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## ADORATION ABOVE OBJECTIFICATION: THE PROMOTION OF OTHER IN BLACK, MEXICAN AND ARABIC LOVE POETRY

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ADORATION ABOVE OBJECTIFICATION:THE PROMOTION OF OTHER IN  
BLACK, MEXICAN AND ARABIC LOVE POETRY

by

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### Abstract

This paper analyzes the philosophical fundamentals of sexual objectification and presents opposing literature, written in the 20th century, by Black, Mexican and Arabic male poets in contrast. In vigorous patriarchal environments that provide more opportunities to practice sexual objectification, the poets reframe male metaphysical perception and behavior in romantic or sexual contexts by promoting the autonomy and agency of women above themselves, and displaying their enjoyment of that situation. This paper will discuss how Western metaphysical philosophy impacts self-perception and belief in contemporary romantic contexts.

TABLE OF CONTENTS

Introduction.....	3
Definitions.....	4
Contemporary Application.....	6
Poetry Analysis.....	9
Efrain Huerta, <i>This is a Love</i> .....	10
Nizar Qabbani, <i>Oh You with Fathomless Eyes &amp; Undress</i> .....	16
Claude McKay, <i>To O.E.A.</i> .....	21
Objectification:A Chosen or Automatic Practice.....	25
Appendix: Presentation at the SPU Honors Research Symposium.....	
Works Cited.....	

## INTRODUCTION

American mainstream media has seen a slight influx in hyper-masculine sentiment as of the past 2 years. TikTok, YouTube and Instagram's algorithms have turned a particular spotlight on rising "masculinity coaches" like Kevin Samuels and Myron Gaines, who promote stark conservative ideals surrounding women's sex lives as the bulk of their content. Topics discussed tend toward redundancy; "Crazy "Feminist" Exposed For Having a Sugar Daddy" (Fresh and Fit Podcast), "Women Should Let Men Use Them" (Kevin Samuels), "Demon Girl Won't Let Her BF Cheat!" (Fresh and Fit Podcast), etc. In these episodes, like in many others, women sustain a singular value: their desirability, so that they can be used in sex. Women are inert instruments, whose main significance is her sexual capacity and utility towards men. Fresh and Fit's podcast episode entitled, *Why Female Body Counts Matter! What Every Man Must Know*, makes a clear statement on this: "There are three things that have defined powerful men over the course of history—that is: resources, territory, and access—exclusive access—to virginic women" (Fresh and Fit Podcast). This ideology, however, is not new in any stretch of the imagination. Authors like Charles Bukowski, who was renowned in the 20th century for his books and poetry on American culture, features lines in his poetry book *You Get So Alone At Times* (1978) like, "girls please give your bodies and your lives to the men that deserve them". American novelist Henry Miller quotes a bit more explicitly on women's sexual ethics in his work *Tropic of Cancer* (1934) just 40 years earlier, saying, "There's something depraved about screwing a woman who doesn't give a f— about it... It heats your blood..." And then, after a moment's consideration— "Can you imagine what she'd be like if she had any feelings?".

A superficial analysis of this kind of content renders its underlying beliefs as misogyny and conservatism solely. But it can distract from a more honest philosophical birthplace; solipsism, which allows a person to believe that only their perception of the world exists and thus, that world is subject to their valuation and utilization. With this paper, I aim to analyze the mindset of the male sexual solipsist archetype and contrast it with love poetry that is essentially anti-solipsistic, authored by renowned 20th century poets Efrain Huerta, Nizar Qabbani and Claude McKay.

### *Definitions*

Solipsism, in a general understanding, is the belief that “only your own experiences and existence can be known”<sup>1</sup>. Because you don’t live in another person’s body and have their consciousness, your perceptual experience can, and is, only observed by you; which makes it the only certain and describable experience you can attest to. Austrian-British philosopher Ludwig Wittgenstein, regarded as one of solipsism’s most renowned progenitors, displays this thinking on a more abstract scale in his seminal work *Tractatus Logico-Philosophicus*, but his main ideas lie in his explanation of the self’s existential relationship to the world. University College London philosophy professor Lucy F. O’Brien summarises it this way:

1. Everything in the world can be represented.
2. That there is a representing self is a precondition of (possibility of) representation.
3. The world is (must be) represented.

Therefore:

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<sup>1</sup> Cambridge Dictionary, 4th ed. (Cambridge University Press, 2022), s.v. “solipsism.”

4. There is (must be) a representing self . (2 & 3)
5. The self cannot be represented.

Therefore:

6. The self is not in the world. (1&5)
7. There can be nothing outside of the world.
8. Even if there were something outside of the world, the world could be nothing to it.

Therefore:

9. The self is not outside the world. (4&7)
10. The self does not belong within the world but is a limit of it, or coincides with it in its entirety.  
(4,6, &9)<sup>2</sup>

The separation and location of self and world contributes heavily to the subject's understanding of what they are, in relation to the world, and how that affects their existence, which is where we reach Wittgenstein's famous remark, "I am my world"<sup>3</sup> and the Cambridge definition "only your experiences and existence can be known". This distinction between self and world is crucial to the functionality of sexual solipsism, as we will later find in the paper, as well as the practice of objectification in sexual relationships and contexts. From this distinction, the concepts of agency and autonomy become absolutely essential in regards to the behavior of the subject. Having absolute assurance of your agency in a world that belongs to you can inspire a pursuit of fulfilling a personal will that utilizes all things outside of yourself, including people. This practice can be more available for some people to accomplish rather than others, as we will also find later in the paper.

