Journal of Transatlantic Studies (2021) 19:350–371
https://doi.org/10.1057/s42738-021-00077-y

ORIGINAL ARTICLE

'Cow-heavy and floral in my Victorian nightgown': maternity and transatlanticism in Sylvia Plath's poetry and fiction

Shihoko Inoue[1]

Accepted: 27 May 2021 / Published online: 14 June 2021

Abstract
This paper examines a transatlantic identity in the poetry and fiction of Sylvia Plath through the lens of her experiences of pregnancy and childbirth in England. Although the influence that her transatlantic movements had on her writing has attracted scholarly attention in the past 20 years, the cross-cultural dimensions of her poetic representation of maternity and motherhood have been largely ignored. Through a close reading of 'You're', 'A Life', 'Morning Song', 'Candles', and sections of *The Bell Jar*, I will argue that the depiction of maternal experiences is crucial to understand Plath's problematisation of the issue of identity, and especially to understand it in terms of post-war nationalist discourse rooted in the fear of the contaminated 'other'. In those works written during and after her first pregnancy in London, the female and maternal subjects are frequently displaced from their native land and situated on boundaries between two different societies and cultures. Focusing on the dual (or multiple) view of society and culture surrounding maternity that was fostered through her transatlantic movements, this paper will illuminate how Plath redefines motherhood as a ground on which one's national identity and the matter of belonging are to be radically questioned.

Keywords Poetry · Sylvia Plath · Transatlantic identity · Maternity · Cold War

Introduction

In recent years, transnational and transatlantic aspects of Sylvia Plath's writing have been brought to light. Born in Boston, Massachusetts in 1932, Plath lived in the USA until the age of 22. In October 1955, after she graduated from Smith College, she attended Cambridge University on a Fulbright fellowship, where she met

✉ Shihoko Inoue
shihoko1217@gmail.com

[1] Department of English, University of Exeter, Exeter, UK

the poet and her future husband Ted Hughes. After they married, she went back to Boston with him in June 1957 but again moved to England in December 1959 in the sixth month of her first pregnancy, and there she gave birth to two children in 1960 and 1962. The influence that her transatlantic movements had on her writing has attracted scholarly attention in the past 20 years. While earlier scholars, according to Tracy Brain, 'deny, assert or ignore Plath's Englishness and Americanness in accordance with their own (often-unconscious) agendas', some recent critics have proposed ways of reading Plath which situate her work midway between the two countries.[1]

In *A Transnational Poetics* (2009), Jahan Ramazani also criticises what he terms the 'culture-of-birth determinism' in nation-based curricula and literary histories, on whose basis the works of transatlantic poets such as T. S. Eliot, Mina Loy, W. H. Auden and Plath have been roughly classified as 'American' or 'British'.[2] In restoring the transnational awareness in Plath's seemingly personal poems such as 'Daddy' and 'Lady Lazarus', he demonstrates how those works presuppose a collective unconscious that 'exceeds the identitarian and Americo-centric paradigms typically clustered around the concept of "American confessionalism"'.[3] Similarly, Paul Giles refuses to align Plath with pre-existing national traditions—that is, the American Transcendentalist legacy and British Romanticism—but instead sees her as an exile into 'the transatlantic aesthetics' originating from the collision between the traditions.[4] Overall, the transnational turn in literary studies has inspired scholars to examine the poet's more undetermined 'midatlantic national identity' that disrupts 'any illusion that there can be any separate or genuine American identity or place'.[5]

With these scholarly contributions in mind, this paper examines what Brain calls 'the transatlantic flux between Englishness and Americanness' in Plath's writing from a previously unexplored perspective, that is, the transatlantic aspect of her motherhood.[6] My particular focus here is on the influence her maternal experiences outside her native land had on her writing, which often challenges monolithic notions of subjects coalescing around one's perceptions of nationality (including race) and gender. As Brain counts Plath's age as one of the major factors in her quick adjustment to a new culture and language, the moment when the poet first moved to England is important in considering the cultural hybridity in her writing.[7] In this regard, however, I would rather like to pursue the possibility that the timing of her second migration to England—that is, her return with her husband after their year in Boston which coincided with her first pregnancy and childbirth—greatly contributed to the formation of her fluid national identity. So far maternal themes in Plath's works have constantly encouraged critics to reconsider the relation between

[1] Tracy Brain, *The Other Sylvia Plath* (Harlow: Longman, 2001), 48.
[2] Jahan Ramazani, *A Transnational Poetics* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 2009), 35.
[3] Ramazani, *A Transnational Poetics*, 38.
[4] Paul Giles, 'Double Exposure: Sylvia Plath and the Aesthetics of Transnationalism', *Symbiosis* 5, no. 2 (2001): 110.
[5] Brain, *The Other Sylvia Plath*, 48, 59.
[6] Ibid., 75.
[7] Ibid., 54.

motherhood and the matter of selfhood. Tim Kendall sees, for example, motherhood in Plath's writing as a catalyst for the crisis of identity, concluding that motherhood and identity 'come into conflict—so much so that one effaces the other'.[8] Yet what matters in Plath's maternal poems is not limited to the choice between the role as a mother and various alternative selves; maternity also appears to be a battlefield for the speaker's national affiliations.

In the poetry and fiction Plath wrote around the time when she had her first daughter in April 1960, maternal subjects are frequently displaced from their native land and situated on boundaries between two different societies and cultures. Through their thematisation of the experiences of pregnancy and childbirth under unfamiliar circumstances, those works often articulate doubt about the status, permanence and stability of one's 'home'. Notably, this alienation from 'home' goes against the current of the time when the household was privileged as an ultimate sanctuary safe from foreign threats under the Cold War domestic ideology in the USA.[9] Under the nationalistic valorisation of motherhood of the time, wives and mothers were extolled as sustainers of their homes, which functioned as a microcosm of America as an idealised community exclusive of racially marked 'others'. Focusing on the dual (or multiple) view of society and culture surrounding maternity that was fostered through her transatlantic movements, this paper will illuminate how Plath's work critically engages with contemporary discourses of gender, nationality and race and also attempts to reconfigure the cultural meaning of motherhood.

To examine this, first I look at 'You're' (1960), a poem which exemplifies Plath's transatlantic emigration concurrent with her pregnancy. My interest here lies in how the poem's representation of pregnancy, rich in allusions to Anglo-American interactions, deviates from the nationalist implications of reproduction. As we will see in the following sections, the commitment to undoing these dominant implications is furthered by her engagement with the ideologically charged circumstances of both American and British childbirth. Sections 2 and 3 will analyse Plath's representations of them, respectively, and investigate how in their maternal experiences the female subjects are preoccupied by—yet at the same time nullify—the idealised notion of motherhood as well as the enclosed home and community that are envisioned to be sustained by the ideal. In doing so, I will be drawing on unpublished papers from Plath's archives to illustrate my argument.

[8] Tim Kendall, *Sylvia Plath: A Critical Study* (London: Faber and Faber, 2001), 62.

