PAIN, PLEASURE, AND PEONIES: SOMATIC COMPOSITION

By

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“In spring the pulse is like the strings of a lute.”

*The Yellow Emperor’s Classic of Internal Medicine*, ca. 600

“Sounds go through the muscles / These abstract wordless movements / They start off cells that / Haven't been touched before / These cells are virgins / I like this resonance / It elevates me / I don't recognize myself”


“What alerts, alters.”

Claudia Rankine, *Don’t Let Me Be Lonely*, 2001

Composer’s Statement

I am a queer somatic composer, and as such I take it as my task to explore embodied creative practices with wholeheartedness and curiosity. In this essay, I will observe themes emerging out of my recent artistic works and methodology, a process I am naming ‘somatic composition.’ My line of inquiry will also approach historical, medical, and literary texts, related primarily to the somatically affecting opera by Tang Xianzu, *The Peony Pavilion* (*Mudan Ting*). My engagement with these translated and/or secondary source materials is grounded in my personal poetic and emotional logic, rather than an academic background in Chinese arts, cultural history, or language.

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Section 1: Pain, Pleasure, and Peonies

I was in the midst of new beginnings – my first book of poetry was about to be published (Martha, Ugly Duckling Presse); I had come out and was building my first long-term queer partnership; I had finally received a diagnosis for my chronic and mysterious vaginal pain (pelvic floor dysfunction or vulvodynia); and I was trying out a cornucopia of new treatments. Two treatments were beginning to shimmer with the possibility of effect – qigong alongside other facets of Chinese Traditional Medicine, and western medicine’s pelvic floor physical therapy.

After years of ineffectual encounters with the medical industry – including pills that disturbed my mental health, creams and suppositories that enflamed my tissues and caused ongoing nerve damage, and worst of all, doctors who told me nothing was wrong or simply gave up on my case – I was finally feeling my body twitch with transformation.

Figure 1 Cover of Martha (Ugly Duckling Presse, 2015), peony image by Molly Schaeffer
All of these themes were bubbling up in my poetry at the time, as was floral imagery, peonies in particular. I was regularly drinking the peony tea prescribed by my acupuncturist (white peony root “relaxes nerves and blood vessels and dispels heat”\(^3\)). My illustrator Molly Schaeffer had just created the peony cover image for *Martha* when I came across another book with a peony on the cover – a lightly worn paperback on the $1 rack outside my local Brooklyn bookshop called *The Peony Pavilion*. Upon purchasing, I began reading and highlighting the text, each delicate word drawing me deeper in love with the work’s cadence, femininity, humor. Though I had no prior familiarity with Chinese literature or performing arts, Tang Xianzu’s 1598 libretto spoke to me immediately and intensely.

Musicologist Judith Peraino has demonstrated how one can personally identify with a work of art, not only its content, but also “its particular situation in the scholarship, its performance and reception history, its dramaturgy, its presentation of the characters.”\(^4\) She traces her experience of “cathartic identification” and “vicarious pleasure” through the Henry Purcell opera *Dido and Aeneas* in order to make the case for a lesbian analysis of the work’s plot, music, and reception.\(^5\) In Peraino’s words,

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5 Peraino, p. 100.
her method was to “project backward (using my lesbian hindsight) to reconfigure history from the perspective of the margins.”

Like Peraino, I identified with the opera *The Peony Pavilion* – the dreamy and mysteriously sick girl struggling for agency, her flower-oriented sexuality and its frustrations, doctors’ and parents’ failed attempts to heal her, the nun with the rock-hard hymen – as well as its history of Qing Dynasty women commentators (17th -18th centuries) expressing their sexualities and their own authorial voices through their published writings about the opera. However, unlike Peraino, the object of my “cathartic identification” and “vicarious pleasure” was/is within a cultural heritage to which I do not belong.

With the context and resources of the Wesleyan Music Department, I finally began the project of formally engaging with Tang Xianzu’s text, *Peony (Queer’s Commentary)*, performed in World Music Hall on April 6, 2019. I structured the piece around my personal access points to the material – Chinese Traditional Medicine’s Five Organ Networks, and the particularly erotic

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6 Ibid.
relationships between the characters and natural realm that I read in my ‘lesbian hindsight’ as queer. Framing the original *Peony Pavilion* and commentary narratives were four original songs representing my personal history and its valences with the texts and themes.

In this paper, I will be investigating the somatic relationships surrounding the *Peony Pavilion* libretto, its readers, and its commentators. Rather than researching the dancing, singing, gesturing, sweating, sweeping, emoting bodies that perform and have performed the live opera, I will focus on Tang Xianzu’s text and its deeply performative and affective history. I will cite a sampling of late Ming and early Qing Dynasty references (from between the 1590s – 1720s) to *The Peony Pavilion*. These excerpts imply that the libretto regularly generated embodied experiences and dramatic emotional behaviors. My own performance project, *Peony (Queer’s Commentary)*, is evidence that Tang Xianzu’s *The Peony Pavilion*, even translated from the original language, several continents away, and hundreds of years removed, still has this capacity.

My ultimate aim as a somatic composer is to create and examine music as a conduit for change. Music as the threshold between the smallest common denominator – cellular, muscular, physical – and the large-scale communities that bring change in waves, communities who throughout time have collaborated to invent and support each others’ agency when none was granted to them. While reading and listening to
my work, I invite you to switch focus between the petal and the garden, like Pauline Oliveros in her meditation illustrating focal and global attention (see Fig. 3). Layer parallel planes of perspectives and reverberate between them. Open and close concentrically like blossoms at dawn and dusk. The subject of this essay determines its form – a peony is a peony is.

**Figure 3** Pauline Oliveros, *Meditation, from a presentation called MMM (Meditation/Mandala/Music) given in 1980 at the Walker Art Center.*

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Section 2: Somatics, Chinese Traditional Medicine, and Somatic Composition

2.1 Encounters with Somatics

The institutionalized study and pedagogy of what is now known as somatics arose out of the dance field in the 1990s. I first encountered the concept as an undergraduate dance major at Sarah Lawrence College, where I studied anatomy, movement forms, and numerous techniques of “embodied consciousness.” Since that time, I have come to understand somatics as a transformation process, a feedback loop oscillating between attuned awareness and self-regulating action within the body. The Oxford English Dictionary traces the term somatics to the Greek root soma or “body,” and a slightly more detailed entry on The Online Etymology Dictionary (etymonline.com) provides a list of meanings for soma including “a human body dead or living; material substance; mass; a person, human being; the whole body or mass of anything.” Somatics understands acts of feeling and acts of adjustment as tied in a mutually causal equation: Awareness \(\leftrightarrow\) Change.

Commenting upon disembodied Western classical musical practices, Suzanne Cusick tears holes through a pedagogy and performance industry that obscures somatic considerations, proclaiming: “Music, an art which self-evidently does not exist until bodies make it and/or receive it, is thought about as though it were a mind-mind

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9 For the record, I have come to understand the body as a non-hierarchical and cohesive system made up of collaborating, simultaneous, interdependent channels of communication and energy flow.
game.”¹⁰ This 1994 essay by Cusick, “Feminist Theory, Music Theory, and the Mind/Body Problem,” first introduced me to the concept of a somatic practice and discourse in music. She proposes developing “a theory of musical bodies,” one that considers the performer’s physical conditions as entwined with the artwork, expanding the concept of “sounding” into “a set of relationships that are only partly relationships among sounds.”¹¹ Music educator Kathryn Woodard, like Cusick, emphasizes music as an embodied phenomenon. In her article “Recovering Disembodied Spirits: Teaching Movement to Musicians,” she emphasizes the centrality of bodily perception and awareness on musicians’ learning of the movements required to play, providing practical exercises for players to develop somatic skills.

Woodard defines somatic music practices as “interventions to begin processes of change.”¹² In her recent book Pleasure Activism: The Politics of Feeling Good, adrienne maree brown describes the importance of somatic work to her understanding of change, citing a definition from social justice organization Generative Somatics: “Somatics is a practice-able theory of change that can move us toward individual, community and collective liberation. Somatics works through the body, engaging us

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¹¹ Cusick, p. 18.
in our thinking, emotions, commitments, vision and action.”\textsuperscript{13} The potential co-applicability of somatic work to healing, creative growth, and liberation makes it an ideal framework for compositional practices that are oriented toward those goals.

