Anne Boyer
Garments Against Women
Ahsahta Press, 2015

Reviewed by Allison Cardon

What is a Minor Reality? Paranoia in *Garments Against Women*

It's no secret that paranoia and theory share their structure, if not their hermeneutics: both explain the world by discounting some perceptions and validating others. Freud himself noted the commonalities between his own psychoanalytic theory and the paranoid instance he takes as paradigmatic—the self-described nervous illness of the German judge, Dr. Schreber, whose delusions included the belief that the sun shined out of his ass. Having used Schreber's memoirs to describe the etiology of paranoia, Freud quipped: "It remains for the future to decide whether there is more delusion in my theory than I should like to admit, or whether there is more truth in Schreber's delusion than other people are as yet prepared to believe."[1] His joke highlights the politics of both the illness and the theory: each is fundamentally about accounting for the relationship of a particular subject or grouping of subjects to a general, authoritative reality. Paranoia is a n unauthorized departure from this reality—a minor reality.

In her 2015 collection, *Garments Against Women*, Anne Boyer takes up Freud's challenge to the future to investigate the relationship between truth and delusion, and while she may not finally find truth in Schreber's..." particular delusions, she does examine the question of authority at the heart of Freud's quip. For Freud, paranoia is characterized by a distorted relationship to reality: "an internal perception is suppressed, and, instead, its content, after undergoing a certain kind of distortion, enters consciousness as a form of external perception. In delusions of persecution the distortion consists in a transformation of affect; what should have been

felt internally as love is perceived externally as hate."[2] For Boyer, reality distorts and discounts particular perceptions. Indeed, certain kinds of people seem to have a monopoly on valid "external perception," while some sorts of perceptions are relegated to "internal" status—"all in the head "of the perceiver: "[d]espite the reality of the sky, that it is blue, a woman without any interior is trumped by a man with any exterior. Or that is what I read in the notes: even the color of the sky is stable only as long as it has a man's proof." Questioning the self-evidence of Freud's distinction between internal and external perceptions, she shows how that distinction is refracted through social categories like gender—encoding authority over reality or discounting certain versions of it."

Eve Sedgwick famously noted the symmetry between the paranoid and political postures: "In world where no one need be delusional to find evidence of systemic oppression, to theorize out of anything *but* a paranoid critical stance has come to seem naïve, pious, or complaisant."[3] With critical mass, Sedgwick suggests, paranoid perceptions can be transformed and elevated to erudition. Boyer explores the other side of Sedgwick's observations: voiced in the wrong context or by the wrong person, a prescient critique can be deflated and discounted as paranoia. But while the label of paranoia can prohibit the broad acceptance of a particular critique, it can also act as a mask or a screen for the critic. Boyer shares perceptions that she knows would be dismissed from authoritative reality as paranoid. She discloses open secrets—"inadmissible information"—strategically sharing information that would render her a target were they made in any other form or medium than poetry:

> Poetry is the wrong art for people who love justice. It was not like dance music. Painting is the wrong art for people who love justice. It is not like science fiction. Epics are the dance music of the people who love war. Movies are the justice of the people who love war. Information is the poetry of the people who love war.

Here she interrogates one common sense, authoritative understanding of poetry—that it is, indeed, an art appropriate for those who love justice—as she considers certain kinds of art and their relationship to certain political stances. Her claims are reminiscent of Adorno's militant insistence on the fascism at the heart of the culture industry. Yet by making she these claims *as a poet* in a book of poetry, they fly under the radar—she reveals an open secret in a form that "the people who love war" will ignore. Open secrets are as much about the people who know them as they are about their content; they're dangerous when they are disclosed in the wrong context by the wrong person.[4] Boyer manages their threat by articulating this information as she claims precisely those positions whose relationship to reality are tenuous at best: poet, woman, mother. The poet's claims may as well be delusional, paranoid projections.

I don't mean to claim that all projections are paranoid; rather, those of the paranoiac have a special character for Freud because they represent an attempt to reconstitute the world: "[t]he end of the world is the projection of this internal catastrophe; [their] subjective world has come to an end since [their] withdrawal of [their] love from it….And the paranoiac builds it again, not more splendid, it is true, but at least so that [they] can once more live in it."[5] Boyer's projections are paranoiac insofar as they allow her to shore up her connection to the world instead of turning away from it completely: "the human subject has recaptured a relation, and often a very intense one, to the people and things in the world, even though that relation is a hostile one now, where formerly it was hopefully affectionate."[6] Though poetry may not help her gain an authorized purchase on the dominant reality, through it Boyer recaptures a relation to the world. Her poetics enable her to examine the politics of reality and remain in the world in spite of its hostility.