[9] As Deborah Nelson argues, Plath was by no means a stranger to Cold War domestic ideology and strongly aware of 'its asymmetrical effects on women's lives'. Deborah Nelson, 'Plath, History and Politics' in *The Cambridge Companion to Sylvia Plath*, ed. Jo Gill (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2006), 29. For Plath's awareness of the gendered ideology linking women to the domestic, see for example Carole Ferrier, 'The Beekeeper's Apprentice' in *Sylvia Plath: New Views on the Poetry*, ed. Gary Lane (Baltimore: Johns Hopkins University Press, 1979), 215; Susan R Van Dyne, *Revising Life: Sylvia Plath's Ariel Poems* (Chapel Hill: University of North Carolina Press, 1993) 129–30.

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Feminist critics have highlighted the nature of maternity as a site of the intersection of self and other. '[I]nhabited by another who is nourished by her substance', Simone de Beauvoir states, 'the female is both herself and other than herself' during the whole gestation period.[10] For Luce Irigaray, the placenta is a vital mediating space that does not unify the mother's self and the foetus as the other but maintains the differentiation between them.[11] Julia Kristeva deepens the discussion throughout her works, investigating the status of pregnancy as 'the threshold between nature and culture, biology and language'.[12] Jacqueline Rose, among others, notices in Plath's poetic language in her motherhood poems the permeability of boundaries between self and other, inside and outside, prelinguistic and language.[13] In addition to these binaries, what Plath's maternal poems often address is the tension between two (or more) nationalities and cultures. When the mother, like Plath, marries and bears children outside her native land, at least two different social and historical roots—the mother's place of origin and the place the child is born into—tend to coexist in one body and self. This fact reminds us that pregnancy can serve as an opportunity to radically reconsider our usual idea of one's nationality as something pure and stable.

'You're', a poem written in January or February 1960, a few months before her first child's birth, shows how pregnancy and childbirth can affect the formation (and dissolution) of the national identity of the speaking subject/mother.[14] In this short poem consisting of two nine-line stanzas, Plath portrays a baby growing in the womb with various metaphors and similes. Each line of this poem is a predicate of the title 'You're' and therefore lets the reader guess who is 'you'. For example, the opening line offers the image of a clown, whose acrobatic handstand suggests both the inverse position of the foetus and its active motion in late pregnancy. As the motion is almost weightless as if in space ('Feet to the stars, and moon-skulled' [2]) and buoyant as the 'you' is 'Gilled like a fish' (3), the reader guesses it might be a baby moving in amniotic fluid. Although the poem first seems a pure nonsense, on closer look it turns out to be filled with a variety of multilayered images that leave room for numerous different readings. What we cannot ignore among the clues to the riddle are a number of references to countries, for example, 'Australia' (11) and 'a Mexican bean' (16). Though the poem has never been read in national or transnational terms, in her attempt to define the unborn baby by means of images related to particular places we can glimpse the speaker musing on the national identity of the

[10] Simone de Beauvoir, *The Second Sex*, trans. Constance Borde and Sheila Malovany-Chevallier (London: Vintage, 2010), 36.

[11] Luce Irigaray, *Je, Tu, Nous: Toward a Culture of Difference*, trans. Alison Martin (London: Routledge, 2007), 42.

[12] Julia Kristeva, *The Kristeva Reader*, ed. Toril Moi (Oxford: Blackwell, 1986), 297.

[13] Jacqueline Rose, *The Haunting of Sylvia Plath* (London: Virago, 1991), 49, 56.

[14] Unless indicated otherwise, all references to Plath's poems are to Sylvia Plath, *The Collected Poems*, ed. Ted Hughes (New York: Harper Collins Publishers, 2008), and the line numbers of each poem are given parenthetically.

baby. In one sense, some images in the first stanza lead us to see the speaker's intention to endow Americanness to the unborn child:

> […] A common-sense
> Thumbs-down on the dodo's mode.
> Wrapped up in yourself like a spool,
> Trawling your dark as owls do.
> Mute as a turnip from the Fourth
> Of July to All Fool's Day,
> O high-riser, my little loaf. (3-9)

While the passage from 'the Fourth / Of July to All Fool's Day' is almost exactly the period of gestation, it also suggests the geographical movement from America to England, tracing the same route travelled by the poet during her pregnancy. Here the conception of the baby is identified with the foundation of the nation America, that is the independence from England. The baby is described as an independent being guided by 'common-sense' (3) as proposed by Thomas Paine in his 1776 pamphlet advocating independence from Great Britain to people in the Thirteen Colonies, and even a disobedient figure: the foetus in its upside-down position is captured in the 'Thumbs-down' pose, disapproving the obsolete 'dodo's mode' of Britain. This reference to an extinct animal is also suggestive in this context. The dodo, a non-flying bird was native to the island of Mauritius in the Indian Ocean, which was taken control of first by the Dutch during the seventeenth century and then by the French before Britain had taken possession of the island from 1814 to 1965. During the colonisation of the island by the Dutch, the dodo became extinct because of hunting, deforestation and invasive species such as pigs and dogs. Here, behind a series of humorous metaphors, we can glimpse the speaker's anxiety about—and a resistance to—killing the Americanness of her child and herself by being adapted to dominant European tradition.[15]

At a glance, this anxiety might appear to reflect the heightening of Plath's sense of identity as an American, which is reconfirmed and solidified at the displacement from her native land. Nevertheless, such a reading would be thwarted by the poem's more complicated relation to England and its radical scepticism about the status of the homeland. Firstly, in solving this riddle poem, we find references not only to the Britain's imperial past but to the British literary canon. For instance, the above-noted 'dodo' alludes to Lewis Carroll's *Alice's Adventures in Wonderland* (1865), through which the strange animal became widely known in England and other countries. *Alice's Adventures in Wonderland* was one of Plath's favourite books, and she often compares herself to Alice and mentions other characters in her letters and journals. For example, in her journal entry in 1958 she compares her colleague at

[15] Bertram Wyatt-Brown recollects how Americans were seen as 'wayward colonists with regrettable accents and pushy manners' in England in the 1950s. Bertram Wyatt-Brown, 'Ted, Sylvia, and St. Botolph's: A Cambridge Recollection', *Southern Review* 40, no. 2 (2004): 352, ProQuest. For Plath's colonial anxieties, see Heather Clark, *The Grief of Influence: Sylvia Plath and Ted Hughes* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2011), 88–109.

Smith College to Dodo and Mad Hatter.[16] Whereas the conception of the child coincides with American Independence Day, it curiously also falls on the anniversary of the tale (whether Plath realised this or not). In the 'golden afternoon' of that day in 1862, as widely known, Carroll told the first version of the story during a boating expedition with Alice Liddell and her sisters, and this trip was incorporated in Chapters 2 and 3 where Carroll himself, Alice and others appear in the forms of Dodo (a caricature of the author whose real surname is Dodgson), Alice and other animals.[17] Thus the speaker's pregnancy is compared to the origination of the famous British children's story, and the foetus crossing the Atlantic to the story developing during the boat trip. The poem's style, moreover, has much in common with Carroll's fictions filled with unexpected wit and nonsense while also rendering subtle political satire.