2.2 ENCOUNTERS WITH CHINESE TRADITIONAL MEDICINE (CTM)

According to \textit{The Yellow Emperor’s Classic of Internal Medicine} (\textit{Huang Ti Nei Ching Su Wen}) a foundational Chinese medical text first published around 600 (but referring to cases from likely hundreds of years earlier):

“To examine into that which is deep and profound means (to examine) the body and the breath, but the blood and vital essences are not apparent on the outside of the body…[Experts] take into consideration whether the day is cold or warm, whether the moon is empty or full, they consider the four seasons and whether the atmosphere is light or heavy; and they consider how these factors associate with each other, their mutual affinity and their blending and harmony.”\textsuperscript{14}

Apparent in this citation and throughout my experience as a patient of CTM is a philosophy emphasizing the mutually-affective correlation between inner and outer realities. From this perspective, the CTM practitioner/patient may observe the external environment to uncover what is hidden inside the body, and conversely,


Generative Somatics, \url{http://www.generative somatics.org/content/what-somatics}, accessed April 13, 2019.

\textsuperscript{14} Veith, p. 219.
observe the body’s sensations in order to determine and transform its relationship to the external environment.

My most consistent source of accessible CTM care has been the practice of qigong (氣功), literally, “life energy [qi] cultivation,” which is based on processes of “adjustment” (or tiao, 調, also translated as “regulation,” “tuning,” or “alignment”) of body, breath, and mind. Qigong is a multi-faceted set of ancient health and spirituality systems practiced in China for an estimated 5,000-7,000 years. The basis for Chinese martial arts and all forms of CTM, qigong is now taught as a standard medical technique. I am not a scholar or professional in Chinese Traditional Medicine; I write as an engaged patient, with practice in both text- and action-based research. My knowledge comes from personal experience with

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practitioners of different qigong schools with diverse backgrounds in dance, western internal medicine, and physical therapy.

The specific practice aspect of the massive, many-branched fields of CMT and qigong that I will discuss in the context of somatic composition is related to the Five Organs or Five Viscera (see Fig. 5). For six years I have practiced an organ breathing protocol associating the viscera with particular vocables, represented in the second row of Fig. 5. This protocol engages the entire structure of intertwined organs and emotions known as the Five Organ Networks and their philosophical anchor, Five-Phase Theory. Five-Phase Theory is a medical thought system oriented around temporal cycles of transformation. The aspects of the Five Phases relevant to this project are roughly represented in the following chart:

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Organs</th>
<th>Liver</th>
<th>Stomach/Spleen</th>
<th>Heart</th>
<th>Lungs</th>
<th>Kidneys</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Sound</td>
<td>Shh</td>
<td>Mmm</td>
<td>Huh</td>
<td>Sss</td>
<td>Choo</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Season/phase</td>
<td>Spring</td>
<td>Early Summer</td>
<td>Late Summer</td>
<td>Autumn</td>
<td>Winter</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Element</td>
<td>Wood</td>
<td>Earth</td>
<td>Fire</td>
<td>Metal</td>
<td>Water</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Color</td>
<td>Green</td>
<td>Yellow</td>
<td>Red</td>
<td>White</td>
<td>Blue</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Inhale</td>
<td>Compassion</td>
<td>Fairness</td>
<td>Joy</td>
<td>Courage</td>
<td>Trust</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Exhale</td>
<td>Anger/Jealousy</td>
<td>Anxiety</td>
<td>Hastiness</td>
<td>Grief</td>
<td>Fear</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

*Figure 5 The Five Organ Networks / Five Phases*

In the many lineages of qigong and TCM, details vary and complexify, but the main features of the Five Organs and their interdependent network structure remain constant.

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17 Veith, p. 38.
18 Beinfield, p. 87.
19 Veith, p. 21; Beinfield, p. 91.
English-language TCM educational text *Between Heaven and Earth* synthesizes Five-Phase Theory in musical terms: “Five-Phase Theory is like a fugue, with ascending and descending rhythms and recapitulations, repetitions, echoes, and variations on a theme. Each Organ Network is a living system, a melody, expressed through the instrument of the soma and psyche.” It is not a coincidence that the term for “resonance” in Chinese (*ganying, 感應*) is commonly applied in both poetry and medicine. Literary theorist Chu-chin Sun explores *ganying*’s etymology from *gan* (to feel) and *ying* (to respond), explaining that in a poetic context, *ganying* refers to “one’s natural, spontaneous response involving body and soul to the evocative stimuli of the external world.” Writing in a medical context, Emily Wu defines *ganying* as a “synchronized, resonating process…variously translated by Western academics as stimulus-response, sympathetic resonance, impulse and response.” I would add to these translations the coda that *ganying*’s feel/respond cycle can be interpreted as parallel to the somatics Awareness $\leftrightarrow$ Change cycle. Wu cites a music metaphor to further clarify *ganying*’s role in Traditional Chinese Medicine as “the mechanism through which categorically related yet spatially distant phenomena interact…Objects belonging to the same category or class spontaneously resonate with each other just as do two identical tuned strings on a pair of zithers.”

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20 Beinfield, p. 90.
22 Lester, p. 32.
The sonic expressions of breath, focused internal awareness, synesthetic associations, and poetic metaphors of qigong and TCM appeal readily to my creative and musical sensibilities as an artist. It is my aim with this paper to resonate the strings of distant yet poetically related sources – my own body’s history of illness and healing; the embodied language of *The Peony Pavilion* and its commentaries; and my recent explorations in somatic music composition.

2.3 WORKING PRINCIPLES OF SOMATIC COMPOSITION

Gathering together concepts and practices I’ve explored through my creative work in collaborative performance artmaking, my healing work in somatics, physical therapy, and aspects of Traditional Chinese Medicine, as well as the critical reading of feminist musicology, I will delineate seven working principles of what I am calling somatic composition. This list is meant to be responsive to change, not codified or institutionalized. My intention is to embrace somatic principles with my art practice, and to search for their echoes in history. Somatic compositional values are not bound within strictly musical settings, residing potentially in any genre of expression, in creative and healing practices, in activism and teaching work, daily movement and emotional acts of transformation.
1) Somatic composition is founded on the **premise** that change and awareness are tied in a mutually causal loop (Awareness $\leftrightarrow$ Change). This equation affirms two sub-qualities of somatic composition:

   a) Immediate goal of practice is to feel, to build an inner awareness of pain and pleasure, as well as a vocabulary with which to express this awareness.
   b) Long term goal of practice is to build individual and collective agency, the ability to enact change.

2) Somatic composition is invested in a **relationship** with nature/the environment that is non-hierarchical and mutually-affective.

3) Somatic compositional **choices** are based on how the work will *feel* (physically and emotionally) to write, perform, and witness. In this way, choices are soma-centric rather than sonic-centric.

4) Somatic compositional **structures** investigate cycles and cyclicity rather than pursuing linear narratives or outcomes.

5) The **form** of somatic composition is interdisciplinary and inter-sensorial, engaging with the relationships *between* genres and sensations.
6) The ultimate **product** of somatic composition is both collaborative and embodied knowledge.

7) The **process** of creating somatic composition centers healthy physical and emotional conditions for all involved. The conditions under which a somatic composition is produced are as important to its success as any performance. When strategizing a production, I consider ‘social’ and ‘domestic’ tasks with a similar degree of thoroughness and care as I consider ‘creative’ or ‘artistic’ tasks. Food and drink, transportation, compensation, emotional support, clear communication, interpersonal dynamics – all of these aspects of the process are essential to somatic composition.

I invite anyone to practice principles of somatic composition, as I consider it an “open source” process.  

2.4 **EXPLORATIONS IN SOMATIC COMPOSITION**

Below are brief descriptions of four selected somatic compositional projects I have begun in the past year at Wesleyan. Full scores, lyrics, and other documentary materials are located in the Appendix.

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24 This terminology comes from my voice teacher Nick Hallett, whose pedagogy is called Open Source Singing Method.
2.4.1 Somatic String Quartets

During 2018, I wrote my first two compositions within the Western classical instrumental tradition of the string quartet (two violins, viola, cello). Both of my string compositions involved processing data related to cycles of transformation, and caused me to reconsider my own personal sense of time within my body.

Case Study for Four Trees (Spring 2018), translates the annual phenological cycles of four different individual trees into a musical time lapse. Phenological cycles, or phenophases, are how plants relate to their environment through the regulation of cyclical biological events, such as leaf out, bud break, seed drop, etc. (see Fig. 6). I chose to focus on the phenological because it is inherently somatic; the phenological represents a tree’s constant, simultaneous perceiving of and adjusting to surrounding

Figure 6 Charting the phenophases of the Black Oak, American Beech, Black Walnut, and Norwegian Spruce
environmental factors. *Case Study for Four Trees* asks about the characteristics of tree feelings, tree time, tree choices.

