

Cate Tedford

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Dr. Rogers

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The Offering of Imagination

The supremacy of global capitalism has not only exploited the international economic system as we know it, but it has pervaded political and social systems and nearly all aspects of our public and private lives. Capitalism has stolen women's bodies as the production and reproduction of labor power, dominated our language and emotions, controlled our words and bodies, and limited our perspectives and emotional capacity. Patriarchal capitalism has resulted in language used for sexual oppression (Butler 158), and the mechanization and punishment of our minds and bodies. And because capitalism seemingly defiles all aspects of our lives, what is our way out? If capitalism owns all the tools, how will we dismantle the master's house?

I believe our first and best option is imagination. We must imagine a better world if we are to create one. First, imagination involves a pronounced recognition of the self, succeeded by an action of complete selflessness--that moment when we lose all self-consciousness as we put the pen to the paper or the brush to the canvas. This is the practice of the creation, embodied as art. When we lose ourselves in our creation, it ensures that our imagination is not a service to our own pleasures but rather a cry out to the world and invitation for connection. How, when it seems capitalism has infiltrated all aspects of our lives and the world, can we create work that is non-exploitative, anti-capitalist? An honest reckoning with capitalism and its power to perpetuate oppression and ultimately yield social inequality impossible requires us to understand the tools used by those in power to maintain their power; in turn, we must both listen to the oppressed and

understand our own role in this dynamic. From there, we can imagine a better world and create art according to that.

When I think of artists whose art gives a glimpse of a better world, one untainted by capitalism, I think of the late poet Mary Oliver. Oliver is known far and wide for her hopeful reflections of simple living and powerful depictions of nature. Her childhood and background are important because they largely shaped the origin and trajectory of her writing career. For Oliver, writing began as an escape from her dysfunctional childhood. As opposed to writing about her trauma directly, she would immerse herself in the natural world, finding its inherent beauty and healing properties her primary source of inspiration. Much of Oliver's adult life was spent living in a modest home in Provincetown, Massachusetts. Her daily routine while living there was characterized by an unhurried walk through the woods, paying careful attention to her surroundings, stopping to notice and write. A writing career that began at age 14 would turn into a revolutionary force in the world of poetry, inspiring people far and wide, drawing us both into and out of ourselves, urging us to notice the miracles in the mundane.

Her work is so compelling because it operates entirely apart from the global capitalist system; her writing is anti-capitalist because the world which she creates in her writing, is not subject to the powers and menaces of the global capitalist system. Even the way she conducted her everyday activities reflected a disinterest in the hurried, mechanistic way of life. Influenced by her traumatic childhood and a father who physically and sexually abused her, Oliver's writing seeks to create an alternate world from her/our own: one more beautiful, whole, and free. I would specifically like to focus on one of her more famous poems, "Wild Geese" and how it serves as a piece of anti-capitalist literature. Mary Oliver's "Wild Geese" draws us into ourselves to examine our true longings and belonging while also turning us out of ourselves by relinquishing

capitalism's grip on dictating our realities. This poem engages with 'the master's house' without 'the master's tools', resists capitalism's hold on language, and rejects a capitalist understanding of the mind and body.

"Wild Geese" gestures to Audre Lorde's famous quote, "The master's tools will never dismantle the master's house," declared at the Second Sex Conference in New York in 1979 (Moraga and Anzaldúa 95). Oliver's poem effectively engages with Lorde's idea through its creation of a better, more beautiful, and whole world by a return to nature--a restoration of the world before capitalism because, nature in its purest form, is the closest thing we have to that. Mary Oliver ends her poems with this: "Whoever you are, no matter how lonely, / the world offers itself to your imagination, calls to you like the wild geese, harsh and exciting - / over and over announcing your place / in the family of things" (*Dream Work* 14). These closing lines maintain that when the suffocating structures and categories capitalism has imposed upon us, leading to prolonged, widespread oppression, discount and overwhelm us, the natural world, untainted by the evil of capitalism, invites into its home where we are free to be our true, whole selves. Having experienced the heaviness and brokenness of a world ripped to shreds by greed and hatred, she implores us to look beyond the master's tools as a way to belong to ourselves and to the world. Oliver is imagining a better world--one in which we are not constrained by the identities ascribed to us by the masters and where we are all free to be exactly who we are and we all belong regardless of that expression.

