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**WOMEN, THE NEW YORK SCHOOL, AND OTHER
TRUE ABSTRACTIONS**

by

Margaret M. Nelson

A dissertation submitted to the Graduate Faculty in English Literature in partial fulfillment of the requirements for the degree of Doctor of Philosophy, The City University of New York.

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Abstract

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by

Margaret M. Nelson

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My study focuses on the relationship of women to the so-called “New York School” of poets in its first and subsequent generations. In painting, the term “New York School” typically refers to the Abstract Expressionists working in New York City at mid-century; in poetry, to the close-knit group of poets who were their friends and artistic peers, a group which includes John Ashbery, James Schuyler, Frank O’Hara, and Kenneth Koch. Recognizing the fact that “the writing of literary history inevitably takes mythic forms,” as Michael Davidson has put it, my study asks hard questions about the critical urge to consolidate a “school” (even, or especially, an “avant-garde,” as the New York School is commonly deemed), along with questions about if and how experimental writing by women can ever be effortlessly slotted into such structures. Throughout, I combine close readings of poetic texts with an overarching interest in the particular aesthetic issues that have accumulated around the idea of the New York School, and explore the relationship of gender and sexuality to their terms. The first two chapters revisit the New York art world of the 1950s and 60s—the first considers the abstract practices of the painter Joan Mitchell and the only “first-generation” female poet,

Barbara Guest; the second discusses the play of gender in the work of Schuyler, Ashbery, and O'Hara in relation to their affinity for detail, contingency, and dailiness. The next three chapters consider the careers of three women poets associated to varying degrees with New York School writing: Bernadette Mayer, Alice Notley, and Eileen Myles. These chapters chart the evolution of each woman's work from the 1970s to the present, with particular attention to how each continues, transforms, and occasionally rejects certain New York School tropes. The dominant theoretical concerns of my study include problems of abstraction and detail in language; the relationship between visual and verbal arts; the nexus of feminist and queer issues; the various roles played by women in narratives of literary and art history; and the ways in which New York City itself shapes the art and poetry created in it.

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Tales In and Out of School: An Introduction

This initial impulse behind this study was to explore the myriad roles women have played in and around the so-called “New York School” of poets. In painting, the term New York School generally refers to the Abstract Expressionists working in New York City at mid-century; in poetry, it has come to refer to the close-knit, albeit diverse group of poets who were their friends and artistic peers, a group which includes John Ashbery, Kenneth Koch, Frank O’Hara, and James Schuyler (and, perhaps less often, writers such as Kenward Elmslie, Harry Mathews, and Edwin Denby), and their so-called “descendants”—poets such as Ron Padgett, Ted Berrigan, Joe Brainard, David Shapiro, Tony Towle, Michael Brownstein, Dick Gallup, and many others. Given these oft-repeated, all-male lists of “leading figures,” the question immediately arises: who *were* (or are) the women of the New York School? And thus we arrive at the difficulty—a difficulty which has fueled my interest in the topic ever since I worked as a research assistant on David Lehman’s book *The Last Avant-Garde: The Making of the New York School of Poets*.¹

Getting to work on this book was a happy accident, and one which helped me to understand how “the writing of literary history inevitably takes mythic forms,” as Michael Davidson cogently puts it in his study of the San Francisco Renaissance (1). As the mythology begins to accrue around the New York School of poets (the mythology surrounding the painters has already been in full-swing for some time, with Jackson Pollock as a premier example), it seems the necessary moment for a study that considers

the various contributions and critiques women have made in and around this particular milieu. For while literary history may inevitably take mythic forms—indeed, most retrospective narratives do—it is troubling that these forms so often reenact the “common historical practice” of “the exclusion of females from the consolidation of literary groups” (though it isn’t exactly surprising, given the existent myths).² Clearly this study aims to complicate this practice. One tempting approach to such a project would be to write a detailed, cultural history that systematically addresses the work of the many women writers and artists associated with the New York School; such a project would readily respond to the question, *Who were the women of the New York School?* with a list of names—a list which would include painters such as Helen Frankenthaler, Lee Krasner, Grace Hartigan, Elaine de Kooning, Jane Frielicher, and Joan Mitchell; the poet Barbara Guest; the poet and playwright V. R. (Bunny) Lang (though she lived most of her short life in Boston); and, perhaps most importantly, so-called “second and third generation” writers such as Bernadette Mayer, Alice Notley, Maureen Owen, Eileen Myles, and many, many others.³