The reality principle enables the normative individual to "differentiate between what is internal—what belongs to the ego—and what is external—what emanates from the outer world."[7] But the poet, like the paranoiac, has difficulty differentiating between them. Boyer records the realities that

exceed or escape this principle, documenting the processes by which they are minoritized and dismissed. See, for example, "Venge-Text":

> I will leave no memoir, just a bitch's *Maldoror*. There's a man. He tells me he does not like the version of the story in which he is like Simon Legree who ties me down to the railroad tracks. This is because he is like Simon Legree who ties me down to the railroad tracks. He is the man who looks at the blue sky and says, "Do not remember this sky as blue."
>
> I look with my eyes at the blue sky and see that it is blue, then also I look with my eyes at him and make a note to not remember the blue sky as blue. I make a note, also, to remember the proclamation, by him, against the color of the sky. I make a note also, that I will have known the sky was blue, then I will have been told to forget what I know about the sky and probably did. I make a note to doubt the legibility of these notes for they are notes about people who together believe a human sentence—one spoken by a man and heard by a woman—can commute the blueness of the sky itself. (49)

The man who ties the speaker down is like Simon Legree, the spectacularly vicious slave-owner from *Uncle Tom's Cabin*, because both demand that their victims deny their own terror and the reality to which such terror is a testament. Instead of leaving a memoir, she makes a series of notes (writing at its most provisional) that subtly undermine the reality he violently imposes. Memoir is unavailable to her because the genre requires a less vexed relationship to reality, and the Legree-like man is the embodiment of the reality principle, crushing her reality and overwriting it with his. Memories or documents that offer a different understanding of that reality are inadmissible, unreliable, or paranoid. The man's reality disavows its own violence by declaring an essential commensurability between his experience and hers. His is the norm, so hers must agree with his to be valid. Interchangeability and exchangeability are

the organizing principles of this reality: if I cannot show how my experience is universally available and applicable to all, my experience is idiosyncratic, paranoid, and does not count. Boyer anticipates and elides this policing simply by articulating her reality in a poetic mode—after all, poetry is not a form known for its realism. Over and over again in *Garments Against Women*, she makes claims about reality and traces how they are diluted, discounted, or effaced. The politics of reality are caught up in the web of her paranoid projection.

Paranoiac projection is particularly unseemly because it stages a different set of relations between the internal and external, the major and the minor, that which characterizes normative reality and the authority that it supports.[8] These projections reveal how that reality is not just relational but political—a matter of social construction and coercion rather than immutable, self-evident fact. Boyer's poetic projections trace the construction and consolidation of that reality as well as its casualties. Indeed, the reality principle demands conformity from everyone—but this is easier for some than others. In "At Least Two Types of People," she meditates on this difference:

> There are at least two types of people, the first for whom the ordinary worldliness is easy. The regular social routines and material cares are nothing too external to them and easily absorbed. They are not alien from the creation and maintenance of the world, and the world does not treat them as alien … The world is for the world and for them.
>
> Then there are those over whom the events and opportunities of the everyday world wash over. There is rarely, in this second type, any easy kind of absorption. There is only a visible evidence of having been made of a different substance, one that repels. Also, from them, it is almost impossible to give the world what it will welcome or reward. (23)

The first type of person is a normative subject who appropriately differentiates between their internal and external perceptions. The latter category comprises everyone else—those whose insides and outsides threaten to overwhelm normative distinctions and for whom the rewards of monolithic reality are out of reach. The prosey quality of these lines is both Boyer's disguise and her tell: it gives her claims a sense of logical progression even as it exposes the illogic of the reality she can't quite measure up to. The form both covers and exaggerates the veracity of her claims.