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<sup>2</sup> O'Brien, Lucy F. "Solipsism and Self-Reference." *European Journal of Philosophy*, vol. 4, no. 2, 1 Aug. 1996, pp. 177–178., <https://doi.org/10.1111/j.1468-0378.1996.tb00073.x>.

<sup>3</sup> Wittgenstein, Ludwig. *Tractatus Logico-Philosophicus*. Translated by Frank Ramsey et al., Kegan Paul, 1922, <https://people.umass.edu/klement/tlp/tlp.pdf>, Accessed 4 May 2022.

For many, Cartesian thought is found to undergird Wittgenstein's. Descartes' ideas surrounding certainty of self in *Meditations of First Philosophy*, i.e. "For it is itself so evident that it is I who doubt, I who understand, and I who desire"),<sup>4</sup> and his own wrestlings with external existence i.e. "...I discover in my mind innumerable ideas of certain objects, which cannot be esteemed pure negations, although they possess no reality beyond my thought"<sup>5</sup> can appear to be parallel in nature with the 20th century philosopher's. On the other hand, it has also been argued that the ideas of these philosophers are at odds with each other (Bell, 1996), but for the scope of this paper, I will conflate them to the same line of thinking.

#### *Contemporary Application*

Wittgenstein's kind of solipsism, as French philosopher Simone de Beauvoir describes it, is a global type—where one doesn't believe in any exogenous consciousness or experience, and the ideology is only dealt with on an internal level (like with internal understanding and decision). This is a broad and general worldview, so it is employable for women, men, children, etc. But, with a local sense of solipsism—that is, the idea where one (and the society they live in) is able to disregard subjective consciousness in a specific group of people, there is a distinguished difference between gendered experiences of adopting this ideology. The fork in the road lies in the application to the external world; the next step of solipsism.

In the Western world, women and men are expected to behave differently when it comes to awareness and responsibility towards others. Women are generally anticipated to hold major social responsibility

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<sup>4</sup> Descartes, Rene. *Meditations on First Philosophy*. Translated by John Veitch, Watchmaker Publishing, 2010.

<sup>5</sup> Descartes, *Meditations on First Philosophy*, 37



in significant social spaces, especially in the familial area i.e. sustaining the home and childrearing (Hochschild & Machung 1989; Sasser 2005), which, can potentially decrease the relevance of solipsistic thinking and adoption of solipsistic behavior. Western social environment creates an expectation of women to assume positions where they are highly utilized by others, rather than being the utilizer; where they are a part of someone else's world (literally and figuratively) instead of being "their own", as Wittgenstein coins. From there, the practice of objectification (or more technically, sexual solipsism) is born. Men, having more opportunities to engage in solipsism because of the anticipation of not being highly socially utilized, can find more freedom in perceiving the world as for their own consumption, and subject it to their valuation. Knightbridge Professor of Philosophy at the University of Cambridge Rae Langton explores this in her book, *Sexual Solipsism*. She explains how, as a result of men being more able to lean into their sense of solipsism, the importance of their absolute experience becomes a point in which other things derive their value. Everything, including women, are subject to the valuation of the man perceiving them. And, nothing has value if the man perceiving it doesn't say so. Beauvoir describes this predicament in her quote, saying, "What peculiarly signalizes the situation of a woman is that she—a free and autonomous being like all human creatures—nevertheless finds herself living in a world where men... propose to stabilize her as an object" (Langton, 1). This feeds into an idea that Elizabeth A. Long law professor at Michigan Law Catherine MacKinnon coins as "desire-driven projection", where "those who exert power over women see the world as a certain way because they 'want to see' the world that way"<sup>6</sup>. When male sexual solipsists subject the world (i.e. women) to their valuation and are reinforced by absolute assurance of internal consciousness, they feed

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<sup>6</sup> Langton, *Sexual Solipsism*, 246.

into desire-driven projection; desires govern perception and functionality in the world they ‘create’, which is crucial to the practice of objectification.

The concept of objectification can render more broad than sexual contexts. Objectification can be done by anyone, and, through only a little more analysis, can be rendered more complex than just ‘making someone into an object’. There are underlying beliefs attached to its functionality that complicates it further. It can raise questions in relation to the essence of the concept: What are the bounds of objectification? How can it be classified in different situations? What kind of metaphysical belief needs to be present in a person in order for them to engage in this practice? University of Chicago professor of Law Martha Nussbaum, creates seven criteria that classifies the presence, or absence, of objectification inside of the belief of the objectifier, defining them this way:

1. Instrumentality: one treats it as a tool of one’s own purposes
2. Denial of autonomy: one treats it as lacking in autonomy and self-determination
3. Inertness: one treats it as lacking in agency and activity
4. Fungibility: one treats it as interchangeable (a) with other things of the same type, and or (b) with things of other types
5. Violability: one treats it as lacking in boundary-integrity, as something that is permissible to break up, smash or break into
6. Ownership: one treats it as something that is owned by another, can be bought or sold, etc.
7. Denial of subjectivity: one treats it as something whose experience and feelings (if any) need not be taken into account.<sup>7</sup>

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<sup>7</sup> Langton, *Sexual Solipsism*, 225-6. She slightly adapts Nussbaum’s formulation of the terms, only changing Nussbaum’s term, “objectifier”, to “one”, in efforts to reflect Nussbaum’s own statement about the nature of objectification and how participating in it in a certain instance doesn’t deem you as an absolute, repetitive objectifier.

These criteria are essential to analyzing the nature of the poems we will explore. These criteria help to create an archetype of sexual solipsistic behaviors and beliefs, as well as defining the opposite: anti-solipsistic behaviors and beliefs. I will use this criteria to describe the anti-solipsist nature, and potential belief, in the poems and in the poets themselves.