My research revealed aspects of tree behavior like decentrality, interdependence, and resilience, and I inscribed these and other tree behavioral patterns into the structure of the quartet, which is comprised of four inter/independent compositions played simultaneously. The cello, violins, and viola oscillate through dozens of potential interlocking melodic lines, as their representative trees are oscillating spatially and temporally between countless decentralized processes such as nutrient transport, root growth, photosynthesis, etc. In *Case Study for Four Trees*, one minute stands for one month of the year, and the year’s sonic unfolding reveals the distinct phenophases of the four different tree species.

I continued to engage with cyclical time with my second string quartet, which I titled *Menstrual Notation*. The purpose of this piece was to interpret my menstrual cycle sonically. I began a process known as moon mapping in August 2018, intricately charting out facets of my cycle in relation to the phases of the moon. Once I developed a consistent mapping practice, I composed a musical lexicon of brief

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27 I learned about this process from a text by La Loba Loca, a Queer, Chocolla, Andina, South American herbalist, artist, and educator (lalobaloca.com). The information on moon mapping came from *We Are All Bodies of Water*, a chapter in their course, Radically and Consciously Mooning.
phrases for each of the physical and emotional aspects I was charting. *Menstrual Notation* represents my October 2018 moon map data processed/translated through this lexicon (see Fig. 7).

The only consistent factor on my charts, the moon, is represented in *Menstrual Notation* by the cello line, which consists of a series of arpeggios transforming subtly over the course of the month. The tempo, rhythm, dynamics, and style of playing of the moon phrases are flexible from day to day, and are determined by the cellist’s instincts throughout the piece. The three other voices take their cues from the cellist. The effect is an energetic and cacophonous exchange of simultaneous musical and somatic gestures.

Both *Case Study for Four Trees* and *Menstrual Notation* attempt to achieve a deeper understanding of and ability to communicate about alternative ways of perceiving time. The practices I developed to compose these quartets (tree observation/biology and moon mapping, respectively) engaged in a positive relationship with natural processes of transformation.
2.4.2 Somatic Chants

My Fall 2018 thesis program “Chants of Survival” consisted of a collection of seven original compositions and arranged covers conceived of together as one somatic composition. Two pieces from this program that I will discuss as particularly relevant to my understanding of somatic composition are *Organ Suite*, for organ, voice, cello, and electronics, and my choral arrangement of Hildegard von Bingen’s liturgical chant honoring St. Ursula, *Fawus Distillans (A Dripping Honeycomb)*.

A sonic meditation about twenty minutes in duration, *Organ Suite* travels musically and lyrically through my five internal organs, expressing, strengthening, and expelling emotions and sensations residing therein. *Organ Suite* is a musical ritual, a functional chant that began with transcribing my visions and experiences while organ breathing into poetic form (see Fig. 5). To accompany these poems with improvised themes on the organ, I located stops to match the moods and elements of five organ networks.

The five chants (Lungs Chant, Kidneys Chant, Heart Chant, Stomach/Spleen Chant, and Liver Chant) are enduring mnemonic devices, filled with reminders. Fragments of the songs still float up into my consciousness, refrains instructing me what parts of myself need attention or healing. As an example, I have underlined the embedded reminders written into the Lungs Chant, which I accompanied on the organ by shimmering between two high cloudy chords, like inhales and exhales:
hanging weight / chain mail / molten protection / silver thread / a hiss / running backwards / listen / crisp big / a gasp / a precursor to truth / grief rises into fall / carves its grooves / along the metal lung walls / gravity’s embrace is slow / and complete / bells breezes messages / threaded through rocks / or great white goose wings / pumping / speaking up / staying in / one place / present and ready / placid presently / placid presently / grey on grey / or a reflection / a loss / and a blind forward motion / breath by breath / until the last one / metal flows and listens / ancient long game / fluent constant / exchange of outside / for in / tin / jangling in the wind / thunder sheet / conductive clarity / boundaries / expanding / in courage / in cave / in darkness so white / instinct shines / a moon / in the mirror

As I cycle through the Suitê, the cellist (Laura Cetilia) trails my voice, pitching microtonally up and down, sometimes alighting on a unison. Her line is the fluctuating shadow of my mental health, stretching the sound sharp with of anxiety and flat with depression. From above, in surround-sound, Paula Matthusen improvises with a pallet of electronics, feedback, and manipulations of recordings of the space in real-time. Orienting her sound textures around descriptors of physical sensations I delineated beforehand such as tingling, numbing, unfurling, aching, and panging, Matthusen’s line frames the body of the piece, delineating the scale of its space, sending sounds through the pathways of the building’s nervous system.
My theoretical and musical approach to engaging with Hildegard von Bingen was to experiment with her notions of dissonance (to sound apart) and consonance (to sound together). Von Bingen’s theology teaches that the fall of humans from God’s grace has generated dissonance, whereas harmony in music represents the unity of God’s creation pre-fall. With my arrangement, I sought to problematize the sacramental Christian doctrine that influenced von Bingen’s notion of harmony/unity and offer a different musical model. My aim was to interpret the unison chant *Favus Distillans* for a group of singers to ‘sound together’ while maintaining individual voices, or ‘sounding apart,’ generating a sense of multiplicity rather than of unity.

To achieve this effect, I cross-pollinated *Favus Distillans* with a technique I learned performing Meredith Monk’s *Other Worlds Revealed* (“Atlas,” 1991) in a workshop with Meredith Monk Vocal Ensemble member Katie Geissinger. *Other Worlds Revealed* requires the singers to line up with a hand on the shoulder of the singer in front. On one end, a singer who knows the melody feeds it, piece by piece, down the line like the game ‘telephone,’ tapping the next singer’s shoulder as cue to repeat the phrase. This technique transforms a melody into a dense rippling round and transforms a group of singers into a collaborating, present, and interdependent organism.

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28 Miranda Lynn Clemens, “That They Might Sing the Song of the Lamb: The Spiritual Value of Singing the Liturgy for Hildegard of Bingen,” PhD Diss., Trent University, 2014, 111.

29 Ibid, p. 50.
To translate *Favus Distillans* into the style of *Other Worlds Revealed*, I broke up Hildegard von Bingen’s signature unison melodic flow into brief phrases of one to four notes at a time. In these chunks, I was able to teach von Bingen’s rhythmically complex and modal composition to a group of fourteen singers of mixed experience and mixed ranges in few rehearsals. I layered the phrases through the Meredith Monk shoulder-tapping technique, amended slightly by placing the singers in a circle instead of a line. Peppered with the clear articulations of fourteen individual voices rising and receding from the group, this polyphonic rendering of *Favus Distillans* is ripe with dissonance. And yet, the circular spatial formation of this *Favus Distillans* both represented and facilitated a musical collectivity.

As Judith Peraino points out in another ‘lesbian hindsight’ sort of analysis, “Some regard [Hildegard von Bingen’s] music and poetry, her distinctive melodies and image-rich gynocentric lyrics, as renegade and homoerotic…as a remarkable creative response to cultural circumstances that place music, sexuality, and women in an ambiguous and ambivalent relationship to constructions of moral behavior.”

Despite my critique of von Bingen’s notions of dissonance and harmony/unity, I certainly align myself with Peraino’s take on the composer. Indeed, I selected *Favus Distillans* out of von Bingen’s prolific collection of works mainly because of its visceral, sensual, pleasure-full lyrics, translated from the Latin as: “A dripping honeycomb /

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was Ursula, virgin / who yearned to lie with God's lamb, / honey and milk beneath her tongue. / For a fruit bearing orchard, a garden in bloom…”

Section 3: A History of This Longing: *The Peony Pavilion* and Its Somatic Legacy

3.1 Tang Xianzu’s *The Peony Pavilion*

Tang Xianzu published the libretto (also referred to interchangeably as a drama, play, script, or text) of *The Peony Pavilion* in 1598 and the first performance took place (likely) in 1599 – the final years of the Ming Dynasty.32 A forty-eight year old scholar, nobleman, and failed bureaucrat, Tang Xianzu was propelled into widespread popularity by *The Peony Pavilion* and his two subsequent “dream” plays.33 Tang Xianzu became a figurehead for the ‘cult’ of *qing*, a term he often discussed and thematized meaning love or feeling, as opposed to its opposite *li*, rationality.34 Tang Xianzu was obsessed with *qing* but never married, opting instead to live on the family estate, writing thousands of poems until his death in 1616.35

Based on an old archetypal tale (*Du Liniang Longing for Love Returns in Spirit Form*) and taking the form of a lyrical romance drama (*chuanqi*), *The Peony Pavilion* is the longest of Tang Xianzu’s plays.36 The narrative buzzes with the sumptuous pleasures of sex and springtime, and scars with the rawness of disappointment and death. Through a

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35 Birch, p. x., I can’t help but wonder if the flamboyance of *The Peony Pavilion* is reflected in the dramatist’s own sexual preferences, but such musings are beyond the scope of this project.
36 Birch, p. xiii.
staggering number of unexpected and sensual twists and turns, we follow the bored and horny 16-year-old noble’s daughter Du Liniang, her ever-present maid Spring Fragrance, and the young scholar Liu Mengmei, who has yet to pass the imperial exams. Energized by the spring weather, Du Liniang sneaks away from her lessons with an old failure of a tutor to gambol about in a peony-lined garden, where she is lulled into sleep, and into a sex dream with Liu Mengmei (see Fig. 837).