The other important allusion in 'You're' is to the metaphysical poet John Donne, with whom the poem also constructs a complex intertextual dialogue. Among other British canonical figures, Donne seemed to occupy a special place in Plath's mind. In her 1962 BBC interview, Plath told how she 'first felt the full weight of English Literature' when someone criticised her poems for 'beginning just like John Donne, but not quite managing to finish like John Donne'.[18] While J. D. O'Hara points out the similarity between Plath's poems such as 'You're' and 'Cut' (1962) and Donne's 'A Valediction' (1633) in the way they deploy their imagery, I suggest that the images in 'You're' can be seen as more directly alluding to Donne's 'The Sunne Rising' (1633).[19] We can hear, for example, the resonance of Donne's 'Busie old foole' in 'All Fool's Day' juxtaposed with the 'high-riser'.[20] Moreover, the setting of Donne's aubade is shared by Plath's use of dawning metaphors for childbirth. In the first stanza, the process of the baby's growth is compared to the passage from night ('stars', 'moon', 'dark', 'owls') to sunrise implied by the 'high-riser', which primarily refers to the organic rising of the 'loaf' (referring to the traditional and vulgar phrase 'bun in the oven') and also hints at the moment of conception with its sexual connotation of erection. Here perhaps Plath presents her homage to and mocks this great poet at the same time. Both poets make the whole world subject to their poetic objects: if Donne's speaker places himself and his lover in the centre of the Ptolemaic system, Plath's speaker appropriates the rotating earth to praise the fruit of love. However, whereas such a conceit in Donne's poems, as has been already recognised by many scholars, is grounded in an imperialistic view of the world, this Anglocentric manner is labelled by Plath as an outdated 'dodo's mode'.

[16] Sylvia Plath, *The Unabridged Journals of Sylvia Plath*, ed. Karen V. Kukil (New York: Anchor Books, 2000), 339.

[17] Lewis Carroll, *The Annotated Alice: The Definitive Edition*, ed. Martin Gardner (New York: W. W. Norton, 2000), 27.

[18] Peter Orr, *The Poet Speaks: Interviews with Contemporary Poets* (London: Routledge & Kegan Paul, 1966), 168.

[19] J. D. O'Hara, 'Plath's Comedy' in *Sylvia Plath: New Views on the Poetry*, ed. Gary Lane (Baltimore: Johns Hopkins University Press, 1979), 77.

[20] John Donne, 'The Sunne Rising', in *Elegies, and The Songs and Sonnets*, ed. Helen Gardner (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1965), 72–73.

Thus, when Plath caricatures British history, she does so by utilising the legacy of Britain's eminent authors. Even though she is fully aware of her American cultural inheritance beginning with Thomas Paine's *Common Sense*, one of the earliest texts through which the nation of America was imagined and constructed, at the same time she attempts to locate her writing in the genealogy of British literature. In short, the poet avails herself of the opportunity of childbirth to achieve literary hybridity. In this regard, the poem's riddle of the baby's nationality, just like the Mad Hatter's infamous riddle, remains unsolved but open to possible answers; or probably the only answer is 'a well-done sum' (17) of cross-cultural elements composing the poem, which would stand for the status of national identity that should necessarily be dual or multiple.

Actually, one's 'home' itself is not presented as stable but revealed as ambiguous and temporary and therefore inevitably multiple in the rest of the poem. As we will see, the retreat from the outer world and privileging of the bedroom in Donne's 'The Sun Rising' is set in remarkable contrast to the unsettled notion of 'home' in Plath's poem. The abundant marine images, in particular, are suggestive in considering this point. The comparison between fish and the 'Gilled' baby growing and quickening in amniotic fluid proliferates into the second stanza:

> Vague as fog and looked for like mail.
> Farther off than Australia.
> Bent-backed Atlas, our traveled prawn.
> Snug as a bud and at home
> Like a sprat in a pickle jug.
> A creel of eels, all ripples.
> Jumpy as a Mexican bean.

Here the baby is described more vigorously, by means of the image of both the ship mail (punning on 'delivery') and the 'traveled prawn' going 'Farther off than Australia' via Mexico ('Mexican bean'). By contrast, when it stops moving, it is relaxed in the 'Snug' house of the mother's womb, like 'a sprat in a pickle jug'. Interestingly, what lodges the sprat here, a pickling bottle, is not the fish's original home, the sea. The single sprat pickled in a glass jar is both dislocated from its natural habitat and alienated from the massive school in which sprats usually swim together, even though it is 'at home' there for a moment. Whereas this poem describes fish travelling around the ocean, it constantly lands them and thus displaces them from their native place to different places by means of the motifs of fishing and fishery (e.g. 'spool' in line 5 and 'Trawling' in line 6). This sense of slight discomfort in Plath's use of the phrase "at home" is also expressed in her oblique use of the British old-fashioned idiom 'Snug as a bug in a rug'. Modified into a longer version 'Snug as a bud […] in a pickle jug', the phrase might sound uncomfortable to the ears of many British readers, as it simultaneously evokes the familiar phrase and yet disappoints their expectations. As the 'creel'/womb filled with 'eels' is wildly stirred with 'all ripples', here our ordinary notion of 'home' is being destabilised through metaphors of pregnancy. The poem presents 'home' as something fundamentally precarious, discomforting and contradictory in its meaning, dramatising the discursive process through which one's national identity is constructed.

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As 'You're' shows, maternity can be a means by which one's usual ideas about nationality and the matter of belonging are questioned. This perception of maternity is worthy of further attention, because such a view attempts to understand childbirth differently from the dominant way of associating the event with a biological reproduction of a nation, as is indicated by the baby/nation metaphor seen in 'You're'. (The word 'nation' originated from the Latin word *nasci*, which means 'to be born'.) As a number of scholars have noted, this association is often drawn on in nationalist discourse which is focused on women as reproducers of ethnic collectivities uncontaminated by foreignness.[21] Around the time when Plath was educated and became a mother in the growing tension of the Cold War, moreover, the fear of imminent foreign threat directed the public mind to this concern. In *Homeward Bound* (1988), Elaine Tyler May observes that the post-war consensus in America was 'no more evident than in the matter of having children', and white pronatalism was widely endorsed by the public which saw mothers and homemakers as countermeasures to cope with communism.[22] Under the rhetoric of the US's post-war foreign policy such as containment, May argues, people and especially women were directed toward 'home' as a privileged, safe place sustained by rigid gender roles. In contrast, as we will see, Plath's poems and fictions written after the birth of her first child often represent the maternal subject as physically and psychologically alienated from nations, further positioning maternity as an opportunity to reconsider such an ideological view.

The situation in Cold War America is reflected in the birth scene in Chapter 6 of Plath's semi-autobiographical novel *The Bell Jar* (1963) written in the spring of 1961, almost a year after her first childbirth.[23] The scene is based on a childbirth she saw in the Boston Lying-In hospital in February 1952, which seems to have inflicted a trauma on her and caused a long-time apprehension about childbirth.[24] As Esther enters the birthing room, she is shocked by the sight of the birthing table:

> It looked like some awful torture table, with these metal stirrups sticking up in mid-air at one end and all sorts of instruments and wires and tubes I couldn't make out properly at the other. […] The woman's stomach stuck up so high I couldn't see her face or the upper part of her body at all. She seemed to have nothing but an enormous spider-fat stomach and two little ugly spindly legs

[21] See, for example, Nira Yuval-Davis and Floya Anthias, eds., *Women-Nation-State* (Basingstoke: Macmillan, 1989), 8–9; Craig Calhoun, *Nationalism* (Buckingham: Open University Press, 1997), 114.