As an artist of words, the presence of capitalism and its by-products in language are thus an area of concern for Oliver. Unfortunately, much of the origin and progression of language has been rooted in and created by the very things we are trying to dismantle such as patriarchy, racism, sexism, homophobia, etc. This reality makes it difficult to fight the power when the

power owns the means to even express any resistance to it. Yet Mary Oliver, and particularly in “Wild Geese”, finds a way to overcome the constraints of the oppressive mechanisms of language. In her book *Gender Trouble*, philosopher and gender theorist Judith Butler discusses French philosopher and feminist theorist Monique Wittig and her ideas about the power of the abstract in language to enact violence on our minds and bodies: “The power Wittig accords to this ‘system’ of language is enormous. Concepts, categories, and abstractions, she argues, can effect a physical and material violence against the violence the bodies they claim to organize and interpret: ‘There is nothing abstract about the power that sciences and theories have to act materially and actually upon our bodies and minds, even if the discourse that produces it is abstract. It is one of the forms of domination, its very expression, as Marx said. I would say, rather, one of its exercises. All of the oppressed know this power and have had to deal with it’” (Butler 158). Although Oliver does not explicitly discuss it in her writing, her acknowledgement of loneliness and nods to an alternate way of living and being, recognize the material action of abstract language upon our minds and bodies. She expresses in the first four lines of “Wild Geese”, “You do not have to be good. / You do not have to walk on your knees / for a hundred miles through the desert repenting. / You only have to let the soft animal of your body / love what it loves” (*Dream Work* 14). The material action of language manifests itself in the ways it tries to govern and limit the measurements of good and/or who/what we can love. Of course, language asserts these arbitrary standards upon us or even denies our flourishing or existence altogether, but we cannot let our discussion of it give it even more power over us. This reasoning is why Oliver does not see it necessary to develop an explicit discussion around it in her writing—we live the reality of the abstract having oppressive strength in our everyday lives; let us not emphasize something which is already real enough but imagine a better, more beautiful, and free

way. In *Gender Trouble*, Butler goes on to insist, “The power of language to work on bodies is both the cause of sexual oppression and the way beyond that oppression” (Butler 158). This dynamic articulates exactly Mary Oliver’s method to overcoming sexual oppression: she uses words to remind us to let the soft animals of our bodies love what they love. While language itself is inherently sexually oppressive in its gendering and prescriptive grammatical function overall, Oliver still uses language as a release from that stronghold. She uses one of the mechanisms of oppression (language) as one of the paths to liberation through careful consideration of the subjects and objects of her writing and an emphasis of her imagining of a better way forward – that is, free from impositions of identities and demoralization of desire, a world liberating for all.

Here again, imagination plays an important role. While Oliver herself is imagining a more beautiful world on her terms, she invites us to do the same. She is not telling us how to be or what to love but rather to trust ourselves and our bodies to figure that out for ourselves and to actually let ourselves be and love whatever that may be. While the world, shaped by capitalism, patriarchy, etc., will tell women and other marginalized populations how to exist and set limits on how they can feel and react, “Wild Geese” reminds us that we are entirely whole and good exactly as we are. For a specific example, Black people in the United States have been oppressed since this country’s inception (of course the oppression of BIPOC extends much wider and further than that, but I am just referencing a particular circumstance here). But, as we saw with the Summer of 2020, not only can Black people not be upset with their treatment under systemic racism, but they cannot resist it any way, especially not with tangible action, for the likelihood of being villainized and criminalized. What I believe Oliver is getting at in her poem is that the reality of ethical life is particular, messy, and circumstantial. She emphasizes the life and