My study has shades of this approach, but for a variety of reasons, it takes a different path. First, excellent and thorough social histories of the period have already begun to appear—perhaps most notably, Daniel Kane’s 2003 *All Poets Welcome: The Lower East Side Poetry Scene in the 1960s*, which spends some real time discussing the increased visibility, influence, and even predominance of women poets—along with the difficulties they faced—in the downtown poetry scene loosely centered around the Poetry Project at St Mark’s Church-in-the-Bowery, the influential “anti-institution” formed in 1966 (the year of O’Hara’s death). Libbie Rifkin has also done interesting work on this topic, in essays such as “‘My Little World Goes On at St. Mark’s Place’: Anne Waldman,

Bernadette Mayer, and the Gender of an Avant-Garde Institution.”⁴ The present study differs from these works in that its primary concern is textual—that is to say, its overriding focus lies in the action of the poetry on-the-page. My approach is thus to combine close readings of various poetic texts with an overarching philosophical/theoretical interest in the particular aesthetic issues that have accumulated around the idea of the “New York School,” and to explore the relationship of gender and sexuality to their terms.

I choose this approach partly out of temperament; partly because I want to give the poetry itself the attention it deserves; and partly because I very much want certain questions—questions about the critical urge to consolidate a “school” (even, or especially, an “avant-garde,” as the New York School is often deemed), questions about if and how work by women can ever be effortlessly slotted into such structures, and so forth—to remain unsettled, and perhaps unsettling. My first chapter, which considers the work of the only “first-generation” female poet, Barbara Guest, alongside that of the painter Joan Mitchell, zeroes in on this tension; the last three chapters then trace its path through the careers of three writers of subsequent generations: Bernadette Mayer, Alice Notley, and Eileen Myles. My chapter on Guest and Mitchell moves their work to center stage while also pointing out the real differences that distinguish it from the movements with which each is associated. Likewise, while I mean to call attention to the prominent—indeed, foundational—roles women have played as writers, editors, and organizers in subsequent generations (Anne Waldman, Bernadette Mayer, and Eileen Myles each directed the Poetry Project at St. Mark’s Church for a period; poets such as Myles, Mayer, Notley, Owen, Barbara Barg, and others ran important workshops, literary

magazines, small presses, and so on), I don't insist that these roles can or should be facily folded into normative narratives of literary history.

In an interview with Judith Goldman, Notley articulates one reason for this skepticism: "Men lead movements and argue with each other over the present and future of poetry, insuring that they get more space in the so-called discourse. It's like they're still doing all the real thinking. We're geniuses, they say, and then go back to arguing with each other . . . It's also a fact that the ways in which poetry gets published . . . not to mention the whole idea of a literary movement, the academy, the avant-garde, are all male forms" (8). Clearly there's much to debate here, and the debate is an important one. It raged, for example, at a 1999 conference on women's poetry and poetics at Barnard College, organized by Claudia Rankine and Allison Cummings. In a statement published after the conference, Rankine and Cummings reiterate Notley's sentiments, and push at them further:

Most discourse on late twentieth-century poetics has been written by men, and has aimed to delimit various aesthetic positions or movements. Given that the (slight) majority of poets writing today are women, the dearth of aesthetic spokeswomen for various aesthetic positions is striking . . . Why is it that so many women poets—or is it simply most poets?—do not want to describe—or is it reify?—their poetics? Perhaps they are not in the habit of theorizing poetry, leaving that to critics or other poets so inclined. Perhaps the wish not to anatomize one's aesthetic position stems from a core belief in slippery subjectivity and a fear of reductively fixing one's position, limiting one's vision of what is possible. Could this belief, this fear, have particular urgency for women writers? . . . Many poets are feeling their ways through an era of turgid, competing aesthetics; are women more likely to respond with reticence, as opposed to braggadocio? Whose nature abhors a vacuum?⁵

These are good questions, and it is my hope that the present study addresses them throughout. Given this "dearth of aesthetic spokeswomen," in my chapters on Mitchell, Guest, Mayer, Notley, and Myles, I have tried to provide ample space for them to describe their work and methods in their own words, as I have learned so much from

listening to them speak for themselves in their interviews, lectures, essays, and (of course) their poetry.