I would like to add to the pivotal plot point of the sex dream that I explicitly interpret it as an orgasmic experience for Liniang. While this may seem like a minor detail, it is not an aspect acknowledged in the Peony literature in my bibliography, and it is certainly not a given. What I believe to be Liniang’s orgasm is a defining moment in the play, worth examining in visceral detail as it will have dire visceral consequences for

Liniang once she awakens. Liniang’s point of view during the sexual experience is not provided in the form of dialogue, instead the proclamation of the Flower Spirit showering down red petals upon Liniang’s body fills in the blanks. The Flower Spirit’s monologue is oriented specifically toward Liniang’s pleasure: it is the Flower Spirit’s “special concern” to “ensure that the ‘play of clouds and rain’ [i.e. sex] will be a joyous experience for her.” So I read the Flower Spirit’s petal shower, which is cast when Liniang is at “the dewy brink of a sweet shaded vale,” as an expression of the climax of her “joyous experience.” It is a simultaneously euphoric and tragic moment for Liniang, since the instant of her “fulfillment” is also when she must “loose herself” from the dream. The orgasmic image of fluttering petals will return again and again to Liniang and to the women *Peony* commentators as they express pleasure and loss.

Post orgasm, Liniang is even more agitated than before. When she cannot regain the ecstatic feelings of her dream, she begins to pine away in sadness and horniness until she is driven mad and stops eating. Her last major act is to paint her own self-portrait to preserve her beauty’s legacy. Despite the hapless tutor’s pulse-taking and Taoist nun Sister Stone of the Purple Light Convent’s attempts to heal her, her agony spirals and she perishes. Specifically, Liniang “died of her spring sickness.” Zeitlin traces Liniang’s mythic death through the logic of Chinese medical texts of the time, which

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39 Ibid.
40 Ibid, p. 104.
took, as she writes, “unfulfilled female desire as a serious factor leading to melancholic congestive disorders and possible death.”

Post death, Liniang is sent before the Judge of the Underworld who wants to resurrect her as a bird. The Flower Spirit intervenes again, and the Judge allows her to return to Earth as a human ghost. At the same time, Liu Mengmei has happened to travel to the flowering plum tree where Spring Fragrance has left a shrine with Liniang’s self-portrait. He is obsessed with the image and brings it into his chamber. That night, the resurrected Ghost Liniang is “drawn by the portrait” to visit Liu Mengmei, and they have sex for a second time. Subsequently, Liu Mengmei digs up Liniang’s corpse and Sister Stone performs a spell uniting Liniang’s ghost with her body and reanimating her. While the exhuming of Liniang also gets Liu Mengmei into near fatal trouble with the law, the pair do marry, Liu Mengmei passes the exams and is named Prize Candidate, and their human union is accepted and celebrated.

As even this brief narrative summary makes clear, the pleasures and pains of Du Liniang are so extreme as to both destroy and reanimate her life. Stories of lovesick girls dying from congested qi have been traced, according to Zeitlin, back to the Six Dynasties (220 – 589). This diagnosis, in fiction or otherwise, is within the paradigm

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42 Xianzu, p. 159.
43 Zeilin, p. 61.
of Chinese Traditional Medicine, according to which the emotions reside within and
determine the health of the five internal organs. Zeitlin cites the Ming medical text
The Complete Writings of Physician Zhang (published in 1624, but referring to medical
cases from the fourteen century), specifically a case involving an ill woman whose
wedding has been postponed too long. Physician Zhang concludes, “The Spleen
system governs longing. Excessive longing will cause qi to congest in the Spleen and
make someone stop eating.”

3.2 MING-QING RECEPTION: FROM RAPTURE TO ILLNESS

Tang’s drama drew initial praise from his Ming literati peers. Contemporaneous critic
Wang Siren extolled in his Peony Pavilion commentary: “the soul of the reader is
already overwhelmed and raptured and the muscles are softened within the first three
lines. The precise choice of word is already difficult and subtle, but…the laughers
truly laugh, laugh with sounds; the weepers truly cry, cry with tears; the sighers truly
groan, groan with breaths…each is depicted deeply to the tendons and marrow to explore
the nuances of the vivid seven feelings” (italics mine). The altogether visceral
vocabulary of this analysis points to the explicitly embodied experiences associated
with reading the text of The Peony Pavilion. The dynamic relationship between the
artwork and the reader, wherein the poetry immediately relaxes the reader’s muscular

41 Zeitlin, p. 62.
45 Fei Shi, “Gender, Body and Space: Classical Chinese Theatricality in Contemporary Intercultural
tension due to the vivid emotional depictions of the characters, is a somatic relationship, a relationship of *qing* [love, feeling] rather than *li* [rationality].

However, within the emotional community of early Qing Dynasty upper class Southern China, *whose* muscles were being relaxed and *whose* soul was being raptured by Tang Xianzu’s masterfully evocative writing was a hotly controversial issue. Jingmei Chen cites a letter written 1737 by moralist Shi Zhenlin, warning of the dangers of *The Peony Pavilion*:

“Fenqi once said, ‘The vice of a talented writer is far worse than that of a corrupt official. A corrupt official jeopardizes his country only for decades, but a talented writer composes the debauched and passes [the vice] to posterity by arousing their erotic passion and corrupting the social customs endlessly.’ Recently, two girls sat reading *The Peony Pavilion* together. Later, they died of some disease.’”

This revealing passage indicates the scope of disruptive power that came to be attributed to *The Peony Pavilion*, particularly in text form. The repercussions of reading it, including erotic arousal, social discord, illness, and death, pan out “endlessly.”

The anonymous two girls and their dramatic demise reflect the by-then popular association of *The Peony Pavilion* with deaths of young women (and/or deaths of their

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virginity), which had reached mythic status by this time. For a woman to read *Peony Pavilion* implied the loss of her innocence, and often her health. Tales of an opera singer dying after performing Du Liniang’s tragic lines, a woman perishing of lovesickness for Tang Xianzu, and a girl becoming physically frail after encountering the book, like the ill-fated girls above, were commonly reported.\(^{47}\) Such stories were intended to have a discouraging effect on women readers. And yet, as Chen posits, “When censors of *The Peony Pavilion* repeatedly attacked it for its effect on women, the overtone very much suggests that women were not only reading it but probably were among its most avid readership.”\(^{48}\) The trope of women *Peony* readers being susceptible to some kind of a fatal possession by the text follows a logic of women’s eroticized frailty, which, as Zeitlin points out, was a trend in portrayals and norms of femininity at the time.\(^{49}\) In the fictional realm, the most extreme example of the increasingly pale and incapacitated woman was the “hyperfeminine” ghost.\(^{50}\) Fantastical images of the fragile/disappearing feminine body were, of course, simultaneously enforced in a very real and physical way upon living women’s bodies through the practice of foot binding.\(^{51}\)

\(^{47}\) Chen, p. 77-116, Ko, p. 82-98.

\(^{48}\) Chen, p. 34.


\(^{50}\) Ibid, 17.