liberation of the natural world as both the entity least tainted by capitalism as well as her safe haven, her imagining of a better, more beautiful world--a return to a life immersed in the natural world as opposed to an industrialized concrete jungle. However, she recognizes that her imagining of her specific more beautiful world is not completely true for all people. While she believes a changing of the current conditions are necessary for total liberation, she realizes that determining the nuts and bolts of a new world requires a conversation with all people and a reckoning with each person's particular experience. Albeit this thinker is not a feminist by any measure, but this notion of the necessity of particularity with the application of virtue, is inadvertently expressed in Aristotle's *Nicomachean Ethics*. Aristotle seemingly provides us with a vacuous account of the virtues of character--temperance, bravery, prudence, justice, etc.--because while they can be loosely defined and exemplified, the honest practices of these virtues require a particular examination of the circumstances (Aristotle). If Aristotle were to give a specific account of what these virtues of character look like in practice, he would be doing everyone a disservice, for what bravery looks like to me, looks like something completely different for someone else, and the same goes for all the other virtues of character. The reality is that there is no one-size-fits-all practice of justice because different people face injustice for different reasons and are subject to different forms of power and oppression, and again, the same is true for the other virtues. Our particular experiences and contexts instruct what virtue looks like and how to overcome the oppressive forces at hand. In the same way, Mary Oliver's "Wild Geese" acknowledges our particularities in its inclusive use of language and an invitation for collaboration in the imagining of a better world.

Not only does her poem overcome the grip of oppressive language, but her work also works to dismantle the mind-body dualist understanding of individual efficiency. Our world,

plagued by capitalism, tells us that we must overcome our emotions and desires in order to put our minds to work and be more effective and efficient workers to ultimately speed up production and make the capitalists more money, while we are increasingly exploited. Yet, “Wild Geese” urges us to slow down, pay attention to our surroundings, listen to our bodies and desires, and act in accordance with them. These ideas are discussed in Silvia Federici’s *Caliban and the Witch* when she compares and contrasts the mechanical metaphysical philosophy of Thomas Hobbes and René Descartes. In her analysis of Descartes’ philosophy specifically, she articulates how his investigation of mind-body dualism emphasizes “the reduction of the body to mechanical matter” (Federici 140), allowing for “the development of the mechanisms of self-management that make the body the subject of the will” (Federici 140). It is this ideology, usurped and weaponized by capitalism, which tells us that our bodies are not made for slowness and desire, if you are of the working class/a minority group that is, but that they are made to be machines, silencing our deepest longings for the sake of producing capital for the owners of production. However, “Wild Geese” resists this thinking and mechanization of the body altogether, encouraging us to let the soft animals of our bodies desire and love what they want and comforting us with the truth that we do not have to *do* anything for anyone, especially if it leads to the destruction of ourselves, as noted by the aforementioned first four lines of the poem (“You do not have to be good... love what it loves”). Federici proceeds to assert how Descartes’ “redefinition of bodily attributes” yield “the body, ideally, at least, suited for the regularity and automatism demanded by the capitalist work-discipline” (Federici 140). The ideology of Descartes has been weaponized by capitalism and those in power to assert that there is some objective truth which claims that things are supposed to be this way. A streamlining of philosophy with an understanding that the non-rational faculties of the mind are bad and to be suppressed is entirely an operation of capitalism

to both silence resistance and promote economically efficient production. This dismissal of the non-rational faculties of the mind curbs our ability to slow down and actually notice all the problems in the world. Instead, it promotes reason as the superior operation of the mind and the sole faculty which should inform bodily action.

Federici continues, “With the institution of a hierarchical relation between mind and body, Descartes developed the theoretical premises for the work-discipline required by the developing capitalist economy. For the mind’s supremacy over the body implies that the will can (in principle) control the needs, reactions, reflexes of the body; they can impose a regular order of its vital functions and force the body to work according to external specifications, independently if its desires” (Federici 149).” But “Wild Geese” defies this ideology altogether. Mary Oliver urges us to listen to our bodies and emotions because our attendance to them is what softens us to love and opens up our imaginations. The world and how it “offers itself” to our imaginations is a calling to resist the capitalist notion of a reason-based posture of life. Affect, ungoverned by our conditioned reason, is the space in which we begin to understand how the interval between perception and reason has been manipulated by capitalism and all its side effects. Capitalism favors reason to overcome the non-rational faculties, yet our feeling, our non-rational response to the world is what evokes positive change, for that is the space where imagination is possible. Subverting our will to an efficiency and/or productivity-based rationale is entirely antithetical to a meaningful way of living, Oliver would say. Thankfully, “Wild Geese”, and the rest of Oliver’s work for that matter, reminds us that paying attention to the world around us not only invites us to find our belonging in the natural world, external to the plagues of capitalism, but also as the avenue to picture a more beautiful, free future for all, for “the world offers itself to our imagination”.