[22] Elaine Tyler May, *Homeward Bound: American Families in the Cold War Era* (New York: Basic Books, 1988), 136–37.

[23] Although Ted Hughes speculates that Plath was working on *The Bell Jar* from February to May 1961, the novel's date of origin is not clearly established. Ted Hughes, *Letters of Ted Hughes*, ed. Christopher Reid (London: Faber and Faber, 2007), 536. For a detailed commentary on discrepancies between scholars' estimations, see Jo Gill, *The Cambridge Introduction to Sylvia Plath* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2008), 75.

[24] Plath, *The Unabridged Journals*, 374.

> propped in the high stirrups, and all the time the baby was being born she never stopped making this unhuman whooing noise.[25]

In this passage, the grotesque description of the birthing body overemphasises the woman's reproductive function and reflects the way in which in medicalised childbirth a pregnant woman tends to be reduced to mere reproductive organs. Nothing other than the 'enormous spider-fat stomach and two ugly spindly legs' can be seen, let alone her face. Instead, what come into Esther's sight are a bunch of 'instruments and wires and tubes' she cannot unravel. The cold and metal, inhuman equipment exemplifies manufacturing metaphors that were prevalent in Western medical texts and discourses.[26] As her legs are fastened onto the stirrups, the woman is almost merged with the apparatuses surrounding her and constitutes a machine of reproduction, keeping up a constant, mechanical 'whooing noise' that is not even a voice or breathing. As Luke Ferretter points out, Plath's critique of control of women's bodies in American medical institution foreshadows with striking precision the concerns of the women's health movement emerged in the late 1960s.[27]

Besides, the novel indicates that the pursuit of an increase in productivity in medicalised birth goes hand in hand with nationalistic and racial ideology of the time. Before Esther and Buddy went into the delivery room, they met Buddy's friend Will, who was to deliver a baby. Will muttered in Esther's ear that she 'oughtn't to see this', because she will 'never want to have a baby' and then it will be 'the end of the human race'.[28] According to May, when in the mid-1950s, the peak of the baby boom, the nativist sentiments that once fuelled the eugenics movement in the early years of the century resurfaced and white Anglo-Saxon Protestants feared that white native-born Americans were committing 'race suicide' while 'inferior' groups were overpopulating the nation.[29] Later in the novel, when Esther is leafing through *Baby Talk*, America's oldest baby magazine, she gets bothered by numerous smiling babies including 'bald babies, chocolate-coloured babies, Eisenhower-faced babies, babies rolling over for the first time, […] babies doing all the little tricky things it takes to grow up, step by step, into an anxious and unsettling world'.[30] Here babies are catalogued/classified as if they are mass-produced constituents of the homogenised society, having uniformly the same face of their president. It is not too far off the mark to see babies learning to 'roll over' as trying to mimic the US's Cold War foreign policy of 'rolling back' communist countries, which had been much debated about since his inauguration in 1953. (The novel's main events are set in the summer of that year, the year when the Rosenbergs were electrocuted on suspicion of

[25] Sylvia Plath, *The Bell Jar* (London: Faber and Faber, 1963), 67–68.

[26] See Emily Martin, *The Woman in the Body: A Cultural Analysis of Reproduction* (Milton Keynes: Open University Press, 1989), Chapter 4.

[27] Luke Ferretter, '"Just Like the Sort of Drug a Man Would Invent": *The Bell Jar* and the Feminist Critique of Women's Health Care', *Plath Profiles* 1 (2008): 136, https://scholarworks.iu.edu/journals/index.php/plath/article/view/4776/4409.

[28] Plath, *The Bell Jar*, 67.

[29] May, *Homeward Bound*, 139.

[30] Plath, *The Bell Jar*, 234.

espionage on behalf of the Soviet Union, as the novel's opening lines make clear.) At the same time, Esther's attention to the many 'chocolate-coloured babies' marks the underlying anxiety about race in post-war period, when public policies and white sentiment were antinatalist in general regarding the fertility of women of colour, while white women were subject to strong pronatalist pressures and seen as engines of democratic free world.[31]

Yet what is ironical in the childbirth scene in *The Bell Jar* is the fact that the birthing woman is not an Anglo native-born American as the reader might assume. This becomes apparent when the faceless and voiceless woman is called 'Mrs Tomolillo' by the doctors in the midst of her birth.[32] In spite of this Latin-sounding name having many 'l's, Esther, overwhelmed by the scene filled with sensational images, does not pay any attention to the woman's name but keep calling her 'the woman' in the entire scene. So we have almost forgotten Mrs Tomolillo when in Chapter 14 a version of this Italian-named character reappears as Esther's roommate in her first psychiatric ward in a city hospital.[33] As symbolically separated by a curtain between their beds, Esther and Mrs Tomolillo are guarding against each other. Or, importantly, perhaps it is only Esther, a not very reliable narrator especially during her hospitalisation followed by her suicide attempt, who feels an aversion and suspicion towards her roommate. There is a hint of her paranoia, for example, when she feels and tells her mother that Mrs Tomolillo is imitating her mother's motion but her mother denies this.[34] This Esther's obsession reflects the public sentiment toward non-Anglo-Saxon people in Plath's time, and the way Esther describes Mrs Tomolillo is stereotypical, too. As soon as she sees Mrs Tomolillo, she mocks the 'mass of tight black curls, starting at her forehead, that rose in a mountainous pompadour and cascaded down her back', keeping watch over how 'the huge arrangement of hair moved with her, as if made of stiff black paper'.[35] Together with the darkness and thickness, the abundance of the Italian woman's hair that evokes her fertility arrests Esther's attention. Mrs Tomolillo's plumpness is also an object of Esther's ridicule ('fat young Italian woman', 'her fat white hands in her lap'), implying Esther's (and America's) latent fear of the fertile foreign woman as well as the social valorisation of a model of slim, sporty WASP femininity.[36]

[31] For pronatalist injunctions on white women and antinatalism concerning the fertility of women of colour among public policies and cultural authorities, see for example Rickie Solinger, 'Reproduction, Birth Control, and Motherhood in the United States' in *The Oxford Handbook of American Women's and Gender History*, ed. Ellen Hartigan-O'Conner and Lisa G. Materson (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2018), 252.

[32] Plath, *The Bell Jar*, 68.

[33] Plath does not make it clear whether the mental patient is the same Mrs Tomolillo whom we encountered in Chapter 6 or not. It can be the case that here Esther uses the name which she felt to be strange earlier in this novel again for any other woman who seems to her to be alien, and then this simplification of the alien other can be read as exemplifying prejudice. It is also worth noting that Plath uses the name Tomolillo in her short stories, including "The Daughters of Blossom Street' and 'The Fifteen-Dollar Eagle', as a figure of ridicule. See Rose, *The Haunting*, 203.

[34] Plath, *The Bell Jar*, 189.

[35] Ibid., 186–87.

[36] Ibid., 186, 189.