*

The title, “Women, the New York School, and Other True Abstractions,” means to condense the above issues while also tethering them to a playful and relevant source. I’ve lifted the phrase “true abstraction” from O’Hara’s 1959 mock-manifesto “Personism,” in which he states: “Personism, a movement which I recently founded and which nobody knows about, interests me a great deal, being so totally opposed to this kind of abstract removal that it is verging on a true abstraction for the first time, really, in the history of poetry” (*Collected Poems*, 498). When I started planning this project, I imagined the more simple title: “Women of the New York School.” This soon changed to “Women *and* the New York School,” as it became clear that although women have been there all along, they have never been simply *of* or *in*. Then the very instability of the terms “women” and “New York School” began to overwhelm; often I felt tempted to abandon the formulation altogether. But O’Hara’s sly turn of phrase helped me to stick with it. For a “true abstraction” could mean, on the one hand, something deeply and truly abstract, with no concrete referent; on the other, it could designate something seemingly abstract that turns out to be “true,” i.e. real, literal, or materialized. Many readers will immediately recognize in this doubleness elements of a long-standing feminist debate about the viability of the categories “woman” and/or “women.”⁶ In fact, it soon became obvious to me that many of the arguments against the unexamined use of literary groupings and/or labels have much in common with certain radical feminist arguments against the use of the category of “women.”⁷ My title thus conjoins these

spheres, and eventually suggests that both “women” and “New York School” might be productively, and even comically, considered as “true abstractions”—i.e., as terms whose definitions are necessarily in flux, but not necessarily without real referents or pragmatic power.⁸

For as many have noted, O’Hara’s “Personism” mocks the seriousness of other “isms,” but it isn’t entirely a spoof. Indeed, his above quip about reaching “true abstraction” via a flood of personal details breezily dismantles the age-old opposition of the concrete and the abstract—another prototypical feminist gesture (though feminism may have been the last thing on O’Hara’s mind). The first half of my study explores this connection via two thematically-linked chapters: Chapter One considers the problem of women and abstraction, via Joan Mitchell’s abstract painting and the deeply abstract poetry of Barbara Guest; Chapter Two considers the investment in detail, contingency, and dailiness associated with the writing of three New York School men—Ashbery, O’Hara, and Schuyler. The structure of the first half thus implicitly calls attention to an intriguing inversion that developed in this particular art scene at mid-century—an inversion that upends the misogynistic equation which figures women as matter and men as form (“matter” indeed derives from the Latin *mater*, for mother); women as detail and men as generality; women as aberration and men as essence; women as incapable of abstract thought or art and men as its natural practitioners.

Though my study is primarily concerned with literature, when considering the “feminine abstract,” as it were, and its relation to the New York School, it would be a tremendous oversight not to explore, however briefly, the accomplishments of female Abstract Expressionist painters of the period. Despite earnest and accurate assessments of the movement as inhospitable (to put mildly) to female artists, I worry that the

observation (here made by Michael Leja in his recent book *Reframing Abstract Expressionism: Subjectivity and Painting in the 1940's*) that “Elaine [de Kooning] and other female Abstract Expressionists were structurally excluded from the construction of subjectivity embedded in the full experience and production of Abstract Expressionist art” (266), may unintentionally lead to overlooking what the female painters *did* do, whether “structurally excluded” from the terms of the movement or no. Leja is right to note that “[a] dame with an Abstract Expressionist brush is no less a misfit than a *noir* heroine with a rod” (262), but it’s crucial to note that for the female painters, such a predicament marked the beginning of a journey, not the end of one. There are many female painters—abstract and figurative and everything in between—who are worthy of discussion. For my purposes here I choose Mitchell, because she worked in an abstract idiom for forty solid years; because of the importance of poetry in her life and work; because she was closely tied to O’Hara, Ashbery, and Schuyler as collaborator, muse, fan, and friend; and because I find her painting astonishingly beautiful.

Chapter Two takes up the reverse, as it were, and considers the distinct ways in which the work of O’Hara, Schuyler, and Ashbery contends with the quotidian, the domestic, the particular, and, in the cases of Schuyler and O’Hara, the autobiographical and explicitly erotic. While socially and historically accurate, I have come to believe that the continual, vague alignment of the New York school of poets with Abstract Expressionism (as famously enacted by Donald Allen in his introduction to the influential 1960 anthology *The New American Poetry*) can sometimes deflect attention from some very potent distinctions between the two—namely, the apparent gulf between the stereotype of the serious, macho New York School painter interested in “transcendence,” on the one hand, and that of the campy, frivolous, queer poet

interested in the quotidian and “deep gossip,” on the other. The critical commonplace that poets such as O’Hara and Ashbery were trying to “do” with words what the Abstract Expressionists were “doing” with surface (i.e. flatness, “all-overness,” “push-pull,” speed, performativity, improvisation, gesture, etc.) is by no means meaningless, but its rush to sublimate the poetry into a formalist paradigm elides some very interesting questions about sexuality and aesthetics. For while many of the Abstract Expressionists are infamous for casting their art in deeply macho terms (most famously epitomized by the ongoing myth of Jackson Pollock as the artist-hero on a quest into the feminized deep of the unconscious), the first generation of poets have a very different reputation—that of “faggy” aesthetes, with a more controversial sort of feminine identification(s).