### *Poetry Analysis*

The 20th century birthed 3 men who heartily oppose this type of practice; Mexican poet Efrain Huerta, Syrian poet Nizar Qabbani and Jamaican-American poet Claude McKay. Instead of embracing the comfortable, popular archetype of hyper-masculinity provided to them by society, they demonstrate a position of utter devotion and desperation toward their lovers. They affirm the humanity of them in many aspects of their person; the corporeal aspect, the emotional aspect, the mental aspect etc.; and do so in a way that exalts their lover's subjective experience and agency. They repeatedly place their romantic desires and intentions second in the order of importance, contradicting the local form of solipsism significantly, and seemingly, choose to be moved by devotion. They are continuously found subverting their "world" for the purpose of experiencing deep love shared with their lover, and expanding the potential of the joy of both people.

### **Efrain Huerta**

Born in 1914 in Silao, Guanajuato, Efrain Huerta was born into a Mexican literature boom, called the “Taller” movement, where other famed Mexican poets, journalists and authors like Octavio Paz, Xavier Villarrutia and Enrique Gonzalez Martinez began to rise in popularity. Together, with a number of other literary geniuses, they wrote about the recently changing art of journalism, politics and literature that emerged from the upcoming political movement in a magazine titled with its namesake. Huerta himself created a new type of written word, known as the journalistsic chronicle, but, throughout his life, he wrote poetry; specifically, love poetry. His love poetry often takes the literary concept of contrast and displays it through vivid imagery. His work is said to display a “rebellious nonconformity and vitality” in a similar manner as American poet Walt Whitman does in his poems.

The following poem was dedicated to Rosaura Revueltas, famous Mexican actress and author.

### ***This is a Love***

Huerta calls attention to the corporeal and experiential aspects of his lover the most in this poem, but does so in a way where they often are entangled together. Huerta utilizes the body in two ways in this poem; (1) it is used to describe physical affection/ tangible affection between him and his lover, and (2) it is a vehicle onto which Huerta imposes immaterial emotions or concepts/knowledge. The five biggest moments when he mentions the body are these:

1. “A love well born from that sea of your eyes” (1) (imposition of emotion onto the body)
2. “the hands hold a sweet sweat of -again- fear, shine as the abandoned pearls (15-16) (imposition of emotion onto the body)
3. “yet she held out her hand to me and I touched her skin” (27) (physical affection)
4. “and I wanted to yell and yell at her ear that I loved her” (33) (physical affection)
5. “the splendid metal of her thighs already knows the photos and the streets” (44-45) (imposition of knowledge onto the body)

He begins the poem with imposing affection, marking the beginning of the depth of his attraction and gravitation towards her, and then flows between describing their love tangibly or non-tangibly through the rest of the poem.

### **“A love well born from that sea of your eyes” (1)**

At the zenith of the poem, Huerta attributes depth and richness to her eyes, which produces attraction in him towards her. With this beginning line, he seeks to immediately establish the intangible experiences shared between them as the foremost; as the birthplace of their love. He cherishes the emotions that arose from the entrancement of her eyes, and expresses affection towards the love that was born, “a love that has its voice as an angel and flag... a love that has neither remedy, nor salvation”(5-7). Where he could have portrayed tangible physicality as the first image of their relationship i.e. sex, or body parts usually associated with sex (which is what a sexual solipsist would be more prone to doing), Huerta chooses to display her as a person of depth, arguably portraying *that* as one of the most distinguishing qualities of her. For him, her eyes are places of captivation, with power

enough to make him identify them as the beginning. He gives her the ability to claim herself as the reason why he's in this space with her, "born from that sea of [her] eyes", while doubly relinquishing control over the relationship, and more specifically, his own emotion toward her. We see this action of the exaltation of her and her power over him many times in the poem: "and I immersed myself in her eyes in flames/ and I died beside her, as a crushed tree"(29-30), "And I used to see everything that was in her eyes -again that sea-... that deep spirit that knows everything and has guessed that I am with love up to my shoulders"(38-42). Huerta subverts the strength of his perception and will purposefully; willingly. As the author, he strips himself of any ability to claim ownership of the relationship and his lover's person by mentioning her pronoun in the statement only, like he does when he positions himself as the less influential contributor to the relationship further down the poem.

**"the hands hold a sweet sweat of -again- fear." (15)**

With this moment, Huerta describes his lover's hands and their function in a more non-poetic manner. Her hands are doing what they are usually expected to do in any context (as opposed to eyes containing a sea that gives birth to the love between Huerta and his lover). But, Huerta uses the literal function of her hands to "hold" an emotional concept; namely, fear. And, not only do they hold her fear, but they hold his fear as well. This is the same fear that Huerta refers to in line 2, "and at the beginning [our love] wasn't more than a bit of fear and sweetness that didn't want to be born". Her body again is not confined to a sexual use or framed in a way where he is observably benefitting from it. Instead, it serves a function of identifying the external signs of internal emotion, of which both people are able to relate

to in their experience. This use of the body in this context is almost a convergence of experiences, which indicates Huerta's acknowledgement of his lover's subjective experience. In order for Huerta to depict their shared emotional engagement in the relationship, it must be acknowledged. And this acknowledgement is continued in his portrayal of their shared timidness and shyness.