In terms of *The Peony Pavilion*’s legacy, Tang Xianzu’s libretto presented major performance difficulties, chief among them sheer length – its complete fifty-five scenes take, according to one reference, two full days and nights to perform.\(^5\) During the author’s lifetime, he was deeply involved with performances of the work, which often took place in private noble residences with either hired or in-house opera troupes.\(^3\) This style of long-form residential theater performance did not stay in fashion. The explicit sexual content also came to pose an issue for the performance and textural life of *The Peony Pavilion*. Composed in the context of the specific sexual norms of Ming Dynasty noble culture, *The Peony Pavilion* did not stand the test of new Qing Dynasty moral codes. The libretto underwent many extracted, edited, adapted, and censored printings, and as a performed work, it was abridged down to several key scenes.\(^4\) These extracts were adapted in the emerging *kunqu* Southern opera style and were performed so frequently as to become emblematic of *kunqu* form.\(^5\) By a century after its composition, what was widely known as *The Peony Pavilion* had been reduced to a fraction of its original size and softened of its many political and erotic edges.\(^6\) Despite this, the text of *The Peony Pavilion* went on to receive the official governmental designations of “profane” and “debauched” during the 18\(^{th}\) and 19\(^{th}\) centuries. These

\(^{3}\) Chen, p. 48.
\(^{4}\) Swatek, ibid, p. xxi.
\(^{5}\) Ibid, p. xvi.
legal labels resulted in blacklisting or further censoring of the text, and in some provinces, the book was ordered burned.\(^{57}\)

3.3. **EMBODIED TEXT: RESONANCE WITH WOMEN READERS AND COMMENTATORS**

While I do not believe that women became fatally cursed or infected from reading *The Peony Pavilion*, such myths reflect fear of a real phenomenon of this era – the somatically enmeshed relationships between women readers and Tang’s text. With the aim of gaining insight into their experiences of bodily awareness, pain and pleasure, I will briefly explore the voices of selected Qing women commentators. My access to these voices exists solely via the research and translations of secondary sources which provide excerpts from original commentaries (unfortunately not translated elsewhere).

As evidence of the extent to which *The Peony Pavilion* was inscribed into the social lexicon of Ming-Qing nobility, Jingmei Chen cites descriptions of a card game involving the players’ personal favorite lines of *Peony Pavilion* text.\(^{58}\) Dorothy Ko’s book *Teachers of the Inner Chambers: Women and Culture in Seventeenth-Century China* traces the text’s popularity further, specifically addressing its role among young educated women. Ko cites a gentry woman’s description of a common *Peony Pavilion* reading

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\(^{57}\) Chen, p. 33.

\(^{58}\) Chen, p. 176.
ritual: “Ladies in the boudoir all collect the latest embroidery patterns and keep them pressed between the leaves of a book. In between cutting patterns, all our eyes are fixed onto the pages of The Peony Pavilion.” Particularly passionate readers did not stop at incorporating the play into games or embroidery, and created their own analytical and poetic writings alongside Tang Xianzu’s original text called commentaries, or pingdian. When Tang Xianzu’s libretto was published, the genre of literary commentary was flourishing, encouraged by a booming publishing market. A century later, gentry women were finding ways to publish their own commentaries. Profoundly, the romantic and eccentric Qing noblewoman Cheng Qiong described her process of writing commentary on The Peony Pavilion as filling “the entirety of this forefather’s book with my feminine point of view.” (see Fig. 9).

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59 Ko, p. 82.
61 Swatek, Peony Pavilion Onstage, p. 17.
62 Chen, p. 185.
63 Hua, p. 742.
In the face of stigmatization and lack of access, as well as laws restricting women’s movement and interactions with men, Qing women literati devotees of *The Peony Pavilion* went to great effort to gain access to complete and correct editions of Tang’s original text. While women of any class wouldn’t have been allowed to go to the theaters, women with some connection to a wealthy man would be able to access books.\(^6^4\) Gentry commentator Tan Ze tells of her desperate longing for the proper edition of *The Peony Pavilion* to complete her commentary, concluding, “when my husband finally found it and brought it home, though I am not good at drinking, I was so happy I drank eight or nine cups of wine.”\(^6^5\)

\(^6^4\) Chen, p. 27.
\(^6^5\) Ibid, p. 157.
Though much less common, there are also documented examples of non-nobility women *Peony* commentators, famous among them Yu Niang and Xiaoqing.\(^66\) Yu Niang was a poor teen girl who wrote her commentary while sick in bed with a tumor. Her commentary manuscript was discovered and sent to Tang Xianzu, though never published. The playwright himself publicly wrote about Yu Niang and her work: “Conveying her secret thoughts in a sad voice, her commentary was even more heart rending than my play.”\(^67\) Xiaoqing, on the other hand, was a famed consort and poet whose lover’s wife burnt her extensive writings. Her sole remaining *Peony* commentary is in the form of these brief lines: “The sound of cold rain hitting the forlorn windows is not bearable. / Turning up the lamp, I read *The Peony Pavilion* in leisure. / Someone in this world is even more foolhardy than I am. / Xiaoqing is not the only heartbroken one.”\(^68\)

Ko emphasizes the multifaceted implications of reading for women commentators at this time, claiming, “Reading was also an inventive act in the fundamental sense of the word. Women who read created not only their self-images but also a multiplicity of meanings with which to construct their world as they pleased.”\(^69\) The act of creative and erotic agency represented by reading, imagining, and writing through the *Peony Pavilion* is what intrigues me about this lineage of commentaries. Of the numerous documented Chinese women who have read, reread, memorized,

\(^{67}\) Ibid, p. 80.  
\(^{68}\) Ibid, p. 162.  
\(^{69}\) Ko, p. 39.
discussed, underlined, glossed, recopied, and analyzed Tang Xianzu’s text, I will focus on four women, the three young women Chen Tong, Tan Ze, and Qian Yi who produced The Wu Wushan’s Three Wives’ Collaborative Commentary Version of The Peony Pavilion, (henceforth Three Wives’ Collaborative Commentary) and the aforementioned Cheng Qiong, who wrote The Genius’ Commentary.

3.3.1 Three Wives’ Collaborative Commentary

The collection of writings known as the Three Wives Collaborative Commentary were pioneered by the poet Wu Ren’s third wife, Qian Yi. Published in 1694, the collection included a commentary on the first half of The Peony Pavilion by Wu Ren’s late first wife Chen Tong; a commentary on the second half by Wu Ren’s late second wife Tan Ze; essays by Wu Ren and Qian Yi; a collection of reflections called “afterpieces” written by several other noble women, including members the women’s poetry club known as Plantain Leaf; among other texts.70 In her afterpiece, gentry woman Gu Si contextualizes the Three Wives Collaborative Commentary within the tangled history of Tang Xianzu’s text and the shortcomings of other commentaries of the time:

“The text of The Peony Pavilion was altered by several people to make it more performable. By and by the play is beyond recognition, this is the first misfortune. Then the play was commentated on by the incapable who totally

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70 Chen, p. 134.
failed in explaining its meanings and passion, this is the second misfortune. For more than a hundred years women like Yu Niang, Xiaoqing, and many others have been known to fully appreciate the play. Unfortunately their commentaries are all lost. Now the three ladies of the Wus offer us their commentaries which expound the meanings hidden between the lines.”

Gu Si sets up a logical yet controversial correlation between female writers and a full understanding of the *The Peony Pavilion*’s meanings and passions. She also laments the lack of care posterity has given to women’s commentaries, particularly naming the aforementioned tumorous girl Yu Niang and consort Xiaoqing. Jingmei Chen argued that such references of upper class commentators to non-elite commentators as peers appear throughout the *Three Wives Collaborative Commentary*, indicating that there was an understanding amongst noblewomen of a sisterhood of *Peony* commentators that extended across socio-economic lines.

In a literary environment openly hostile to women’s published writing of any class, it is unsurprising that the majority of critics did not share an enthusiasm for the ideas of Gu Si and the other writers of *Three Wives Collaborative Commentary*. Chen cites a publisher writing under the name Bingsiguan, who dismissed the *Three Wives Collaborative Commentary* as “shallow, ignorant, pretentious, and unscholarly.” His

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71 Chen, p. 142.
72 Chen, 162.
73 Chen, 143.
review decries the very existence of such a book, declaring: “Women’s words should go no further than the inner quarters. Even if his women manage to write, the husband should appreciate these works privately. How dare he publish them as if to boast to the world? Not to mention that some dramas are unfit for respectable women. These in particular should be kept strictly private.”

It is precisely this kind of misogynist censorship that Qian Yi fought against in publishing the *Three Wives Collaborative Commentary*. Qian Yi addressed Wu Ren with bitter urgency, “It is all because of you that their names have remained hidden. If we do not reveal the truth and make my sisters known to the public won’t they feel unfulfilled in the underworld?” Wu Ren’s introduction freely admits that he refused to publish the commentaries for years but relented after Qian Yi’s vehement prodding, and her offer to sell all her jewelry to personally pay for the printing of the commentary.