If capitalism controls nearly our entire way of life--thinking, feeling, etc.--what do we have to use to combat it, or better yet, overthrow it? How do we resist something which has infiltrated any means to do so? In light of this reality, our efforts seem hopeless. Yet people far and wide have discovered effective modes of resistance and mechanisms of change; they have refused to comply with the current conditions. Artists, in particular, have knelt close to the suffering, oftentimes their own experience, understood the power dynamics at play, and imagined a world not subject to the same forces. Artists have redefined objects and language and nature to overcome how capitalism has usurped our opportunities to flourish. In doing so, they create art that speaks to the deepest parts of ourselves and invites us to the same--to imagine a world where all have the equal chance to flourish.

Mary Oliver's "Wild Geese" invites us to question the meaning of life--from where we gain fulfillment and how we define goodness, belonging, and worth. While she offers a reckoning with the current conditions ("You do not have to be good"; *Dream Work* 14), she emphasizes the importance of exercising our own imaginations; she leaves the means to conceptualize our ideal world to us. But in order to imagine a better, more beautiful world, we must also be in tune with our desire ("Let the soft animal of your body / love what it loves"; *Dream Work* 14) to even picture what that world would encompass. Oliver argues that there is, in fact, meaning and value apart from how capitalism has conditioned us to believe which is largely in terms of monetary benefit and efficiency and productivity. A valuable life is not something that must be, or even can be, quantified. Rather, a valuable life can truly only be decided by the individual and felt by the deepest parts of themselves. It is not contingent upon power dynamics or external conditions altogether; it comes from an introspective examination of what is true and beautiful to the individual, listening to the voice of knowing deep within us, but also what honors

the flourishing of all of humanity. This piece functions to resist how capitalism has hijacked our ability to wholeheartedly engage with the world, for the world has imposed upon us a lens which prioritizes how we are of advantage to the capitalist system. And this system makes use of everyone by exploiting them from their “species being”, as Marx would say, or the uninhibited, undefiled (by capitalism) nature of our minds and bodies. Capitalism does not just exploit us from our own species beings, but also from our fellow humans’, from the products of our labor, and from the world itself, also, according to Marx). Thus, we need an invitation and/or an example to know that it does not have to be this way. We are more than entities to be exploited, we are created to live in community with one another, and we deserve to have agency over the products of our labor. This truth is made known to us by the imagination, picturing a reality that is not our own. Therefore, the imagination and how artists have used it and created work according to it is necessary to the overcoming of capitalism.

One might argue that Mary Oliver’s offering to overcome oppression caused by global capitalism is limited because of her position as a white woman of moderate economic means living in the Western world. Her experience and position within capitalism’s power dynamics is limited, so how could she possibly offer a way for all people to overcome the global menace of capitalism? For instance, the book *This Bridge Called My Back: Writings by Radical Women of Color*, edited by Cherrie Moraga and Gloria Anzaldúa, contains numerous testimonies of women of color in the form of poetry, visual art, essays, etc., investigating how the intersection of their identities, particularly in the form of race, gender, class, and sexuality, has impacted their oppression and position within power dynamics. Much of the writings cry out for an expansion of the term feminism, asserting that the predominating Western feminism discounts their experiences and excludes them from the movement for liberation (Moraga and Anzaldúa). For