Timidness and shyness seem to be dominant qualities in both of them in the first half of the poem ("and of the anxiety we breathe under San Angel's twilight"(11)), which contributes considerably to Huerta's position in the relationship and his position as author of the poem. Expressing timidness in both parties acknowledges the conscious experience of both people. Huerta's use of we in line 11 indicates his defiance against solipsism's demand to "remain alone" in perception and his effortful promotion of her "world". He desires to acknowledge her experience as much as his, (as much as he is able), when he is not overcome with adoration of her. He represents her experience within the shared "we", and gives over the authority of his experience over to her through his pairing of their pronouns in each line i.e. "...**she** held out her hand to **me**/and **I** touched **her** skin/full of grace"(27-28), "And **I** used to see that everything was in **her** eyes" (38).

**"yet she held out her hand to me and I touched her skin/full of grace" (27-28)**

The ability to confidently designate this scene in the poem as an actual occurrence instead of a figurative or metaphorical one is not arguably a strong one. This could be considered a general recount

of the moment where their love began to grow more poignant. But, the relevancy of this line in its mention of possible tangible experience can still render useful in establishing Huerta's manner of approaching the body of his lover.

This moment of contact between Huerta and his lover suggests acknowledgement of autonomy. In context, this line comes after describing the awkward, distant beginnings of their relationship, "and we saw each other along the rivers/and across the countries/and the distance was as huge oceans/and as brief as a smile without light" (23-26). But in lines 27-28, she opens the door for them to engage, in spite of the nervousness. For Huerta to portray his lover as the catalyst of their relationship in her decision to engage with him regardless of past experience ("yet she held out her hand"), he suggests an affirmation of her self-determination. He does not make the decision to extend himself to her; in fact, he does not depict himself asserting control over any situation in the poem. Instead, her self-determination is found to significantly contribute to the foundation of their relationship and give way to the intensely consuming affection Huerta displays for her. This ties back into Huerta's affirmation of her subjective experience. The acknowledgement of her experience is crucial to the functionality of her autonomy, which is crucial to the activity of their relationship.

**"and I wanted to yell and yell at her ear that I loved her" (33)**

This is one of the most passionate moments of the poem. Huerta displays himself, in his strongest moment, overcome with devotion to his lover. His strength is not to be found in aggression or composure over his emotions towards her, but they are to be found in the emotions themselves. He is completely willing to give himself over to her in this moment. In fact, that's what he does four lines



above line 33: “and I immersed myself in her eyes in flames/and I died beside her, as a crushed tree”(29-30). And, we see it in the beginning of the poem as well (“a love that has neither remedy, nor salvation, nor life nor death, nor even a bit of agony” (7-8)). Through this desperation, he sheds himself of power and control. His “world” and his will cease to matter; in fact, they are repurposed after her. The only purpose his perception is good for is understanding how she sees the world (“And I used to see that everything was in her eyes...”(38)) The only desire he has is her (“...I am with love up to/my shoulders, up to my soul and up to the withered lips”) (41-43). This sentiment is largely anti-solipsistic in essence. He sets the distribution of power completely in her favor; he becomes a victim of his love for her; completely destroying the function of sexual objectification in the process.

**“the splendid metal of her thighs already knows the photos and the streets” (44-45)**

This is the only moment where Huerta refers to the body in a way that we expect in this poem. Calling her thighs “splendid” has connotatively sexual undertones, which is congruent to the romantic purpose of the poem. But even in this instance, where he could go further in framing her body in a sexual manner, he chooses to go in another direction; he imposes intelligence on her body. Her thighs know the “photos”, the “streets”, the “words”, and they know that she knows of them(47). She is a vessel of knowledge here; her body holds capacity beyond sexual contexts, which ties directly into Huerta’s action of affirming her subjectivity. Using his power as an author to portray her as a knowledgeable person who experiences things and who has a body that participates in that cultivation of knowledge, Huerta immediately annihilates any attempt to frame her as sexually exploitative. All of

the moments he features her in this poem is to serve as evidence to her life outside of sex and his pronouncement of that life i.e. when he describes the shared experiences they have (11-20) or her own moments of autonomous decision (27-28). He uses the main method of objectification and turns it on itself, enforcing a new way of expressing affection toward your lover while also affirming their humanity. And because of that, he is able to experience a vaster array of joys in their relationship than he could ever imagine.

### **Nizar Qabbani**

Born in 1923, in Damascus, Syria to an upperclass family, Qabbani, was born to a political and artistic inheritance passed down from his paternal line. His father participated in the rising Syrian Independence movement against the French during the 1920's, and his grandfather, Abu-Khalil al-Qabbani, held the title of renowned poet and founder of Egyptian short musicals during the mid-to late 1800's. Qabbani's birthplace, Damascus, being the center of "economic, political and cultural life"<sup>8</sup> provided a young Qabbani with ample education on the social order of Syrian life and conservative norms surrounding gender behavior. Such an education resulted in the production of his later political and erotic poetry, written strictly in rebellion to social norms regarding women and the expression of their sexuality. In many of his poems, Qabbani writes in the voice of a woman, discussing issues of societal expectation, sexual and romantic freedom, emotional coping and myriad of others topics. In

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<sup>8</sup> Gabay, Z. "Nizar Qabbani, the Poet and His Poetry." *Middle Eastern Studies*, vol. 9, no. 2, 1973, pp. 207–222. *Taylor & Francis Online*, <https://doi.org/10.1080/00263207308700241>. Accessed 5 May 2022.

the rest of his poems, he writes in his own voice, strongly voicing his observations of politics within society and expressing his resentment of male chauvinism<sup>9</sup>.

Many contemporary Syrian and Arab poets, male and female, still regard him as a trailblazer in Arabic literature for his political and social tenacity.