Fei Shi locates the somatic core of *The Three Wives Collaborative Commentary* as a physical and emotional identification with Du Liniang: “The ladies’ commentary constantly wavers or negotiates with the tensions among the depictions of the image of Du, the creative imaginations of Du’s subjective feelings and the constant references to their own bodily sensations and emotional feelings.” They “articulate the interiority of Du

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74 Ibid.
75 Chen, p. 162 and 137.
76 Ibid, p. 137.
77 Shi, p. 73.
by asking ‘who knows my dream?’ and ‘who do I desire to dream of?’…the inter-subjectivity between the imaginative Character Du and the commentators [implies]…a sheaf of multiple layers of performances.”78 Commentators felt embodied connections to each other’s writing as well as Tang Xianzu’s. Tan Ze, for instance, could recite Chen Tong’s commentary from memory flawlessly, and wrote that she “imitated elder sister Chen” in commentating on The Peony Pavilion.79 Here I am, imitating all the commentators, performing my embodied commentary. A sheaf or a peony blossom. Each layer imitating the next. Narratives nesting, reflecting.

Revealing her spiritual identification with Du Liniang, commentator and third wife Qian Yi described and justified her performance of an original ritual invoking the heroine. On New Year’s Day, 1695, nearly one hundred years after the publication of Tang’s original text, she set up an altar with offerings in the garden.80 Her offerings included a copy of the recent printing of the Three Wives Collaborative Commentary, and an ancestral tablet inscribed with the name Du Liniang. She worshipped the tablet “as if Liniang had been an ancestress.” When Wu Ren mocked her, Qian Yi told him:

“The spirit of this cosmos dwells with whatever is empathic, be it a stone or a piece of wood. The poet Qu Yuan once wrote an ode to the river goddess Xiang. So did Sung Yu compose a eulogy for the mountain goddess Wu.

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78 Ibid, p. 74.
79 Chen, p. 156 and 158.
80 Chen, p. 138.
These goddesses may have been just the poets’ imagination but they are dignified by poems. So people worship them anyway. How can you or I judge whether Liniang exists or not?"\textsuperscript{81}

In this passage, Qian Yi identifies herself with poets whose words resonate with the frequencies of stones and wood. She elevates the imagination and the creative act to a metaphysical plane, where depicting something brings it (as good as) into existence.

When, later that night, a beautiful woman toying with a plum branch appears in Qian Yi’s dream, she recognizes the woman as Du Liniang. Suddenly, “a wind blew the peonies up to the sky / and the petals fell down like a shower.”\textsuperscript{82} This image, directly referential to the orgasmic petals cast upon Du Liniang by the Flower Spirit in The Interrupted Dream, is as erotic in this recapitulation. Like Du Liniang, Qian Yi is flooded by conflicting emotions after this dream encounter. In the verses she composed about the incident, she is “happy for finally knowing a heavenly face,” though, of course, her “heart breaks at the awakening from the dream.”\textsuperscript{83} Qian Yi’s story validates her practice of imbuing the ‘fictional’ Liniang’s tablet with spiritual significance and resonance, proving the ritual functioned ultimately as desired – her spirit worship produced a visitation from Liniang accompanied by a shower of petals (and pleasure).

\textsuperscript{81} Ibid.
\textsuperscript{82} Ibid, p. 137.
\textsuperscript{83} Ibid, p. 140.
3.3.2 *Genius’s Commentary Version*

Qian Yi had hoped that the published *Three Wives Collective Commentary* would develop the cannon of women’s literature, would contribute to “future collectors of women’s writings.” A century later, noblewoman Cheng Qiong published her commentary with a similar goal:

> “People write books with a purpose in mind. I am aware that my years in this world are limited. I cannot attend to all the ladies of the future in person…Their desire for knowledge is great but they are fearful of study. That is why I intend to feast these ladies with rhetorics, histories, poetry, fictions using the space in the upper margins of *The Peony Pavilion.*” (see Fig. 8)

While the *Three Wives’ Collaborative Commentary* emphasized the theme of pure *qing*, Cheng Qiong thought this was a prude interpretation and claimed that the root of *The Peony Pavilion* was instead *seqing* (sexual desire or sensual passion). As Wei Hua points out in her “How Dangerous Can a Peony Be? Textual Space, *Caizi Mudan ting (Genius’s Peony Pavilion)* and Naturalizing the Erotic,” Cheng Qiong frequently cites Tang Xianzui’s phrase throughout her commentary: *seqing nanhua* (sensual passion too

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84 Ibid, p. 162.
86 Hua, p. 142.
strong to crush). Cheng Qiong interprets each image and turn of phrase erotically, to extreme, hilarious, and tender effect. Of all the published commentaries, Hua writes, “[Genius’] commentary especially opened a critical private and social space for female readers, one that both satisfied their erotic imagination and justified their own sexual desire.”

One such justification for sexual desire struck me like a chord when I first read it: “...the daughter’s wish is to experience sex as soon as possible. This is because the natural energy of a bud about to open makes it so.” A similar bud metaphor had come to me independently years before while composing my book of poetry Martha. On the chaotic and climactic final pages of the narrative poem, the cloistered teen girl narrator bemoans being separated from her crush: “it’s blocking my true sex light from bursting tenderly, yes tenderly, like a tight hard little peony bud.” The transcendent erotic power of the peony bud carries the voice of Cheng Qiong to me, one of her “ladies of the future.” Feasting.

As Qiong’s erotic and rebellious language implies, writings like the Three Wives’ Collaborative Commentary and the Genius’ Version stirred more than the intellects and passions of female literati. Predictably, they also generated sharp criticism and censorship. Editions of Cheng Qiong’s explicitly erotic and critical Genius’s

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87 Ibid, p. 758.
89 Ibid, p. 750.
commentary, for example, were banned.\textsuperscript{91} Currently, both commentaries are rare texts housed in special collections, indicating a long-term erasure of their voices from the canonical literature on \textit{The Peony Pavilion}.\textsuperscript{92} I contend that these texts have been forgotten because women’s creative and somatic engagement with this sexually explicit play represented a massive political threat – the threat of educated women’s agency. The threat of women knowing their erotic power. The threat of women drawing their own portraits. As Hua concludes:

My interest in [the \textit{Genius’} \textit{Peony} commentary, besides its unorthodox content, lies in the fact that it provides us with a powerful example of how the Chinese literary tradition of commentary, or \textit{pingdian}, can be reconsidered as a significant cultural phenomenon with social and political—not just exegetical or aesthetic—implications. \textit{Caizi} also challenges our preconceived idea about female agency in the field of cultural production in premodern China.\textsuperscript{93}

I share Hua’s interest in Cheng Qiong’s ideas and in the \textit{pingdian} genre, as well as Hua’s belief in the individual and collective transformative powers inscribed in these commentaries. I was drawn to figures like Chen Tong, Tan Ze, Qian Yi, and Cheng Qiong because their emotional and creative engagements with Tang’s \textit{Peony Pavilion} represent a cascade of somatic “interventions that begin processes of change.”\textsuperscript{94}

\textsuperscript{91} Hua, p. 741.
\textsuperscript{92} Chen, p. 132, Hua, p. 743.
\textsuperscript{93} Hua, p. 743.
\textsuperscript{94} Woodard, p. 162.
Section 4: Somatic Composition in *Peony (Queer’s Commentary)*

My commentary on *The Peony Pavilion* and its creative and erotic legacy takes the form of an interdisciplinary, large-scale performance piece *Peony (Queer’s Commentary)*. In my attempt to honor the collaborative lineage of the commentaries discussed above, I involved a large network of collaborators in the production of my commentary. The process of its creation blossomed out beyond the performance into new relationships, complex discussions, emotional intimacy, and artistic growth. The kaleidoscopic soundscape and interlocking narratives of *Peony (Queer’s Commentary)* were achieved through the efforts of a director, pre-recorded actor/readers, live actor/readers, live vocalists, a dizi player, a laptop and keyboard player, and a live ensemble I named Muscle Memory, consisting of me on vocals, Cindy Ye on erhu, and Jace Arouet on electric bass.

At the start of Muscle Memory rehearsals (held twice per week) I led the ensemble in a full round of qigong organ sounds to soften muscles, sharpen focus, strengthen breath, and develop imagination. After the first two rehearsals, I was struggling because of the shyness of the performers, and I felt less than confident about my material and their take on it. They had participated fully and energetically in the organ breathing and the musical improvisations, but their lack of verbal communication and affect was making me doubtful. At the third rehearsal, I preceded our usual organ breathing with a round of ‘roses and thorns’—wherein everyone
names a positive event or feeling, a rose, and a negative event or feeling, a thorn, from their day. Both Cindy and Jace became animated during the exercise, and that comfortability translated to their playing and to their verbal responsiveness about the work. The roses and thorns tradition stuck, as did our collective comfortability. This shift reminded me that intentionality given to even a modest degree of emotional engagement can open a pathway to change.