Plath's works offer caricatures of the American birth scene surrounded by the anti-foreign ethos of her time, which is shown as naïve not only by physically displaced birthing subjects such as Mrs Tomolillo but also by Esther's psychological alienation from her native land. One of the important and recurrent media through which both post-war society and the cultural meaning of maternity are defamiliarised is the bottled specimen of foetuses.[37] We have already seen an example of this in 'You're' where the foetus takes the form of a baby 'Like a sprat in a pickle jug' (14), and a similar image can be seen in 'Stillborn' (1960), a poem about undeveloped 'piggy' (12) and 'fishy' (12) babies sitting in 'the pickling fluid' (8). While the image again emphasises the metaphorical equation of reproduction and mechanical production through association with packing pickles on an assembly line, it also evokes containment policy, the foreign policy the Eisenhower administration adopted alternatively to rollback during their term to prevent the spread of communist forces. Suggestively, after Esther encounters 'some big glass bottles full of babies died before they were born' just before she witnesses Mrs Tomolillo giving birth, she has a flashback of the image in Chapter 8 when she is reading a magazine: 'The face of Eisenhower beamed up at me, bald and blank as the face of a foetus in a bottle'.[38] Under Esther's detached gaze, what is contained by the strategy aiming at hemming off the communist countries from each other is Eisenhower himself, whose policy could lead to the isolation of America from the rest of the world. Such a policy is shown as nonviable by comparison with an undeveloped baby.

In *The Bell Jar*, there are plenty of unproductive associations between US policy and reproductive motifs that articulate Esther's estrangement from both her country and the idea of having babies. The policy cannot tie her to domesticity, as she declares that 'I'm neurotic as hell' for her inclination to 'live in the country and in the city both […] flying back and forth between one mutually exclusive thing and another'.[39] Here her desire to endlessly move without settling down implies her rejection of conformity to idealised motherhood. In this female Cold War Bildungsroman, the individual development of the female subject is set side by side with the growth of the nation/race and both of these timelines come together in motherhood, but from such an ideology the protagonist consistently alienates herself.

Similar motifs are to be found in the desolate post-war hospital-scape of 'A Life' (1960), a poem written seven months after Plath's first child's birth. Here an enigmatic woman, who seemingly underwent some treatment or operation in hospital, is compared to an undeveloped foetus in a bottle. The motif, again, portrays the anxious female subjectivity resisting, rather than endorsing, the ideal of femininity and motherhood which Cold War nationalism promoted as essential to the national security and future development:

[37] This is based on the jarred unborn infants arranged in chronological order which Plath could inspect during the 1952 Boston Lying-In hospital tour. For biographical accounts of this visit, see Edward Butscher, *Sylvia Plath: Method and Madness* (Tucson: Schaffner Press, 2003) 62; Ronald Hayman, *The Death and Life of Sylvia Plath* (London: Heinemann, 1991), 67.

[38] Plath, *The Bell Jar*, 65, 93.

[39] Ibid., 98.

A woman is dragging her shadow in a circle
About a bold, hospital saucer.
It resembles the moon, or a sheet of blank paper
And appears to have suffered a sort of private blitzkrieg.
She lives quietly

With no attachments, like a foetus in a bottle,
The obsolete house, the sea, flattened to a picture
She has one too many dimensions to enter.
Grief and anger, exorcised,
Leave her alone now.

The future is a gray seagull
Tattling in its cat-voice of departure, departure. (21-32)

The 'blank' (23) and 'flattened' (27) state of the woman's mind and body unoccupied as an 'obsolete house' (27) is open to different readings. As Linda Wagner-Martin speculates from the loss of consciousness resulted from 'a sort of private blitzkrieg' (24), the woman might have taken an electroshock therapy (which Plath herself had in her college years) for the treatment of postpartum depression.[40] Simultaneously, the mindlessness, in terms of hospital delivery, reminds us of Twilight Sleep, a stupor caused by the anaesthetisation with which the woman has undergone a blitz of labour pains. The obscuring of which of these events the woman underwent seems deliberate, since that is exactly the mental state of the speaker, who now 'lives quietly // With no attachments'. The poem's shortest line with a large blank space on the right side and followed by a stanza break illustrates the loss of memory of an important event. Here Plath attempts to recover these layers of insecurity from being erased by the treatment with drugs and electricity, both of which were believed to be the necessary agents by which society was to be controlled in postwar American society.[41]

The alienated and marginalised subject is signified by the female figure 'dragging her shadow in a circle' (21), unable to return to her home or find a new place to settle in. As Jo Gill suggests, the metaphors of 'rings, circles and circumferences' are recurrent throughout Plath's writing between 1960 and 1961 and 'signal[s] the exclusion of the speaking subject from the centre which nevertheless commands her attention'.[42] Those female subjects including the woman in 'A Life' who are 'endlessly prowling the peripheries' seem to articulate an awareness of being what Kristeva calls 'boundary-subjects'.[43] In *Nation without Nationalism* (1993), she warns: 'Women […] are particularly vulnerable to a possible support of *Volksgeist*. The

[40] Linda Wagner-Martin, *Sylvia Plath: A Literary Life* (Basingstoke: Palgrave Macmillan, 2003), 63.
[41] For Plath's concern with those agents, see Luke Ferretter, 126–27, 135–37; Robin Peel, *Writing Back: Sylvia Plath and Cold War Politics* (London: Associated University Press, 2002), 69.
[42] Gill, *The Cambridge Companion*, 100.
[43] Ibid.

biological fate that causes us to be the *site* of the species chains us to *space*: home, native soil, motherland (*matrie*) (as I wish to say, instead of fatherland [*patrie*])'.[44] But then she also adds: 'Women have the luck and the responsibility of being boundary-subjects: body and thought, biology and language, personal identity and dissemination during childhood, origin and judgement, nation and world—more dramatically so than men are'.[45] Plath's poems often reveal that the speaking subjects are on boundaries—the boundary of culture ('You're'), community (*The Bell Jar*), consciousness ('A Life')—and from the in-between point of view they reflect on what occupies the centre, that is, the shadowy figures of themselves around which a society is formed.

So far we have observed how Plath's maternal writing at once dramatises and debunks the nationalistic ideal underlying the public concern over race and female reproductive role in Cold War society through its portrayal of pregnancy striding the Atlantic and post-war American hospital-scape. Our next concern, naturally, is with how her maternal writing further reconfigures the cultural meaning of motherhood through her own experiences of childbirth and mothering under unfamiliar circumstances and practices in England. In the post-war decades, the methods and circumstances of childbirth differed between the US and the UK. The biggest difference is that the latter still allowed mothers to choose home delivery, which was largely conducted by a midwife while also attended by a doctor and analgesia for emergency.[46] When Plath gave birth to her first daughter in her flat in London in 1960, she was 'absolutely delighted with home delivery' and the 'nightmare vision' of hospital birth she saw in Boston was 'completely dissipated'.[47] In addition to free birth cost, free vitamin pills and reduced milk price offered by the National Health Service, what Plath particularly liked about the British system was this childbirth at home, whose 'intimacy, privacy, homeiness' made her feel 'happy as we've never been anywhere else'.[48] Did England and English homey space in particular, then, come to afford a new and more secure foothold for the maternal subjects both in her own life and her writing?

[44] Julia Kristeva, *Nations Without Nationalism*, trans. Leon S. Roudiez (New York: Columbia University Press, 1993), 34.

[45] Ibid., 35.

