

Notes on Molecular Girl – Mel Chua

First reaction: after reading the title and the start of the abstract, I groaned inwardly.

Ordinary experience encrypted into academic words. I understand that sometimes this theoretical translation helps us get ideas into formats that give us more affordance for articulating and transforming it into a different sort of understanding. At the same time, I needed to warm-up my brain's buffer to hold the pictures that the abstract words would be weaving inside my head -- the paper wasn't going to hold those thoughts or imagery for me. (p1)

At the same time, this sounds like what I'm doing -- "engaging in different collaborative strategies of deconstructive writing and talking" and resisting the image of philosophy as an "independent, intellectual, disembodied, and masculine-coded endeavour." There are some nice, sticky phrases: "the tactile embodiment of collaborative deconstructive research strategies" is about pulling things into the real world, the messy, sweaty, contradictory world. While I strain against the language (perfectly understandable, but not the way I want to write myself), I also nod at the actions explained by the message. (p1)

The paper quickly paints a picture of the academy as a place where people are aware of existing inequalities and beginning to embrace and call for different sorts of dialogues, even conflicting dialogues, that represent and draw out more of the multivocality of the world. (p2-4)

We're reading a case study by a teacher who was asked by students from a variety of disciplines to help them (the students) reflect on their own analytic practices; this case study is being written after the class, as the teacher sits down at the end of a long semester trying to figure out how to capture it all (p4-5).

I still don't understand where the image of the "molecular girl" comes in, and I'm 1/6th of the way through the paper. She's used this phrase multiple times, but always in isolation, no explanation nearby that I can see or understand.

The first thing the author takes up is feminism, bringing in citations of Deleuze and Lloyd

and others to shore up the arguments that philosophy has mostly been thought of as "male," with "female philosophy" standing as an outsider, an oxymoron, in the space. (p7-8) 9 of the 10 students who requested the class were female (p 9), but females don't necessarily make an activity feminist -- and "feminism" is painted as "embodied" or "collaborative" in contrast (or opposition?) to the male. Even if the paper says that "in terms of feminism... women are not bound to the category of Women subordinated to Man, nor to the image of philosophy as Man," it still set up its argument with "HERE IS MAN!" and then "in contrast, we are feminist!" so I would say it actually falls into the same trap it describes.

As I read on (p 11-12) I'm struck by now... normal this all seems. Of course you'd work together, using distributed collaboration tools if you have to. You'd publicly document your process to make visible your thinking along the way. You're trying to get yourself aware of and possibly out of your old habits of thinking. Of course it's challenging -- more challenging for some than others. Of course it's wrestling, contradictory, something that "hits us," transformative. How else would you work? (Why are you writing this down? How can this possibly be a journal paper?) At the same time, I realize this way of working isn't normal, that it hasn't been documented in formal scholarly spaces nearly as much as it might be, and that writing "obvious" (to me) papers like this will be how it becomes more of a norm across academia, how my own work in this vein can become more accepted.

As the paper continues to describe how students experimented -- different screen layouts, looking at "dominant and resistant discourses" (p 13), and so forth -- I start to grate at the ex post facto nature of the paper. I want to be shown, not told -- I'd rather have the present-tense written, real-time plungings-in of the students and their experiments in the raw voice of the experimenter-in-the-moment, not with a third-person narrator saying "this is what we found" after the fact, the chaos neatly described. Deleuze is repeatedly invoked, invoked, invoked -- my eyes start glazing over when I see his name. Maybe it's the gloriously sunny afternoon coming through my window, reminding me that I'd rather be outside than at my computer; maybe it's the tiredness at the end of a

long day, but I'm not being caught by this paper right now; my reading is starting to accelerate into skimming-speed.

Finally (p 16) we might have an explanation of what "molecular girl" means -- this seems promising! It can "be understood as a collective researching body -- assemblage, producing increasingly more articulations to widen the realities of the data." In other words, a non-unanimous collaboration, a multivocal one. "Molecular girl" happens to be the phrase they agreed on to describe it -- probably "girl" for the feminist angle (why not "woman"?) and "molecular" for the breaking-up-into-millions-of-tiny-pieces action they felt, but this is the guess of an outside observer reading this paper quickly one exhausted afternoon.

Here's an interesting phrase (p 19): "the ethics of our collaborative work was about being able to trust in a love of the practice itself by the others... without intention to produce a qualitatively 'better analysis' or positioning oneself in specific ways as a researcher." (It's a draft copy, and things are struck out and underlined -- it's hard to tell how I should capture a quote, which is appropriate for the deconstructivist "molecular girl" approach while I am reading. Also, the writing is not quite as terribly academic as I'd feared, except for the long invocations of Deleuze.) It talks about (p 21-22) forces shaping a work, the occupation of a work in almost-violent imagery -- you get the sense they're conscious of this violence but trying to minimize their own, while knowing that some form of violence is always present in manipulation needed for greater understanding.

I'm not sure what the conclusion was, though. The author has basically taken us on her own thought-stream (much as I am thought-streaming into this document right now) regarding the experience.