular condition of becoming multiple and when to rest your eyes

Boundaries of womanhood are slippery. They are embedded in the social, the performative, and the bodily. *TAODW's* bedroom is the maternal—that is to say, it embodies a sense that comes with a history of childbearing. This is a sense of connectedness, a link between a woman's body and another, dependent body, and the anxiety that comes with it. The association with this history is a boundary of womanhood, more so than actual childbearing. The bedroom speaks to this sense. The viewer lies in a two-person bed. The weight of his/her head on the pillow prompts an audio track: a dense compilation of the same voice speaking in multiple layers. Some phrases come through clearly: “my love was tough and you came back to me”, “my uncle had a thing long”, “what did I do with my last five hours?”, “Mommy’ll fix it!”, but mostly it is a frantic mess of multiple monologues. The track is made up of the words of several mothers:

Sethe, of Toni Morrison's *Beloved*

Molly Bloom of James Joyce's *Ulysses*

the mother from a *Five Hour Energy* commercial

the mother from a *Dayquil* commercial

Francena Turner, a black, feminist, mother, activist, and academic

8. The Kitchen: The Sisters

Timing (semi)regular visits. What our daughters already knew. How to keep score after giving away our common name.

My mother has three sisters and five brothers. I did not grow up knowing her brothers at all well, nor her parents. Their relationship was tenuous and distant at best. Her sisters however were a great part of our lives. They scheduled visits but were also present in stories and phone calls. The four of them would gather occasionally, in my mind it is always summer, shoes kicked off, and sit around a kitchen table with wine and cigarettes and great, loud laughter that seemed unique to the occasion. My mother and Auntie Kitty smoked Marlboro Lights, Auntie Corky smoked American Spirits from a big cylindrical can, and Auntie Ellie would never dream of smoking. Auntie Ellie is the oldest and irons her jeans. These women were my first source of curiosity about relationships between women and remain my deepest source of intrigue on the subject. They are the players that demonstrate fierce and complex, emotional bonds, off-kilter feminine competition, shared trauma, and unspoken, embodied, agreements. They are my first disagreeable women.

This set is a raised floor divided into two partial rooms by a wall. A hole in the wall cuts to the space beneath a kitchen table. The viewer must lie on his/her back, head and torso spanning between the two rooms, to face the underside of a kitchen table on which a man's face is projected. The projected video is a close-up of a mouth, surrounded by pale stubble, lips and teeth and tongue shining and licking. The viewer must lie, belly and legs splayed out, head and shoulders cloaked under the fort-like confines of table and tablecloth. The casual scene laid out on the kitchen table is as follows:

four wine stained glasses
four colors of lipstick staining the glasses and tips of cigarette butts
a deck of cards--the evidence of a game of Gin

The House: Becoming and Possibility

I am building a house out of ghosts, a space that becomes, asking what it might mean for these ideas to live together. It seems unlikely that these women will find harmony together in these scenes. One of the sisters at the kitchen table will surely tell Sylvia, “I just want you to be happy” , falling into the trap of her own making (Ahmed, 200-201). Kay will quite possibly shame one of the unnamed for her jealous desires (Cvetkovich, 56-60). Maybe they will turn on each other and burn the whole thing down. I am not interested in “granting” power or making these characters sympathetic. On the contrary, it is not their innocence but their humanity that grips me, their connectedness to their surroundings and to us (viewer, maker, participant). They negate the notion that women no longer lay claim to humanity after their innocence has been compromised. Instead of sympathy or empowerment, I seek becoming. Perhaps by bearing honest witness and embodying these archetypes we can cease to protect ourselves from what hurts, we can feel and “notice what causes hurt, which means unlearning what we have learned not to notice” and in so doing question how harm and violence are directed at some bodies and not others (Ahmed, 215-216). *The Archive of Disagreeable Women* does not seek harmony. It seeks possibility for both terror and joy (Ahmed, 219). It seeks *becoming*.

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