[46] According to Ann Oakley, the proportion of deliveries in hospital was 64.7 per cent in 1960 Britain. Ann Oakley, *The Captured Womb: A History of the Medical Care of Pregnant Women* (Oxford: Blackwell, 1984), 215. For the detailed information about maternal care in England in the mid twentieth century, see ibid., 132–151.

[47] Sylvia Plath, *The Letters of Sylvia Plath Volume II: 1956–1963*, ed. Peter K. Steinberg and Karen V. Kukil (London: Faber and Faber, 2018), 451.

[48] Ibid., 448, 451.

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Although Plath's characters and themes are marked as mobile and transboundary in nature, her transnational writing has less to do with presenting a liberated or newly discovered true self than it does with registering repeatedly baffled quests for a well-secured self. In her analysis of Hughes's *Birthday Letters* (1998), Gill emphasises the metaphors of 'restriction', 'loss' and 'numb incomprehension' pervading the transatlantic project of both Hughes and Plath, all of which preside in 'A Life', too.[49] Although the woman in hospital wishes to release herself from her entrapped state, the future she can imagine is obscure and unpromising as it is compared to the indeterminately 'gray'-coloured 'seagull', whose voice sounds like 'departure, departure'. Here the temporal notion of stunted growth encapsulated in the image of a bottled unborn baby is paralleled with the spatial implication of her failure to progress or mature, as she will be endlessly departing without arriving. It should be noted, moreover, that here Plath originally and deliberately employs British spelling of 'grey', instead of the misprinted 'gray' in *The Collected Poems*, in each of her five typescripts held at Smith College's Rare Book Room and the Lilly Library at Indiana University.[50] Hence these lines in the original version specifically foreshadow the bleak future state of the woman after her transatlantic emigration and articulate the emotional state of transatlantic impasse. As we will see in a moment, poems such as 'Morning Song' (1961) and 'Candles' (1960) are emblematic of British home birth, as they are set in a home where the mother is caring for her baby she has just been delivered of at home. Although at first glance the at-home delivery might seem (as it was to Plath herself) a favourable alternative of American medicalised birth, which is shut from the medical experts and ideologies behind their practices, this supposedly private, closely shut sphere of home will be revealed to be contiguous to the outer world, where the speakers are alert to invading ideologies.

Before moving to those motherhood poems, I would like to hover a little longer over 'A Life' to look into a nuanced depiction of a nostalgised domicile somewhere in England. Suggestively, the woman's turbulent and forlorn life described in the latter half of the poem is juxtaposed with the preceding portrait of the tranquil life of a 'valentine-face[d]' family encapsulated in an 'egg-shaped bailiwick, clear as a tear' (2). It is certainly important to see, as Christina Britzolakis does, the similarity between this scene contained in glass and the poet's retrospection of her childhood in Winthrop Massachusetts, the bayside of the Atlantic Ocean in her memoir 'Ocean 1212-W'.[51] Still, as the word 'bailiwick', which was first used in English history to mean a district or jurisdiction of a bailiff, signals old-time England, we cannot

[49] Jo Gill, '"Exaggerated American": Ted Hughes's Birthday Letters', *Journal of Transatlantic Studies* 2, no. 2 (2004): 181, https://doi.org/10.1080/14794010408656833.

[50] 'A Life' [two typescripts], Box 10, Folder 137, Sylvia Plath Collection, Mortimer Rare Book Room, Smith College, Northampton MA.; 'A Life' [typescript], Plath mss., Lilly Library, Indiana University, Bloomington, Indiana.

[51] Christina Britzolakis, *Sylvia Plath and the Theatre of Mourning* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1999), 52.

ignore a series of British motifs—and especially the images related to the British royal household—that characterise the scene:

> At their feet, the sea waves bow in single file,
> Never trespassing in bad temper:
> Stalling in midair,
> Short-reined, pawing like paradeground horses.
> Overhead, the clouds sit tasseled and fancy
>
> As Victorian cushions. This family
> Of valentine-faces might please a collector:
> They ring true, like good china. (11-18)

This snowdome-like miniature globe contains 'the sea waves […] like paradeground horses' which reminds the reader of Royal Horse Guards, in addition to 'the clouds' like 'Victorian cushions'. At first sight, the household scene in Britain doubly guarded by the Household Cavalry and the calm sea impresses us as a favourable alternative to the desolate hospital scape (dotted with Plath's biographical objects related with the social unease of post-war America). Nevertheless, we should also note that this unrealistic world is 'idealised, even deliberately sentimentalised' as Eileen Aird points out.[52] In fact, into this 'Windless threadwork of a tapestry' (5) Plath purposefully weaves words relating to territory and invasion ('bailiwick', 'trespass') and military images ('file') which, especially when we read these lines for the second time after we came across the word 'blitzkrieg' in line 24, evoke a war-like scene. On our second look, the scene rather makes us think of the fact that the 'sea waves' usually 'bow[ing] in single file' did trespass 'in bad temper' thronged with battleships in maritime warfare; that the clouds settling over the estate like fancy cushions on comfortable sofas in the royal residences were ragged by the German aircraft; and that the Household Cavalry had to guard—but how?—the family, whose faces must have been not sweet as 'valentine-faces' any more but terrified by the fear of aircraft attacks. By showing that even the most securely guarded family space was open to attack, the poem renders such an enclosed British family estate as nothing but a relic of the distant past and exposes a nostalgic ideal encapsulated in the miniature globe through post-war disillusionment.

The metaphor of the glass container in *The Bell Jar*, Britzolakis notes, signals 'the quasi-scientific detachment' inherent in Esther who 'schizophrenically views her own life as a laboratory specimen'.[53] And so does the speaker of 'A Life', who is probably very close to Plath herself, in a more thorough manner: this time the speaker's life is split into two samples she dialectically engages with. As Plath observes in a detached way the two miniature worlds, she estranges herself from her native land and yet is unable to fully conform to her second home in England. As we have seen, the two worlds have a certain similarity, sharing an ideal of tightly enclosed,

[52] Eileen Aird, '"Poem for a Birthday" to *Three Women*: Development in the Poetry of Sylvia Plath' in *Sylvia Plath: The Critical Heritage*, ed. Linda W. Wagner (London: Routledge, 1988), 201.
[53] Britzolakis, *Theatre of Mourning*, 53.

monolithic community. The title even suggests that they are the versions of the same world. This transatlantic, double disillusionment seems crucial for Plath in forming a consciousness of not wholly belonging to any particular place.