instance, “The Bridge Poem” by Kate Rushin included in the text portrays how she is sick and tired of having to explain the injustice she faces as Black woman to other people and sick and tired of being the object of so much injustice with so little change in the first place (Moraga and Anzaldúa xxxiii-xxxiv). She writes, “I must be the bridge to nowhere,” emphasizing how it seems all her efforts to embrace her full humanness, only result in her continued oppression. She emphasizes the exhaustion she experiences from working for her own liberation, only to find herself in the thick of oppression. Further, in another book *Feminism Without Borders: Decolonizing Theory, Practicing Solidarity*, writer and professor Chandra Talpade Mohanty details how feminism has been hijacked by the Western world and ascribed to ‘Third World women’, to use her vocabulary, ultimately perpetuating colonialism and counter-productive social movements. In her text, she emphasizes the importance of individual contexts, experiences, and particularities to transnational feminism in order to adequately assess capitalism’s destruction across the globe and to each individual woman in their particularity (Mohanty). For example, in a chapter titled ‘Under Western Eyes’ a section named ‘Women as a Category of Analysis’ and a section called ‘Married Women as Victims of the Colonial Process’, Mohanty discusses how capitalism has caused an erosion of tribal laws for the Bemba people in Zambia, leading to women who were once protected by a tribal marriage law, now being treated as solely capital, for men just have to be able to pay the woman’s family enough to buy her from them to have her as his own (Mohanty 26-27). Previously, a man would have to prove his devotion to the woman over a long period of time, but now the woman is commodified and instantly reduced to an object as her new husband cashes in on his wife. Marriage is no longer a ceremonial process but an economic exchange because of how capitalism infiltrated the local economy. Both *This Bridge Called My Back* and *Feminism Without Borders* are critically

important to the movement of anti-capitalist feminism because they highlight specific experiences which are the by-product of an oppressive global economic system. The comprehensive portrayal of these experiences contributes to transnational feminism because they indicate the ways in which a Westernized, whitewashed feminism still harms women around the globe. These texts work in conjunction to emphasize the importance of particularity--that injustice must be addressed in its particularity or else run the risk of the mechanisms to combat it actually being counterproductive or perhaps even more oppressive.

The idea of particularity goes back to Aristotle's expression of the virtues of character in *Nicomachean Ethics*. Aristotle does not provide how the virtues of character definitively operate because he acknowledges the necessity of particularity in ethical life; our circumstances dictate the operational differences in what ideas like justice look like. We need to inform ourselves and elevate the voices of women around the globe to understand both the scope of the adverse impacts of capitalism and that feminism is not a one-size-fits-all movement. Mary Oliver accomplishes a similar goal in her poem "Wild Geese", for she does not impose a one-size-fits-all ideal world. She instead liberates us from the limits of identities imposed upon us and sets us free to engage with a world where all people belong, "whoever you are, no matter how lonely" (*Dream Work* 14).

Oliver does not explicitly mention any identities which are of concern to anti-capitalist, transnational feminist writers, but nor does she dismiss their existence. She invites us into a movement in which all can participate in the stride toward universal liberation, regardless of your identity. "Wild Geese" calls us to listen to our own inner knowing and allow that to guide our reality as opposed to the systems capitalism tries to force upon us. This idea of being both drawn into and out of ourselves, exhibited by "Wild Geese" is the antidote to the power grab of

capitalism, and it is the intersection of particularly how this piece defies the odds of the presiding power dynamics of global capitalism. The conversation between the soul and the self and the soul and world will both reckon us with our own role within power dynamics but also free us from the notion that we must conform to our assigned identity. For example, the straight, white, cis, middle-upper class man can find himself in this writing and discover that he not discounted from the movement. His participation is also welcome, and even necessary, if we are to collectively, but each from our own particularity, imagine a better, more beautiful world for all. And this goes for each and every person, however they do or not identity, wherever they are in the world. Of course, there are voices and experiences which are long overdue to be heard and highlighted, but we need to also not draw even more borders about who can and cannot participate in this movement, even for the people who have benefited most from global capitalism. After all, the anti-capitalist feminist movement requires as much participation as possible.

Resistance to capitalism, as posed by Mary Oliver “Wild Geese” poses a tension of both not giving into what the world imposes upon us to perpetuate capitalism and oppression, but also being soft and letting our bodies love what they love. Here again, is where that conversation between the soul and the world is important. “Wild Geese” calls us to question what is leading to flourishing of the self and liberation for all, and what is giving me temporary fixes for desires and fueling the flame of oppression? Perhaps Mary Oliver’s calling to her readers to pay attention is not limited to the natural world; perhaps she is also inviting and encouraging us to pay attention to how our choices and actions also affect others and the world around us. Oliver’s writing urges us that it is important to slow down to be able to hear ourselves and notice our own

desires as well as consider through the inevitable, consequential impacts of our decisions on the world around us.