### ***Oh You with Fathomless Eyes & Undress***

Qabbani, like Huerta, calls attention to the corporeal and experiential aspects of his lover the most in these two poems. He explores the corporeal in *Undress* and the experiential in *Your Love, Oh You with Fathomless Eyes*. Qabbani uses a singular distinct method for imposing affection onto the body in *Undress*: he associates his lover's body with divinity and transcendence. From that association, his desperation and devotion are displayed; where Qabbani places himself lesser in power than her and affirms her agency and autonomy over her decisions within the relationship.

In *Your Love, Oh You with Fathomless Eyes*, Qabbani takes the concept of transcendence and applies it to the experience of her love.

### ***Oh You with Fathomless Eyes***

In *Oh You with Fathomless Eyes*, he expresses his love through description. This poem utilizes rich, loaded, singular adjectives to depict his perception of his lover. For example, he names the descriptors of her love in order, using the adjectives “extreme”(3), “mystic” (4), and “holy” (5). Like Huerta, he

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<sup>9</sup> “Nizār Qabbānī.” *Encyclopædia Britannica*, Encyclopædia Britannica, Inc., <https://www.britannica.com/biography/Nizar-Qabbani>.

makes the intangible experiences of their relationship the most primary. But not only does he make them the most primary; he utilizes their intangible nature to explain the bulk of his emotion regarding the relationship. All of the adjectives used are deeply complex and lush concepts that typically require a lot of thinking in order to ascertain the meaning of them (the reason for that being the difficulty of understanding their nature; being located beyond earthly understanding). Mysticism and holiness are vibrant, elusive concepts beyond our comprehension regardless of human attempts to understand it, which makes Qabbani's use of these terms deeply engaging. Equating his experience of his lover's love with elusive concepts suggests the profundity of it, which indirectly indicates his lack of control over the relationship. His inability to concretely define his experience with her, and by further extension, his emotions in relation to her, displays him as an awe-struck person. She is beyond him, and seemingly, he is consumed by that fact. He relinquishes claim of ownership of the relationship because of his inability to define and pinpoint every aspect of the relationship. His awareness of himself, like Huerta's, is subverted to comprehend the richness that his lover, an external being, contributes to his life.

Qabbani sustains this rich profoundness in the lines 6-7, "Your love, like birth and death/is impossible to repeat". He returns back to earth in these lines, but, still wanting to attempt to describe her love with concepts that are more familiar, he takes two thoroughly dense concepts and exacerbates the elusive elements of them. Qabbani takes the quintessential moments of life, which can be argued to be the most consummative, and equates them to their love. They are revolutionary moments; they are unexplainable moments that consume one with a realization of a new reality. That is their love. This is

one manner he uses to expand the image of his lover outside of the common boundaries of objectification. Sex does not come with this conceptualization of her, it is never mentioned in the poem. In fact, it can be argued that sex and physicality are secondary to this experience between them. Because of his action of spurning ownership over the relationship, his lover does not have to be confined to one functional use in the relationship, but can be free to offer autonomous love.

### *Undress*

He focuses more attention onto the body in *Undress*, but he maintains the theme of divinity from the first poem and further utilizes it as a concept that can be associated with his lover's body. Qabbani places his lover in a more connotatively sexual situation in this poem, which can seem to give way to more opportunity for objectification. But, Qabbani's association of her body with divinity seems to point beyond portraying, or "stabilizing", her as an object of cathartic pleasure. The manner in which he allocates power between them seems to indicate this strongly.

His positionings of power in the poem are similar to that of *Oh You with Fathomless Eyes*. She is the one who holds miracles and knowledge of all "language" in her body, "Undress,/for long ages have passed since a miracle has touched the world" (1-3), "...your body speaks every earthly tongue"(6). He is the "dumb" one, "Undress, undress/for I am dumb" (4-5). And, arguably most significantly, he has to petition her to be graced with her body if she so chooses to do so, which highly affirms autonomy in his lover. He has to ask her to undress herself, because she has not already given that to him. And because of the temporal demarcator, "for long ages have passed/since a miracle has touched the world", signaling his longing and yearning for her, we can believe that there is a presence of hesitancy in her,

which can also suggest the affirmation of autonomy. If Qabbani viewed her as violable, inert or as an instrument as a sexual solipsist would, there would be an absence of regard towards consent. His ability to enact abusive physicality in this would strengthen him to take it. But we don't observe an act of that here. Instead, what we do observe, is him placing himself below her and making her more powerful and vibrant than him, amidst his possession of authorial power over the telling of this experience. He uses his freedom in dictating and depicting the world the way he desires, to further emphasize his respect of his lover and her body in a way that portrays her to be nigh-divinity in everything that she is: agent, free, bodily alluring. We have confirmation in the sincerity of this method through the response of the women on the other side of his poetry. Mohja Kahf's poem *On the Death of Nizar Qabbani* reflected her emotions toward his death and the thorough impact his poetry made on her life and self perception. She writes,

“I will never be beautiful again  
 My body will never be like light across a fountain  
 My breasts will never be this full and tipped with milk  
 I'd finally learned to own myself  
 I finally learned to give myself  
 because of you...”<sup>10</sup>

Kahf uses sexually-charged language around her own body to mark the freedom attained through Qabbani's poetry, which doubly indicates a mutual understanding between himself and his woman audience regarding the way that he is using this framing. A woman considering and promoting herself

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<sup>10</sup> Handal, *The Poetry of Arab Women: A Contemporary Anthology*, 144.

as a sexual being within this context is an act of rebelling against conservative society and ennobling herself as an agent, moral person. Here in the poem, Qabbani desires to do the same thing.