Certainly one could make the claim—and I think it would be a worthwhile one—that as the gay giants of the era of the New York School pass on (and this would include the tantalizing triumvirate of Frank O’Hara, Allen Ginsberg, and John Cage), the importance of their queerness is in danger of being critically erased under the guise of wanting to avoid any reductive readings of their work. For this reason among others, Chapter Two calls attention to the fact that the New York School of poets was unique in mid-century America for having a core of openly gay men as its primary practitioners (not to mention a gay man, John Bernard Myers, as their original publisher and the source of their moniker). Cast in this light, the idea of the New York School as the “last avant-garde” interests me less than the ramifications of its being one of the first gay avant-gardes. I find that the interest of this point far outweighs any fear of reducing the terms of the discussion to homosexuality, especially as such fears strike me as closely connected to an outdated fear of outing the writers, and the consequent desire to protect them from a homophobia presumed to come from without.⁹ As the feminist critic

Shoshana Felman has pointed out, sexuality takes on the status of an answer to a text only in the relation of interpretation; in the relation of transference, it takes on the status of a question (171). Chapter Two considers some of those questions in relation to the valorization of contingency, detail, dailiness, and “personalism” that has become associated to varying degrees with the writing of O’Hara, Schuyler, and Ashbery.

Though Chapter Two focuses on primarily feminine identifications, I do not mean to suggest that male homosexuality and effeminacy are inevitably or intrinsically linked. Nor am I particularly interested in delimiting any monolithic “gay sensibility.”¹⁰ Rather, I see this discussion as part of a larger conversation about the various roles played by the feminine in the history of male lyric poetry and its critical reception—a complex issue which has been lucidly explored by Barbara Johnson (especially in *The Feminist Difference*) among others. In light of this conversation, I have become wary of critical attempts to exalt O’Hara’s localized “I do this, I do that” poems, or Schuyler’s “Things to Do” laundry-list poems, which blithely skip over gender issues. In her book *Reading In Detail: Aesthetics and the Feminine*, Naomi Schor considers the recent theoretical privileging of “the detail” by Jacques Derrida (not to mention Freud, Barthes, Foucault, Lacan, de Man, Habermas, and so on), and asks the following important questions: “Does the triumph of the detail signify a triumph of the feminine with which it has long been linked? Or has the detail achieved new prestige by being taken over by the masculine, triumphing at the very moment when it ceases to be associated with the feminine?” (6). Indeed, when we consider the related “triumph” of “contingency over universality”—or of “self-resistance and uncertainty” over the model of an autonomous, stable self—that characterizes so much 20th century thought, one may indeed find

oneself wondering whether such ideas maintain their power and panache only when partitioned from feminist inquiry.¹¹ One point of this study is to abolish such partitions.

For many critics who champion the writing of the New York School do so by attempting to re-valorize the detail, the contingent, and the particular, *while simultaneously repressing the fact that “the detail does not occupy a conceptual space beyond the laws of sexual difference: the detail is gendered and doubly gendered as feminine,”* as Schor has put it (*Detail*, 4, ital. mine). Indeed, Schor’s main point is that while “the detail has been traditionally connoted as feminine and devalored, the modern age has witnessed a remarkable transvaluation of detail accompanied by its no less significant degendering” (97). Clearly the discourse about New York School writing may not occupy such “heavyweight” ground, but it’s still crucial, I think, to make sure such a degendering doesn’t suffuse its terms. For example, to celebrate the “abundance of localized detail” in O’Hara’s poem “The Day Lady Died,” (the poem begins: “It is 12:20 in New York a Friday/three days after Bastille day, yes/it is 1959 and I go get a shoeshine/because I will get off the 4:19 in Easthampton/at 7:15 and then go straight to dinner”), and to then argue that the poem is great because “historians a century hence” could use such detail to “piece together the New York of that moment in the same way that archaeologists can reconstruct a whole extinct species of dinosaur from a single fossil bone” (Lehman, 202), inadvertently constructs a peculiar double-bind: O’Hara’s “abundance of localized detail” represents a departure from—indeed a threat to—the traditional gender equation that figures women as “attentive to their immediate surroundings, the finished product, the decorative, the concrete, the individual,” while “men prefer what is most distant, the constructive, the general and abstract,”¹² but by degendering such a reversal—and by insisting that O’Hara’s detail will somehow *matter* to future historians the same way a fossil will—the