While the consideration of these anti-capitalist feminist theories and identities is important, it is also imperative to think about the transcendence of these identities toward the overall goal of liberation for all, which Oliver certainly asserts in her writing. While each of our particularities play a role, the ultimate goal is universal liberation from oppression, and it is important to keep that in mind to, as previously mentioned, to emphasize that all are invited to join the movement. Mary Oliver's work embodies art's ability to transcend our identities. Even as a queer woman, Oliver did not overtly discuss her queerness, yet her subtle yet powerful liberatory notes of self-acceptance and trust beckon us to not see beyond social identities to try to identify similarities, but to truly see our uniqueness, our humanness, untainted by capitalism, as beyond and much more powerful than anything we can fit to a label. Her work demonstrates the rejection of capitalism, granting no value in material possessions or the master's tools, namely oppressive and exclusive oppressive social identities. Furthermore, her work, and "Wild Geese" in particular, is remarkably profound, yet not intellectualized, such that her poetry is truly accessible for everyone, allowing all people, regardless of education, socioeconomic status, or social identity to connect with their humanness apart from the master's constructions.

"Whoever you are, no matter how lonely, / the world offers itself to your imagination, / calls to you like the wild geese, harsh and exciting - / over and over announcing your place in the family of things" (*Dream Work* 14). These closing lines of the poem tie an ending to the piece itself and also frame the ending of this discussion of Mary Oliver's "Wild Geese" as a work of anti-capitalist literature. There are numerous things to consider when choosing to take feminist posture, and it is important to critically engage with your personal choices and the world around

you in doing so. Just as there is no one way to define virtues of character, so there is not one way to define womanhood or motherhood or. For example, we have been conditioned to believe that motherhood entails sharing the DNA with your offspring, or otherwise you are a stepmom or referred to by a different name. But the idea of motherhood is not limited to just that situation. Mother is an entirely fabricated idea and is not some emblem of universal truth; it has the capacity to change with respect to the circumstances and can take form in many different ways that don't involve the sharing of DNA.

Mary's Oliver "Wild Geese" calls us to do the critical work of examining everything we think we know. In her book of poetry *Felicity*, Mary Oliver includes the following quote from Rumi as an interlude between "The Gift" and "A Voice from I Don't Know Where": "Out beyond ideas of wrongdoing and right doing, there is a field. I'll meet you there" (*Felicity* 79). "Wild Geese" urges us to not measure ourselves against the world standards or let the world impose oppressive identities onto us. Oliver's work guides in slowing down and resisting the mechanization of our minds and bodies. She beckons us to immerse ourselves into the natural world and invite our imaginations to roam free and chart new, liberating territory. And in order to chart that territory, we must deconstruct all the ideas of right and wrong, good and bad, which have been fed to us over the years. These ideas such as racism, sexism, homophobia, transphobia, or even just our ideas about what a mother is, or what a good worker is, or what beauty is, are all sourced from or influenced by capitalism and are taught to us from the moment we can comprehend them and are cemented into our brains throughout our whole lives. It takes much time and energy and conscious effort to unlearn and relearn ideas that are true and beautiful to us and liberating to all people. Mary Oliver's "Wild Geese" resists all the twisted ideas prescribed to us by capitalism, inviting us to imagine a world not subject to compulsory

injustice. In posturing us toward introspection and extrospection Oliver's poem incites us to realign ourselves with our true desires and understand ourselves as members of a larger community, where there is no such thing as one way liberation. Therefore, we must all collectively confront our taming by a capitalism-stricken world. We must understand that we do not labor in isolation but as a humanity inherently connected to one another. Just as our struggle is not our own, neither is the solution. There is not one struggle, but many, and there is not one path to liberation but many. And it will take our particular, yet collective, imagination to envision and build a new house, using our own tools.

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