4.1 Five Organs as Structure and Aesthetic

In keeping with a philosophy of mutual correspondence between inner and outer environments, I structured the macro body of the performance Peony (Queer's Commentary) to reflect the inner organization of the physical body, according to Five Systems Theory. Once I had processed the full Cyril Birch translation of The Peony Pavilion into an erasure poem of the particular language and themes I wanted to include, I used this (organ)izing principle to determine how to group the ideas and present the information in scenes and acts (see Fig. 10). The
schema came together fluidly, since the vocabulary and concepts of Tang Xianzu’s writing are rich with the elements, seasons, emotions, and health characteristics of the five organs or viscera.

*The Peony Pavilion* begins in an effusive springtime, one which is admired and derided and otherwise described over and over again in the first scenes of the play, providing me with an obvious Act 1 organ, the liver. The anger of Prefect Du in scene 3 Admonishing the Daughter and the compassion between Du Liniang and Liu Mengmei in scene 10 Interrupted Dream fit into the emotional domain of the liver, while the constant references to green vegetation, calls of spring birds, and smells of blossoms re-ground the narrative in the sensations of spring. Act 2: Heart encompasses the burning desire and impatience of Du Liniang’s post-dream pining as well as her joy in depicting her beauty in scene 14 The Portrait. The wasting away of Du Liniang occurs throughout Act 3: Stomach/Spleen, where her lack of fairness and balance increases anxiety to the point of not being able to eat. Grief and courage lined up neatly with Act 4: Lungs, in which Du Liniang dies and is sent to the Underworld to face judgement. Finally, the commentators collaborate to resurrect Du Liniang through their writings and rituals and emotional obsessions in Act 5: Kidneys, as they exhibit trust and a lack of fear in their friendships, metaphysical connections with Du Liniang, and creative ambitions.
Once I settled the script into this sequence of five Acts comprised of twelve total Scenes, I put the text through one further erasure process. Inspired by Cheng Qiong, who had created her commentary “using five ink colors,” and Qian Yi, in whose dream “bloomed peonies of five different colors,” I glossed the pages of my own draft with colored pencils for each of the five acts/organ (green, red, yellow, white, blue). I color-coded words and phrases that most reflected the respective organ characteristics, then compiled the underlined phrases into five erasure poems, or prologues, that open each act.

The Liver Prologue, for example contains vocabulary of spring, green, wood/leaves (see Fig. 11), and compassion: 

- days of spring / composed last spring / leaf-locked / mosses
- make a green mass / grass stain / emerald pavilion / waves of spring / how disturbing the spring’s splendor / green springtime of my own / branch from weeping willow / spring strolling / compassion / jade-like.

While the Stomach/Spleen Prologue is full of summer, yellow, earth,
digestion, anxiety: *my bowels twist / don’t call it eating / my gold / restraint / hot sun /
inflammation of the spleen / hills / deserts / stone field / valleys / the sun / a lamp / a yellow
earth / mustard / salt / exposure to sun / in her belly / buttocks / asshole / fear disturbance /
bright golden beams / disturbance. The prologues become sparser and cooler, as in the
final prologue of the watery, wintery, trusting and fearing kidneys: *drinking / cups of /
rain / wetting / river goddess / open and free / moist / hesitation / chill.*

These organ prologues or premonitions are performed in unison by the
actor/readers, while Muscle Memory accompanies their readings with corresponding
organ sounds. I incorporated Muscle Memory’s regular organ breathing practice into
the performance so as to ground the ensemble and reset at the start of each act. I
wanted to spin a thread of somatic connection throughout the piece, so that the acts
of *(Queer’s Commentary)* are strung together on the sounds of our organs. The seasonal
(organ)ization of *Peony (Queer’s Commentary)* also facilitates a sense of cyclicity. *Du
Liniang*’s narrative of sexual awakening seems to begin again in the final love scene
with Qian Yi, as winter shows signs of yielding to spring.

Certain sound choices were influenced by the elemental characteristics of the
acts/organs as well. The earthen Act 3: Stomach/Spleen is accompanied by a laptop
score (played by May Klug) consisting of samples of clay bells and platters from
composer Tan Dun’s ‘earthsounds’ instruments (recorded by Paula Matthusen). Klug manipulates the earthsounds in a patch (designed by Doug Van Nort) in descending order from high pitches to low pitches, signaling the ever-degrading physical condition of Du Liniang and her increasing proximity to the ground, the earth, the underworld. When Du Liniang is resurrected by the commentators in the watery Act 5: Kidneys, Muscle Memory plays the score Three Vases Filled, in which the players pass water between three glass vases (specifically from ‘get-well’ bouquets) while improvising with the vessels’ bell-like and rattling tones.

4.2 THE MIRROR AND SELF-PORTRAIT: A VANITY TRAGEDY

To make a self-portrait ‘from life’ is to stare deeply into the mirror, to trace closely the shapes of one’s own body, to seamlessly connect the drawing hand to the observing eye. It is a somatic practice consisting of close awareness and small adjustments. I used to draw self-portraits regularly when I was a teen. At the time, they felt urgent, like drawing myself into existence. I felt this same urgency vibrating throughout scene 14 The Portrait when I first read it. While scene 10 The Interrupted Dream is the most reproduced and iconic scene in The Peony Pavilion, The Portrait is arguably the most climactic moment in the play.

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96 Tan Dun has also composed an experimental interpretation of The Peony Pavilion, see Bitter Love, recorded in 1998, Sony Music Entertainment (1999), CD.
4.2.1 Death

At the start of this scene, Spring Fragrance comments upon Du Liniang’s wan appearance as a sly strategy to snap her out of her moping funk. Liniang takes the bate, crying, “I must have become completely haggard (She looks in the mirror and sobs) / Before it’s too late let me make a portrait of myself to leave to the world / lest no one ever learn of the beauty of Du Liniang who came from Sichuan!” Liniang’s sudden outburst conveys her premonition that it will soon be “too late” for her. While looking into her own reflected eyes, Du Liniang invokes her death and in the same breath commits to painting her portrait.

Throughout The Peony Pavilion, the mirror, the self-portrait, the body, and its demise are all linked to each other in a complex matrix of correspondence. In her essay “Making the Invisible Visible,” Judith Zeitlin reflects on these correspondences in the context of Chinese fiction and drama from this period:

“In such plays, the portrait of a woman is also affiliated with the body because it is not simply an image but a material object, a hanging scroll. Scenes of the woman painting or inscribing the portrait before her death usually occupy a prominent position in the drama. Such performative scenes reinforce the

97 Xianzu, p. 67.
apprehension of the portrait as posthumously preserving traces of the woman’s body in the form of brush strokes.”

The mirror provides the visual confirmation of the body, a potential conduit of self-knowledge, while the portrait provides the continuation of the body into the future. Catherine Swatek confirms this correlation of objects and concepts is true for Du Linang, who, in Swatek’s words, “identifies with [the portrait] strongly, treating it as an extension of her person, especially her body. Fearing that it will fade with time, she orders that it be mounted...At the moment of her death in scene 20 she speaks of it as the repository of her soul.”

The Portrait was a scene of particular identification for the commentators of the Three Wives Collaborative Commentary as well. As Dorothy Ko describes, “Both the tenderness Du feels toward her beauty and her lament of its fleeting nature stirred Chen [Tong] and Qian [Yi], who were about the same age as Du when they wrote their commentaries.” In his dissertation “Gender, Body and Space: Classical Chinese Theatricality in Contemporary Intercultural and Transnational Performances,” Fei Shi teases out the close relationships of identification that emerge as the Three Wives commentators engage with The Portrait scene, quoting from the commentary:

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100 Ko, p. 85.
“The commentary stresses the extreme importance of this scene, that 'Liniang’s unprecedented infatuation only resides in the scene of self-portrait; if not there is no further dramatic development.' [...] The commentator continues to play out the nuanced feelings of the process of self-portrayal and asks ‘when drawing the self, who would know my beauty? Such a sort of deep feeling [qing].’ Therefore the commentary takes great trouble to...enumerate the different parts of the face and body along with the intricacies to represent them onto the silk. [...] If a detailed delineation of Du’s self-portrayal reveals the female imagination of the self, that imagination thus also illustrates the commentators’ envisioning of their own bodies through Du Liniang’s mirror and painting scrolls. The hermeneutics of the text thus is also an imaginative/performative gesture to heuristically evoke attentiveness to their own bodies as readers.”