Boyer's theory of absorption suggests that one will have an authorized grasp on reality if they are willing to deny their particularity. The normative type of person is thereby able to keep up with the demands of the reality principle by internalizing the logic of infinite exchangeability; what's more, the demand for exchange reveals the collaboration between the reality principle and capitalist ideology. *Garments Against Women* dramatizes the imperative to internalize this logic of exchange through Boyer's attempts to replace "literature" with almost anything else. Take the poem "Sewing," for example: "Having given up literature, it was easy to become fixed on the idea of a single shirt" (25). Though she trades one pursuit for another, her paranoia forces their singularity—their inexchangeability—into view. She cannot make literature exchangeable with sewing. Nor can she make one sewn object interchangeable with any others. The paradigmatic product of market exchange and mass-production—an article of clothing produced by the garment industry—is not exchangeable here, despite all the forms of exchange that make the industry, market, and its products possible:

> I sew and the historical of sewing becomes a feeling, just as when I used to be a poet, when I used to write poetry, used to write poetry and that thing—culture—began tendrilling out in me, but it is probably more meaningful to sew a dress than to write a poem. (29)

She goes on to list the costs of mass-produced garments at the stores in which they are sold, alienated from the labor conditions and laborers that

produced them. Someone with a firm grip on reality might make their purchases without a thought, enjoying any product as though it arrived at the store by magic. Boyer is not one of those people:

> All of these have been made, for the most part, from hours of women and children's lives … The fabric still contains the hours of the lives, those of the farmers and shepherds and chemists and factory workers and truckers and salespeople and the first purchasers, the givers-away, who were probably women who sewed.

Ultimately, sewing and writing are both forms of paranoid resistance to the logic of exchange—these products (these projections) are each irreplaceable. Exposing the imperative to participate in this sort of exchange, Boyer thereby highlights the opposition between the dominant, monolithic reality and a careful account of particularity. That reality insists that all experience is essentially shared and that attachments are thus exchangeable and replaceable; in her paranoia, Boyer can reject this imperative and attend to her particular objects and experiences, minor though they be.

One of the implications of Boyer's intervention is her sense that the paranoiac is characterized by their abnormal or anti-normative relationship to loss—the time lost sewing, the connections lost to capital, the perceptions lost to the reality principle. By highlighting its particularity, its singularity—that is, in its historicity—she invites us to recognize the underlying drive motivating her paranoia: an insistence on recognizing and remarking historicity and particularity; the principles of a minor reality over and against a majoritarian one. *Garments Against Women* projects a world "not more splendid…but at least so that [we] can once more live in it."[9]

Works Cited

Boyer, Anne. *Garments Against Women*. Boise: Ahasahta Press, 2015.

Freud, Sigmund. *Civilization and Its Discontents*. New York: Norton, 1930. Web.
—. "Formulations on Two Principles of Mental Functioning." *The Freud Reader*. New York: Norton, 1989. 301-306.
—. "Freud Complete Works: 1890-1939." "Psycho-analytic Notes on an Autobiographical Account of a Case of Paranoia (Dementia Paranoides). (1911).

Sedgwick, Eve Kosofsky. "Some Binarisms." *Epistemology of the Closet*. Berkeley: U of California Press, 1990. 91-130.
—. "Paranoid Reading and Reparative Reading, or, You're So Paranoid, You Probably Think This Essay is About You." *Touching Feeling*. Durham: Duke, 2003. 123-151.

---

[1] Eve Sedgwick's famous essay on the sort of paranoia that seems to saturate most literary criticism and political theory begins by noting that, "[i]n the last paragraphs of Freud's essay on the paranoid Dr. Schreber, there is a discussion of what Freud considers a 'striking similarity' between Schreber's systematic persecutory delusion and Freud's own theory…For all his slyness, it may be true that the putative congruence between paranoia and theory was unpalatable to Freud…" (Paranoid Reading, Reparative Reading 125).

[2] 1026.

[3] "Paranoid Reading, Reparative Reading." 125-126.

[4] For Eve Sedgwick, there is a fatal symmetry that structures the sort of paranoid knowledge that constitutes the open secret: "to know and to be known become the same process," and therefore the paranoiac will either be exposed for their paranoia or disciplined for their unauthorized disclosure (*Epistemology of the Closet* 100-102).

[5] 1028.

[6] *Ibid*.

[7] Freud, *Civilization and Its Discontents*, 14.

[8] *"The delusion formation, which we take to be a pathological product, is in reality an attempt at recovery, a process of reconstruction*…the man has recaptured a relation, and often a very intense one, to the people and things in the world, although the relation may be a hostile one now, where formerly it was sympathetic and affectionate." "On the Mechanism of Paranoia," 24, emphasis in original.

[9] *ibid*. 24.