By focusing on the body in efforts to promote women's sexual and general, autonomy, he reframes both men and women's perspectives of moral womanhood; it's what Kahf discusses in the lines after the excerpt above, "...because you taught me to be savage/I wanted to claw at your cheek/I wanted to write like the claw of a cougar"<sup>11</sup>. This is what makes his poetry and political efforts significantly anti-solipsistic. Freedom and agency are central to the ideas he wishes to promote; ideas that strongly state women's position as autonomous, active agents that are deserving of being listened to and respected.

### **Claude McKay**

Born Festus Claudius McKay in 1889 in Sunny Ville, Jamaica, "Claude" McKay was born right before the emerging era of the Harlem Renaissance in the 1920's. His childhood education fostered his interest in literature; specifically in English poetry. He is said to have studied under his brother and schoolteacher Uriah Theophilus McKay and a neighboring Englishman Walter Jekyll on the subject of British Restoration and Romantic era poetry<sup>12</sup>. Through this education, his literary gift was nurtured through to adulthood as he began to observe socio-cultural issues occurring in 20th century America and Jamaica. McKay became a key contributor to the Harlem Renaissance with his poetry, writing on topics such as racial and economic disparity, but also writing on love, nature, masculinity, femininity

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<sup>11</sup> Handal, *The Poetry of Arab Women: A Contemporary Anthology*, 143

<sup>12</sup> "Claude McKay." *Poetry Foundation*, Poetry Foundation, <https://www.poetryfoundation.org/poets/claude-mckay>.

and more. He composed many poetry books in his adulthood, displaying his proficiency in capturing the multi-faceted natures of social issues, while also gaining critical acclaim for his fiction works. He maintains the title of one of the “harbingers of the Harlem Renaissance”<sup>13</sup>.

### **To O.E.A**

Claude McKay ascribes love in a different way than Qabbani and Huerta. As opposed to their more intense, profound emotive methods of describing love, McKay describes his lover with more gentle imagery and focuses more energy in talking about singular, distinct aspects about her before referring to her holistically in the last two lines of the poem. And, not only does he explore those aspects of her in significant detail, but he equates them to nature also. He extends her image beyond herself and her body, and portrays her love to be more alluring than a human love. She is interwoven with nature, his second love.

The first aspect of her that he talks about is her voice. He describes it as “the color of a robin’s breast” (2), which can be arguably strong or soft depending on the context. It could be strong because the orange hue is the strongest patch of feathers on the bird’s body, making it the brightest and most commanding. Or it could be the softest, because the level of softness in the hue as compared to a neon orange is much more warm and autumnal. Either could serve as viable interpretations, but the second might be more accurate because of the language he uses in the following line: “...there’s a sweet sob in it like rain—still rain in the night”. Like Huerta and Qabbani, McKay takes the intangible aspects of his

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<sup>13</sup> Poetry Foundation.



lover and inflates them as the most important; deserving the most attention in this moment. McKay makes himself an admirer of his lover, in a similar way as they do, i.e. “You are sea foam, pure with the star’s loveliness”(10), “Not mortal, a flower, a fairy, too fair for the beauty-shorn earth/All wonderful things, all beautiful things, gave of their wealth to your birth”(11-12). But, there is one element of McKay’s writing that distinguishes his method of adulation: his description of how his lover contrastingly invades and comforts him through her eyes. In lines 6-8, which say,

“I am afraid of your eyes, they’re so bold,  
 Searching me through, reading my thoughts, shining like gold,  
 But sometimes they are gentle, and soft like the dew on the lips of the eucharis”

McKay makes her the active doer while he undergoes analysis. She invades his private experience, learning and knowing him through it, which indicates his acknowledgement of her own experience, which is pivotal to the portrayal of her as a non-object and living conscious being.

An object’s nature suggests its ability to be denied subjectivity or experience. And because of that presupposed absence of experience, there can be an absence of expectation in the person perceiving it to be internally influenced. McKay does not portray his lover to be lacking in the ability to create memorable experiences for him i.e. her voice reminding him of rain in line 2: “and there’s a sweet sob in it like rain—still rain in the night”. But with this section, he takes a step further in admitting her ability to know him and affect him. McKay does not invite her into his thoughts or internal experience, but she comes in anyway and searches him, which is an indication of a lack of control in the way that he interacts with her.

Another distinguishing aspect of this poem amongst Huerta and Qabbani's poems is McKay's tone. In comparison with theirs, this one is by far the most mellow. Many of the descriptions he uses towards his lover can seem fairly feminine, because of his frequent allusion to nature, fairies and flowers, and aversion of intense, devoted tones. There's even a moment where he denounces intense desire in the last section of the poem; where he "feels it is wrong" to "reck of passion" for her (13). Additionally, this can seem especially strange to place in an era that focused on the realities of social, cultural and political life in America in a racialized identity. A more congruent era would be 17th century British Romanticism, which calls back to his beginning childhood interests in English poetry. His mentioning of fairies and flowers seems akin to Alexander Pope's poem, *Rape of the Lock*, where fairies and nymphs protect a young aristocratic woman from the wiles of one of her suitors.

This divergence from an expected masculine presentation of emotion places even more focus on his dealings with perception. McKay restructures male perception and author voice in love poetry; treating his lover with care in the way that he portrays her, while also being honest in his emotion towards her. As a man, McKay shares an intimate moment of admiration for his lover where he does not focus less on her femininity to give light to his own emotions, but rather he sustains her as the center of the poem. He looks inside of her character and solidifies her as gentle, while displaying his admiration and desire for that gentleness. His aim is to display her emotional investment in his life and how it changes the way that he views life outside of him; it (and she) are alive, beautiful, sweet and affecting.