critic notes O'Hara's difference only to sublimate it into a traditional conception of literary value. As Jane Gallop has pointed out about postmodernist thinkers such as Derrida, who "celebrates Nietzsche's 'femininity' while attacking feminists' 'masculinity,'" one needs to be attentive to any formulation which tacitly sets up a scenario in which "[b]eing antiphallic becomes the new phallus, which women come up lacking once again" (160). Thus, in considering the role of detail in New York School poetry, I avoid celebrating its particulars *qua* particulars, on the one hand, or as thruways to the "universal" or the "archaeological" on the other. For, as Schor has suggested, "[b]y reversing the terms of the oppositions and the values of hierarchies, we remain, of course, only just barely able to dream a universe where the categories of *general* and *particular*, *mass* and *detail*, and *masculine* and *feminine* would no longer order our thinking and our seeing" (*Detail*, 4-5).

The poetry associated with the New York School—like any art grouped under a label—is incredibly diverse. But if I had to make one tactical generalization about the writing I will be discussing here, it might be this: when considered together, its paradoxical commitment to "true abstraction" offers a rich field from which to rethink the standard oppositions of the concrete vs. the abstract, the particular vs. the universal, "the world vs. the word" (as the poet Jorie Graham recently put it)—or, in terms more intimate to the work at hand, the daily vs. the epic. It is my contention that the different ways in which New York School-related poetry has gone about this task have much to teach us, and that these ways can have a truly liberating effect on those writing and reading in its wake. For whatever the "New York School of poetry" may be, one of its effects has been to allow male writers to explore a different relationship to materiality and immanence, and, conversely, female writers a claim on abstraction and idealism.

Sometimes, as we shall see, this exchange finds women performing butch and/or masculine identifications, exploring hermaphroditic fantasy, or identifying with non-human species (for Mitchell and Myles, as for Gertrude Stein, dogs are important; Notley regularly invents species that combine the human with non-human species). The stakes of this exchange could not be higher, as they concern nothing less than the question of how “being-man” and “being-woman” can *both* be thought as “primary, originary forms.”¹³

*

The stakes of a discussion about the New York School, its particular nexus of gender and sexuality, and its status as an “avant-garde,” are in fact higher and broader than they may initially appear. For if the New York School was indeed “the last authentic avant-garde” in the United States, as Lehman has argued, and if that “last avant-garde” coincided with everything from the “the death of the public intellectual” to “the expansion of the purview of academe” to “the triumph of a slick, mass-produced globalization” (often personified in the effete figure of Andy Warhol), to the rise of “irony” at the expense of “sincerity,” to a kind of doomed infatuation with poststructuralist theory and its unpopular (if not a bit outmoded) association with moral relativism (whatever that might mean)—one might fairly ask why such a bell tolls for the American avant-garde precisely at the cultural moment of the triple “liberations” of the Civil Rights movement, the women’s movement, and the gay/lesbian rights movement, and the consequent rise to prominence of art from these corners. Lehman and others are right to diagnose the disturbing and daunting impediments facing the avant-garde impulse today—the ever-increasing commodification of literary production; the

absorption of so many writers and intellectuals into the academy, coupled with the increasing corporatization of the academy itself; a widespread loss of faith in personal and/or collective potency in the face of multinational capitalism, a crushing militarism, stringent fundamentalisms, and so on. But I would also ask hard questions of any nostalgia for a time—or the fantasy of a time, as the case may be—when the so-called avant-garde was safely dominated by white men (many of whom, in the case of the New York School of poets, came to New York straight out of Harvard).