The nostalgic and idealistic view of the household as an ultimate sanctuary from social anxiety is renewed in 'Morning Song' through the speaker's experience of childbirth at home. What the poem offers is in one sense a highly private and intimate space, where the mother is addressing her baby who has just been born. The childbirth conducted at home with the assistance of the 'midwife' (2) and the mother's 'Victorian nightgown' (14) mark the scene as somewhere in England. The mother's clear consciousness, which captures the baby's birth with the vivid and concrete image of 'a fat gold watch' (1) that comes out of the abstract concept 'Love' (1), is in sharp contrast with the numbness of the anaesthetised mother who 'didn't answer or raise her head' even when the doctor said 'It's a boy, Mrs Tomolillo'.[54] Unlike hospital birth, where the mother is 'sent off on a stretcher in the opposite direction from her child',[55] British home delivery allows her to stay with her baby. Nevertheless, the space begins to transform into the public space of a museum:

> Our voices echo, magnifying your arrival. New statue.
> In a drafty museum, your nakedness
> Shadows our safety. We stand round blankly as walls.
>
> I'm no more your mother
> Than the cloud that distills a mirror to reflect its own slow
> Effacement at the wind's hand.
>
> All night your moth-breath
> Flickers among the flat pink roses. I wake to listen:
> A far sea moves in my ear. (4-12)

Here the house the baby was born into is compared to the museum, and there the newly installed 'statue', the baby, will be constantly exposed to the intent public gaze. In the room the adults are standing as 'walls' and guarding the baby, but the architecture is 'drafty', not entirely protected from the outer world. (The word 'drafty' is a key word which recurs in Plath's poems about maternity as a constant reminder of the permeability of the domestic sphere. It also appears, for example, in 'Parliament Hill Fields': 'Gulls stiffen to their chill vigil in the drafty half-light; I enter the lit house' [49–50].) Then in the next stanza, the wall becomes more and more tenuous as the mother compares herself to the 'clouds' which are dissipated by the wind and then finally disappear. As the walls disappear, the interior begins to merge with the outside world: the baby's sleeping breath is hyphenated with the small sound made by the 'moth' flying around the 'roses' in the garden, and here is no distinction between the inside and outside. Besides, the inner and outer spaces are bound up by means of the fricatives in the consonance ('mo*th*'/'brea*th*', '*Fl*ickers'/ '*fl*at') mimicking and confusing the baby's breath and the fluttering of the moth.

[54] Plath, *The Bell Jar*, 69.

[55] Plath, *The Letters Volume II*, 451.

As the accumulating fricatives are finally voiced in 'roses' and 'moves', the sound comes to be enlarged as the 'far sea' that 'moves in my ear', getting beyond the land, before in the final stanza the poem's range even reaches to the 'stars' (16). As these sound effects again show, the room is so quiet and intimate that the mother's ears can catch the small sounds of the baby's breathing; yet it is never entirely unconnected with the vast, open space of the sea and the sky.

Although Plath preferred British home delivery to American hospital delivery, she was critical of certain elements of the former. For example, she had ambivalent attitudes toward natural childbirth, which was popularised by Grantly Dick Read's *Childbirth Without Fear* (1933) in the mid-1950s in Great Britain and the USA. Plath's copy of this book is massively underlined (specifically in the sections providing an account of the 'Fear-Tension-Pain Syndrome' and prescriptions on diet) and indicates that she was eager to learn about Readian methods, and she actually attended relaxation classes at an antenatal clinic in London before her first child's birth.[56] Nevertheless, she was consistently dismissive of Read's tendency to see labour as not physical but spiritual as well as his patriarchal assumptions. For instance, she wrote a big exclamation mark in the margin next to the author's remark that 'Childbirth is not a physical function' (11), and highlighted sentences in which Read deifies labour and the female body.[57] In her letters she wrote that she was 'disgusted with Grantly Dick Read, who at one point says "Childbirth isn't physical!" and goes ga-ga over the Spiritual Nobility etc. of it all, and says you're only in pain if you're nervous'.[58] As Tess Cosslett argues, even though Readian natural childbirth draws attention to the subjective experience of the birthing woman by minimising medical intervention and emphasising the importance of knowledge and preparation on the woman's part, it is based on the belief that 'the male obstetrician must *control* [her] state of mind' and in this respect it is no different from medicalised birth.[59]

The unsettled private sphere in 'Morning Song' conflated with the museum hints at Plath's sensitivity to this subtle form of medical control pervading even outside the hospital. As Langdon Hammer suggestively points out, Plath's poetry recurrently blurs two symbolic settings, that is, the museum and the hospital, both of which are 'important institutions in professional culture, where male experts superintend the bodies of women and children, represented or actual'.[60] Remarkably, 'Morning

[56] *Plath, The Letters Volume II*, 408, 412, 430. Her copy of Read's *Childbirth Without Fear*, the third edition published by Heinemann in 1959, is housed in the library of Sylvia Plath at Smith College, Northampton MA.

[57] For example, Plath marked a sentence where Read begins to talk about motherhood as 'a holy estate' (6) with a bold vertical line and wrote an exclamation mark beside his claim that every girl finally falls in love upon and marries 'one semi-divine individual', no matter how 'blissfully ignorant' she is of 'the fact that she is but an instrument in the design of Nature' (7).

[58] Plath, *The Letters Volume II*, 519.

[59] Tess Cosslett, *Women Writing Childbirth: Modern Discoveries of Motherhood* (Manchester: Manchester University Press, 1994), 15.

[60] Langdon Hammer, 'Plath's Lives', Representations 75, no. 1 (2001): 79, https://doi.org/10.1525/rep.2001.75.1.61.

Song', 'Barren Woman' and 'Heavy Women', a series of poems Plath wrote in a four-day period in February 1961 deal with different aspects of women's reproductive lives and all utilise the motifs of statues, museums and paintings.[61] The fact that those poems together anticipate *Three Women* (1962), a radio play narrated by three women in maternity ward, is also suggestive of this reciprocity of two institutions.[62] By dismantling the notion of a clear-cut separation between the medical, the artistic and the domestic, Plath debunks the notion of a 'private' birth at home and demonstrates that control/regulation is omnipresent both in the institutions and home.

Thus, unlike the hermetically sealed familial space in 'A Life', the home in 'Morning Song' is subjected to a constant spatial transformation, which concurs with the speaker's newborn doubt about her preconceived notions about being a mother ('I'm no more your mother'). At the moment of her baby's birth, in other words, she is forced to recognise that her expectation that she will gain a securer identity as a mother by fulfilling her new role of providing an absolute safety for her baby is a mere delusion. This awakening to a new, precarious nature of motherhood is intensified as she becomes aware of her situation of being a mother in England more clearly than ever when she hears: 'One cry, and I stumble from bed, cow-heavy and floral / In my Victorian nightgown' (13–14). In her adopted country, she 'wake[s]' to imaginatively listen for the ocean which is now 'far' from her residence in London (unlike Plath's hometown in Massachusetts) where she, whose use of American spelling of 'drafty' signals the speaking subject still identifying with its cultural root, suddenly finds herself in her 'Victorian' gown with her heavy breasts full of milk. The word 'stumble' implies the speaker's loss of her cultural footing at the moment of her child's birth, and here the profound disturbance in her identity is encapsulated in the degradation of the maternal subject into the state of non-human entities—of a domesticated cattle (not far from the de-humanising view of the maternal body as a factory) and even of a flower—dressing, strangely, like a human.

Similarly, the October 1960 poem 'Candles' is set in a home where the speaker is nursing her newborn daughter whose eyes 'are scarcely open' (28) and who is 'still in a birth-drowse' (33) by candlelight at night. As through the comparison to 'draughty ephemerids' (30) the candlelights are shown as windswept and burning out, the home is again not entirely shut up but permeable and subject to external influence. This time Plath's original use of U. S. spelling 'drafty' in her archived typescripts is wrongly typeset as 'draughty' in *The Collected Poems* by the publisher.[63] This inconsistency in spelling might indicate the oscillation between two places, or it is more likely read as the poet's conscious refusal to prioritise one against the other.