*Objectification: A Chosen or Automatic Practice?*

These poems display a revolutionary shift in male metaphysical perception and behavior. The poets, placed in contexts of a thriving patriarchal environments, where they would have more access to opportunities to sexually objectify women, choose not to receive it. They choose not to further invest in Wittgensteinian conception, making the world an instrument of will-fulfillment; (namely women located in that world), but instead, they choose to go against the tide and enliven that world. They place value in women, against societal encouragement to subtract it, and from it, experience the consuming expanse of affection and love. Being cognizant and firm in their acknowledgement of women's non-sexual value allows for their world to be opened; for them to be confronted with autonomous and living love that causes for them to eagerly give the power of absolute experience away. Devotion to their lover evokes a desperation that reminds them of their lack of control over the world that seemed to be theirs. The world doesn't belong to them, the women in it don't belong to them; and it is a joyous thing.

Male sexual solipsists constrain their experiential capacities without realizing it. By making women into sexual objects, and reducing their own world to be only a product of their creation, they miss the joy of receiving freely given love. Control, paired with their own valuation system, does not ensure the most happiness to be had; it only fulfills the self-established happinesses that they can imagine. Immersing oneself in their own environment, and refusing the life of the world outside of them leaves them

metaphysically and literally alone; uncontent. Practicing objectification dooms them to an experience that is lacking, even though it is more within reach.

But the beauty of the condition of this predicament is that it is not permanent or interminable.

The very existence of the poems authored by Huerta, Qabbani and McKay suggests the nature of objectification as a chosen practice, not an automatic one. The metaphysical beliefs of those poets separate them from the environment they lived in, which gave them the opportunity to experience real joy. Though patriarchal systems have persisted through the ages, and have given many men the opportunity of receiving its hollow pleasures, rebellious men continue to rise against it; through their dedication to their families, through their efforts in advocating alongside women, for women, and through the love poetry they write to their wives.

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Appendix: Presentation at the SPU Honors Research Symposium

Another, more clever title of my honors project could have been *Sex and Self-Existence: Solipsism's Lonely Love Affair*. The essence of it is true to the topics I explore in my honor's project, but I think my current title "**Adoration Above Objectification: The Promotion of Other in Black, Mexican and Arabic Love Poetry**" is a bit more optimistic.

In my project, I explore the philosophical roots of objectification and misogynist sexual ideology in patriarchal societies; (objectification being the act of reducing someone to the status of an object (like a woman not being worth more than her looks); and misogynist sexual ideology being a misogynist's understanding of how sexual relations go between men and women (men go cheat on wife tonight, wife stay home and have sex tomorrow) ). There are many glittering quotes that emerge from these two practices. Charles Bukowski, for example, features stunning poems in his poetry book **You Get So Alone at Times**, that features lines similar to this: "girls/please give your/bodies and your/lives/to/the young men/who/deserve them/besides/there is/no way/ I would welcome/the intolerable/dull/senseless hell/you would bring/me". Or, for another example, recently viral "alpha male podcast" Fresh and Fit features a litany of quotables answering the age-old question, what is a powerful man, including this one: "There are three things that have defined powerful men over the course of history—that is: resources, territory and access—exclusive access—to virginic women". Divinely inspired words I must say.

There is something that I want you to take notice of here though. You see when women are mentioned in these quotes, they are silent? Bukowski petitions women to give their bodies without anticipating an answer from those women; Fresh and Fit places women on a list of non-living items that belong to a man, so they're not expecting feedback from them either. Women, in these contexts, are silent, and the man is "left alone", as French philosopher Simone de Beauvoir poses, to dictate their value. Their bodies, according to men, are created for the benefit and possession of men; for the sole purpose of advancing them. Women are hollow; lacking in will, speech and thought. They are for use; and most specifically, sexual use. But, as people who have interacted with women, this belief is tremendously depraved. It's dumbfounding how imperceptive they are about women's lives, to the point of being comfortable viewing them only in sexual contexts. The only motion forward in processing this belief is asking *how* they can believe that. Questions I asked were, "How can a person view another

autonomous person as an object?”, “How can a person stake another person’s value distinctly in sex only?”, “How can a person ignore, or completely disregard, another person’s life outside of sex?”. My research bore the beginning of an answer in a concept called, “sexual solipsism”, coined by University of Cambridge professor of philosophy Rae Langton. The latter part of the term “solipsism” is derived from Ludwig Wittgenstein’s famed conclusion “I am my world” from his renowned work **Tractatus Logico-Philosophicus**. To understand the basis of what he was saying, I’m going to ask you to take a 2 second look at the person next to you, and after you’re done, I’m going to ask three questions: (1) are you seeing with that person’s eyes?, (2) are you hearing me with that person’s ears?. If you answered no to both, then you understand the basics of solipsism! Everything that you experience, from your sight, to your smell, to your taste, to your touch— everything is your own experience. No one else is experiencing the world in your body except for you. The world that you interact with, and your perception of it is only known by you. And, you are the only person who can step back from an experience and observe yourself experiencing it. For example, let’s say you made a really good slab of ribs on the grill. Your mouth is salivating, your stomach’s growling, the woodwork of sensory perception is happening all at once. While sitting down at the table, waiting for the ribs to cool down on your plate, you are able to feel the roof of your mouth salivating. The only person that is experiencing that salivation is you, and you are able to step outside of yourself almost and identify yourself as the person salivating. No one else knows it except you, which is very favorable in this case, but can be potentially dehumanizing to others. Sexual solipsism gives examples to this dehumanization.