As Du Liniang extended her body, soul, and emotions somatically into her self-portrait, so the Three Wives extend themselves into their texts, tracing the lines of Liniang’s face, absorbing her “deep feeling,” and finding their own bodies stirred. Fei Shi indicates that, as I argued earlier, the commentators’ relationships with the Peony Pavilion text were somatically entangled.

4.2.2 Sex

What is so refreshing to me about Tang Xianzu’s treatment of Liniang’s unfiltered vanity (Swatek aptly calls it “self-enchantment”) is that it is allowed existential depth rather than being presented as shallow. 102 Du Liniang croons lovingly to her scroll and mirror while she paints, “A hint of hill and stream / a gate, a door / and my own self, captured in likeness / bearing in hand a ‘green sprig of plum’ / as I recall my lover / Here see me lean / in a dawn dream / against a rocky mound / grace of bearing to match the wind-stirred willow.” 103 In the mirror she finds a gate, a door, a portal to...her true self, her dream self, her dead self. Du Liniang uses the mirror to create herself in her own image, and the portrait to author her own legacy, tasks deemed in Tang Xianzu’s portrayal to be admirable and, in fact, necessary in the context of the play (see Fig. 12).

102 Swatek, ibid, p. 214.
103 Xianzu, p. 69.
Du Liniang wields her mirror and paint brushes as tools of self-creation and adoration, symbolizing her imminent death but also its inverse – her sexual body. Judith Zeitlin suggests that in the context of *Peony Pavilion*, “portraits and ghosts are correspondingly interrelated because both function as exteriorizations of invisible desires concealed within the female body.”¹⁰⁴ I would add that the mirror, as a kind of ghostly portrait in itself, also serves to host invisible desires of the female body. For people with interior genitalia, mirrors are a necessary source of anatomical information, and a tool for developing erotic awareness.¹⁰⁵ Mirrors are also ideal for catching someone’s eye and sharing an intimate, yet safely mediated, flirtatious glance.

¹⁰⁴ Zeitlin, ibid, p. 49.
¹⁰⁵ adrienne maree brown, *Pleasure Activism*, p. 120.
The daily rituals of femininity are what entwined Spring Fragrance and Du Liniang, they were ‘connected at the mirror’ so to speak. I read the mirror is a site of erotic tension between the maid and her charge. After all, the mourning Spring Fragrance cries out to the just-deceased Liniang, “no more will you have me burn incense cakes in the shape of the ‘heart’ character…no more will you have me turn the mirror to your face, paint with crimson your peach-bloom lips.” These affectionate lines of keening invoke the heart, the mirror, lips, and finally the self-portrait, as Fragrance continues, “reminds me of the self-portrait / I shall have her / as she did in life / lean once again by the rocky mound.” Fragrance’s keening solidifies the symbolic link between mirror, mortality, self-portrait, erotic body. Nestled between the heart-shaped incense smoke and Liniang’s leaning portrait is a mirror reflecting Liniang’s lips. Vessel of love. Always transferring, never touched.

Catharine Swatek writes, “Chunxiang’s [Spring Fragrance’s] wish to have her mistress ‘lean [kao] as before’ by the rock mound recalls the moment in scene 10 when Liniang’s dream lover leads them there to make love. The repetition of kao has the effect of animating the portrait and underscoring its close identity with Liniang’s person.” Indeed, this action reflects a close correlation between Liniang’s body/soul and the painted portrait. I further perceive Fragrance’s lyrical reversal from “no more will you have me” to “I shall have her” as indicative of an erotic

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106 Xianzu, p. 104.
107 Swatek, ibid, p. 88.
power shift underpinning her act of leaning Liniang’s symbolic body against the (erotic-coded) Taihu rocks.

4.2.3 Follow and Reflect

While Du Liniang and Spring Fragrance perform The Portrait scene in Peony (Queer’s Commentary), Muscle Memory abandons tonal sounds. The accompaniment consists solely of contact mic-amplified pencil strokes, as the ensemble gazes in a large mirror onstage and draws self-portraits in real time (see Fig. 13). Composing sounds through the drawing of portraits is a process that reinforces the performers’ inter-sensorial report, and is reflected in the text score for the final scene of Queer’s Commentary, Union in the Shade. In this score, called Finely Traced Flower Shadows, the process is reversed: players draw flowers through their composed sounds. The score directs,
“Create fine, focused, and fluid sounds, as if you are drawing the outline of a delicate flower with your instrument. Try to see the flower in the dark.”

The players and I began a practice of drawing self-portraits between rehearsals and sharing them with each other so that the act of drawing would feel familiar, focused, and intimate (rather than performative) during the scene. As important was the sense of actively creating and re-creating our visions of our selves. Each portrait captured something different (see Figs. 14 and 15).
Through the sounds of our pencil marks’ gliding and tapping, curling and shading, I hoped to absorb listeners into the portraits’ two-dimensional world of paper; to sonically carry the traces of self-creation; to build tension with and highlight the climactic language of the scene. I discovered after the show that an unintended but appropriately somatic reaction from several audience members to the drawing sounds was a triggering of their ASMR, a positive sensorial reaction to certain sound textures. The focused meditative mood and subtle soundscape of The Portrait is broken when Spring Fragrance declares, “Show them the bewitching captured in this painting,”108 which cues Muscle Memory to start in on the first verse of the original song Vanity Tragedy.

The lyrics explicitly address the interplay of the mirror’s simultaneous emptiness and self-forming powers, its sadness and erotic charge: “my blissy void / in blossoms woe

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108 Xianzu, p. 72.
/ my mirror knows / I am the rose - /colored light.” The two choruses of “Vanity Tragedy” were the first pieces of music I wrote for Peony (Queer’s Commentary), just as The Portrait was the first scene I read (at random) from Tang Xianzu’s script back when I first bought it. The chorus’ direct lyrics, ominously waltzing 5/4 bass line, and florid melody came swiftly and fully formed:

Chorus 1:
Vanity
sweet vanity
show me gently
to myself
sex death sex death
forever and ever
follow and reflect

Chorus 2:
Tragedy
webs out timelessly
as flowering
dogwood
sex death sex death
forever and ever
follow and reflect
Section 5: Pain, Pleasure, and Peonies: Outro

In Elaine Scarry’s singularly thorough political and metaphysical study *The Body in Pain: Making and Unmaking the World* (1985), physical pain is defined, among other qualities, by its all-consuming and reality-altering powers.109 “The body is its pains, a shrill sentience that hurts and is hugely alarmed by its hurt; and the body is its scars, thick and forgetful, unmindful of its hurt, unmindful of anything, mute and insensate.”110 With the development of somatic composition, I want to uncover pain and vocalize pain and mitigate pain and theorize pain with Scarry. And I want somatic composition to affirm that the inverse of Scarry’s assessment is simultaneously true – the body is its pleasures, sounding with its delicious memories in a collective presence.

I cast New York performer and acupuncture student Michi Osato to play Du Liniang in *Peony (Queer’s Commentary)*. The precision and immediacy with which Michi landed in the emotional world and body language of Du Liniang, her passions and concerns, indicated her true identification with the role. I realized later that Michi and her sister Una were featured interviewing each other in adrienne marie brown’s *Pleasure Activism*. In the chapter called “Burlesque and Liberation,” Michi describes the somatic value of their company BRASS (Brown RadicalASS)’s performances: “What we are doing when we are creating is envisioning or practicing for the world we want.

So to have those moments on stage where we and the audience are living in, inhabiting a different world, where that is our reality, gives us a physical memory of it to be able to have the strength to keep working for it, for the world we want to live in.”111 With somatic composition as a general practice and with Peony (Queer’s Commentary) in particular, I intend to continue engaging in a dialogue with conditions of feeling, with an emphasis on creating memories of pleasure. As Michi Osato and the historic women commentators on Tang Xianzu’s opera have written, such sense memories – even in ephemeral settings like performances and dreams – can and do transform.

Sense memories of pain and pleasure layer through any living body’s tissues. Petals clasped tight, locked, raw, shrill, or unfurling, sighing, fluttering down. The imagination, accessed through embodied musical practices and empowered into a tool of world-making by a supportive creative and social environment, delivers awareness to these petals and awareness to the whole garden. Referring back to one of my working principles in composing and interpreting somatic art, the ultimate product generated in this process is knowledge that connects individuals to their own physicality and to the collective. This knowledge, integrated into the body and social world of the participant, extends beyond the finite temporal bounds of the performance. Seeds of awareness, inciting change.

111 brown, Pleasure Activism, p. 371.
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