[61] Tracy Brain, 'Unstable Manuscripts' in *The Unraveling Archive: Essays on Sylvia Plath*, ed. Anita Helle (Ann Arbor: University of Michigan Press, 2007), 21.

[62] Ibid.

[63] 'Candles' [two typescripts], Box 7, Folder 43, Sylvia Plath Collection, Mortimer Rare Book Room, Smith College, Northampton MA.; 'Candles' [typescript], Plath mss., Lilly Library, Indiana University, Bloomington, Indiana.

If the house in 'Candles' does not undergo the spatial transformation and disintegration like 'Morning Song', its preconceived closedness and uniformity are challenged from inside by transnational family history told by the mother to the baby. As is shown in the poem's final lines, in the house, where 'Tonight, like a shawl, the mild light enfolds her [the baby]' (34), there are not only the speaker and the baby but also 'The shadows' that 'stoop over like guests at a christening' (35). Those shadows are of the speaker's ancestors—'my maternal grandmother from Vienna' (17) and 'my grandfather moped in the Tyrol' (20). The speaker's grandparents are based on Plath's actual Austrian grandparents on her mother's side, Aurelia Greenwood Schober (1887–1956) and Frank Schober (1880–1965), as she states in her letter to her mother on 26 October 1960: 'The other poem is about candles & reminiscences of grammy & grampy in Austria spoken while nursing Frieda by candlelight at 2 am. I'm very fond of it'.[64] Although this nursing scene is marked by Christian motifs 'saints' (4) and a ceremony of 'christening' on which High Church Anglicanism ('a high-church hush' [22]) places a heavy emphasis, the poem has another central motif, that is, the Jewish practice of candle lighting in honour of the life and memory of the deceased relatives.[65] Brain suggestively discusses Plath's reference to the Jews, who 'have been historically associated with wandering and homelessness, and have been persecuted for an ethnicity that threatens the supposed purity of others', as a strategy of revealing 'the status of any national identity as contingent and multiple'.[66]

As the association of candles with 'balloon flights' (12) signals their transboundary function, the poem illuminates a journey into the speaker's family roots. In the family history told by the mother, different places on both sides of the Atlantic are juxtaposed: England where the mother lives, 'Vienna' and 'Tyrol' where her grandparents were originally from, and 'America' of which her grandfather was dreaming (and where Plath's real grandparents immigrated to and met with each other in the early 1900s). The poem's form itself reflects these cross-boundary movements, as in each stanza (except the last two stanzas) a new sentence begins in the final line and runs over from the stanza to the next. Again, however, the transatlantic journey was no way to paradise. What the grandfather could acquire or imagine to acquire was a position of 'a headwaiter' (21) in an oppressive 'high-church hush / Among ice buckets, frosty napkins' (22–23).

Given her grandparents' personal predicament and the larger political situation of the Continent followed by disasters, the speaker is full of scepticism about optimistic and flamboyant 'Edwardian sentiments' (16) that the candles evoke. Nor does she align herself with the anachronistic 'private point of view' (13) of the candles associated with the 'romantics' (1) in the previous era, while she never advocates the classical realism or objectivity which technological developments such as 'balloon flights and the stereopticon' (12) promise. For all her postmodern distrusts, the

[64] Plath, *The Letters Volume II*, 531.
[65] Gill, *The Cambridge Introduction*, 118.
[66] Brain, *The Other Sylvia Plath*, 61.

poem underscores that the speaker's mindset is also not permanent but inevitably mutable under the complex matrix of spatial, temporal and gendered conditions:

> In twenty years I shall be retrograde
> As these [drafty] ephemerids.
>
> I watch their spilt tears cloud and dull to pearls.
> How shall I tell anything at all
> To this infant still in a birth-drowse? (29-33)

Here, again, the presence of the baby does not secure the mother's identity but complicates it. Adding another chapter to the family history, the mother is urged to acknowledge the historically and geographically contingent identity formed through her own genealogy. So far the poem's central image of the candles have undergone a myriad of transformations from 'the bodies of saints' (4) to the Viennese 'children' who 'wore white' (19) to the 'headwaiter in America' (21), and each of them is short-lived as 'ephemerids' and scarcely allows her a moment to identify with them. As she watches the way the metamorphic body (wax) is 'spilt' like her scattered ancestral roots, her amorphous sense of self crystallises into 'pearls' made of impure tears that 'cloud and dull', while, in the first place, the dripping of the candle grease allude to her lactation. As such, the discursive history troubles the speaking subject ('How shall I tell anything at all?'). In Plath's post-war maternal poem, the image of candles is at once endowed a function as an objective correlative for the mother's newborn awareness about identities of nationality and gender, while also showing that she is impregnated with doubt about its universal and immutable values.

Conclusion

In a letter she wrote to her mother from Cambridge in March 1955, Plath once professed herself 'your puddle-jumping daughter'.[67] This fluid mindset, as we have seen, further grew in her later years through her experience of cross-cultural childbearing. Her letter to her mother after her son's birth in January 1962 hints at the profound effect the experience had on her self: she writes, 'I have the queerest feeling of having been reborn with Frieda'.[68] The works written in her pregnancy in London and during the year after her first child's birth are a record of her persistent attempts to translate this 'queerest feeling' into her unique portraits of the maternal. Refreshing and often discomforting our notion of motherhood, nationality and identity, Plath's works present the maternal as dynamic in its own right and reimagine it as a ground where the relation between gender and the formation of one's national identity is consistently defined and redefined through cross-cultural interactions with the world.

[67] Sylvia Plath, *The Letters of Sylvia Plath Volume I: 1940–1956*, ed. Peter K Steinberg and Karen Kukil, (London: Faber and Faber, 2017), 903.
[68] Plath, *The Letters Volume II*, 739.

Acknowledgements I wish to thank my anonymous reviewers for their helpful feedback. I am also grateful to my supervisors Professor Jo Gill and Professor Jana Funke for their invaluable comments and suggestions on the earlier versions of this article. My research in the Sylvia Plath Collection at Smith College was enabled by the British Association for American Studies and was greatly aided by generous help from Karen V. Kukil, Associate Curator of Special Collections at Smith College, to both of whom I express my sincere gratitude. References to and quotations from documents in the Sylvia Plath Collections are with permissions of the Young Library, Smith College and the Lilly Library, Indiana University, and I thank these organisations for their permissions.

Author's contribution Shihoko Inoue is a PhD candidate at the University of Exeter. Her research focuses on the shifting borders and boundaries of the body and poetic subjectivity in the Cold War period.

Funding This research was funded by the Japan Student Services Organization (JASSO). It was also benefited from a British Association for American Studies (BAAS) Postgraduate Short Term Travel Award (the Malcolm Bradbury Award), which enabled me to make visits to the Sylvia Plath archives at Smith College and Indiana University.

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Shihoko Inoue Shihoko Inoue was born and educated in Japan. After completing her BA (English) and her MA (English) at Kobe City University of Foreign Studies, she was granted a scholarship from the Japan Student Services Organization (JASSO) to study for a PhD at the University of Exeter from 2018. She is currently writing her PhD thesis on the poetry of Sylvia Plath, Elizabeth Bishop and Anne Sexton. Her research focuses on the shifting borders and boundaries of the body and poetic subjectivity in the Cold War period.