Sexual solipsism claims that since you are your “world”, the world (including the people in it) can be made as a means to fulfill your will, especially your sexual one. Being able to deny the subjective experience of another person, i.e. their ability to perceive as you do, can create people to be objects of your world, opening up the potential of them being used by you. University of Chicago professor of Law Martha Nussbaum describes 7 beliefs that fuel people utilization:

- (1) instrumentality (one treats the object or person as a tool of one’s own purposes);
- (2) denial of autonomy (one treats the object or person as lacking in autonomy);
- (3) inertness (one treats the object or person as lacking in activity or agency);
- (4) fungibility (one treats the object or person as interchangeable with other things of the same type);
- (5) violability (one treats the object or person as something that can be violated);
- (6) ownership (one treats the object or person as ownable) and;
- (7) denial of subjectivity (one treats the subjective experience of the person(if any is acknowledged) as able to be ignored).



Any combination of these can be applied to the sentiments of Bukowski and Fresh and Fit. With making women “speechless” and sexually instrumental, they promote existential isolation and increasingly dehumanizing belief towards the women in their lives and around them.

All of this can be very depressing, I know. I was near tears the entire time I had to research this part of my project. But, fear not! 3 renowned men from the 20th century, who have actually had happy relationships with women, present an opposing method of viewing the world and the women in it. The 3 are these: Mexican poet Efrain Huerta, Syrian poet Nizar Qabbani and Jamaican-American poet Claude McKay. Through each of their poems to their lovers, the poets do the unthinkable; they subvert their will under the will of their lover and establish her as the main controller or originator of the relationship. Huerta does it in his poem called *This is A Love*; where, almost at the end of the poem, he is found to be overcome with desperation and devotion towards his lover, to the point where he loses sight of himself. He says,

“and I immersed myself in her eyes of flames  
and I died beside her, as a crushed tree  
and then I forgot about my name  
and the damn name of things and flowers  
and I wanted to yell and yell at her ear that I loved her...” (29-33).

These lines do not sound like the lines of someone who is hell-bent on solidifying their will as the only will that is important and that exists. In fact, in every line, he is the one who lays himself at her feet. “... I immersed myself in *her* eyes of flames”, “...I died beside *her*, as a crushed tree” “...I wanted to yell and yell at *her* ear that I loved her”. The only moment/line where he doesn’t involve her or their relationship is when he forgets himself: “and then I forgot about my name”. He portrays his spurning of control as a natural experience, naturally occurring when caught up in the depth of his love for her. He makes her the vibrant person in the relationship, gladly promoting her subjective experience and portraying her as more important than himself.

Qabbani does the same thing, in a different way in his poems *Undress* and *Oh You with Fathomless Eyes*. In *Undress*, he refers to himself as “dumb” (line 5) and her body as a holder of “miracles” (line 3) that knows “all languages” (line 6). He portrays her to be other-worldly, unexplainably rich in experience while he stands on the sidelines and admires her. He continues this admiration in *Oh You with Fathomless Eyes*, where he calls her love: “extreme”, “mystic”, “holy” and impossible to repeat. Qabbani doesn’t mention himself once in this poem. He dedicates all 7 lines to displaying the richness of her love. His perception, in this poem, is only good for beholding her.

McKay also does the same thing, in a different way in his poem *To O.E.A.* McKay features more connotatively feminine tones in his description of her. He describes her voice as “the color of a robin’s breast” and her entire person as “sea foam, pure with the [sun’s] loveliness”. She reminds him of the second love of his life, nature, which he got from his literary upbringing in English Romantic poetry. There are no sexual undertones or overtones to be observed anywhere, removing the possibility of a person reducing her fullness to a sole sexual capacity. Again, McKay, like Qabbani, creates himself to be an adorer of her, rather than the main subject of the poem. The only time he mentions himself is when she invades his personal experience (“I am afraid of your eyes, they’re so bold/Searching me through, reading my thoughts, shining like gold”) (lines 6-7). She is able to join him in observing his internal character, in a metaphorical sense. She is agent in her decision to understand him deeper than before. She is a living, active contributor to the relationship.

This is aggressive anti-sexual solipsism in my understanding. Presenting women in contexts where they are living, agent holders of will destroys any effort of perceiving women as objects. The portrayal of women in these poems are more akin to what women in real life are actually like, and therefore distinguish the poets as more educated (perceptually and mentally). Women are more than sexual vehicles of pleasure; they are vibrant, worthy of devotion. And, when loving them, it is natural to lose self-absorption.

Apart from the obvious, almost pun-like, ways my project connects with the theme of our panel, objectification and ethical tool making contributes largely to the conversation surrounding what it means to be human. When we believe that others are able to be made useful to us, we enter a very dangerous game at human valuation. But, because of the nature of patriarchal societies or capitalist societies, which tend to create embedded hierarchies within social behavior (patriarchal) or the complete demand to value everything according to a system (capitalist), we are always in positions where we have the ability to imagine the utilization potential of everything around us. No one can escape our perception unless we let it; and in combination with our constant state of potential-searching, we fall victim to the societies we live in, while others fall victim to us.

The question that follows this is can we treat humans like humans. Can we refuse to allow tool building to be our default in operating in a social world. I think yes. I think Huerta, McKay, Qabbani, Katie, Rebekah, Joycelynn, you, already are answering the question. Where we have the desire to learn from one another, there our proclivity to love starts. Looking at each other in the face, asking each other about their lives and experiences, seeking ways to turn our hideous tendencies into ways we can avoid hurting one another (i.e. academia); that’s how ethical tool building starts and is sustained. We

cannot be alone in our desire to make “our world” a better place for us, because, by those standards, “our world” will never reach beyond our understanding of “better”. We must acknowledge others; we must look outward instead of inward. Because then and only then, can we say that our world is full.