For nostalgia notoriously works to create a mythic past, which it then mourns. Though not nefarious in and of itself, this cycle can unintentionally serve to obscure or ignore trends or movements that do not fit into its strictures. (For example, if the explosive and transformative Black Arts movement of the late 1960s wasn't an avant-garde, I don't know what is.) My discussion of Mayer, Notley, and Myles thus emphasizes how their writing complicates such nostalgia, and works instead to enlarge the scope of possibilities for poetic project, feminist imagination, and even political action (especially in the case of Myles, who “conducted an openly female write-in campaign for President in 1992,” as the bio note from her 2001 collection *Skies* puts it). These latter three chapters focus on how certain New York School tropes necessarily morph when their practitioners are women, whose historical relationship to detail, the personal, the local, and the quotidian is somewhat overdetermined. At times, as we shall see, this mutation has entailed a wholesale rejection of some of the traits that the New York School has become known for. For example, Mayer has testified to having an “incredible resistance to New York School writing”; Myles has called “third- or fourth-generation New York School poetry . . . too decadent to be believed”; and Notley recently told me, “I don't like the quotidian much any more either as new writing or as

living.”¹⁴ These mutations play out on a variety of levels. For example, while Chapter Two discusses the playful identification with domesticity practiced by Ashbery, it is a quite a leap to the work of Bernadette Mayer, whose books *Midwinter Day* (written as a piece on December 22, 1978), and *The Desires of Mothers to Please Others in Letters* (written during the nine-month period of a pregnancy in 1979-80), make clear the difficulties of mapping a celebration of the domestic quotidian onto a woman writing out of “female anonymity,” as Myles has put it.¹⁵ This situation gains in complexity when that woman is a mother (as explored in my chapters on Mayer and Notley) and/or a lesbian (as considered in my chapter on Myles). Likewise, as dirty-minded as the men in Chapter Two get, the celebrated “trash aesthetic” of male artists as diverse as Duchamp, Ashbery, Rauschenberg, or Warhol necessarily mutates when its practitioners are women, as women have a historically distinct relation to pollution. And as explored in my chapter on Myles, the tradition of the writer as *flâneur*—a tradition of great importance to O’Hara, for example—cannot remain unaltered as *flâneur* slips into *flâneuse*.

But perhaps the most compelling mutation explored in the following pages has to do with the particular vacillation between “caring” and “not caring” that characterizes so much New York School writing and attitude. The concluding lines of Marjorie Perloff’s book on O’Hara cut to the heart of the problem: “All his life, O’Hara refused to *care* in the conventional sense; he would not fight for publication or scramble for prizes,” she writes. “But perhaps he adopted this stance because he knew, all along, that we would indeed be looking” (197). In his study, Lehman extends this idea to argue that this nonchalance was primarily a put-on—that underneath it all, the New York School poets cared deeply about poetry, about fame, and about creating lasting and complex works of art that would rise to the top of the heap in posterity. “They were dedicated to

the new, and implacably opposed to the poetry of the academy,” he writes. “But they did not confuse the new with the ephemeral. They never forgot that the aim of a poem was to live forever” (290). There may be some truth in this statement, but its sudden downgrade of the ephemeral is jarring. *Celebrating the ephemeral is all fine for fun and games*, it seems to say, *but in the end, this is no sand painting. It’s Poetry, and with a capital P.*

No one can pretend to know the extent of the inner fantasies of fame, recognition, and adulation that the male New York School poets may have harbored—and surely they harbored some, for most human beings, and certainly most artists, do. But I think we lose something pivotal when an intense drive toward canonization leads us to discount O’Hara’s statement, “I don’t think of fame or posterity (as Keats so grandly and genuinely did), nor do I care about clarifying experiences for anyone or bettering (other than accidentally) anyone’s state or social relation, nor am I for any particular technical development in the American language simply because I find it necessary” (*CP*, 500) as a fronting, evasion, or deception. The more interesting action lies in the vacillation between “caring” and “not-caring,” not in an eventual decision about which stance is “code” and which one “real.” Further, my study aims to explore how the stakes of caring or not caring about literary stature differ significantly for women as compared to both gay and straight men. As Myles explains in *Narrativity*:

Let’s face it, [the male New York School poets] were just as New Critical as everyone else in the fifties. They would all assert that the poetry was not about them. It’s about skimming the surface of the self. Using that facility to shape the poem. My dirty secret has always been that it’s of course all about me. But I have been educated to believe I’m no one so there’s a different self operating and I’m desperate to unburden my self of my self so I’m coming from nowhere and returning. That’s sort of classic. You just cannot underestimate the massive difference in writing out of female anonymity. It blows all styles out of the water.

In spite of this “massive difference”—or perhaps because of it—the insouciance of O’Hara’s “Personism” and the New York School at large has often proven attractive and

useful to women writers navigating their way through a male-dominated writing scene and literary history which has never “cared” about their voices in the same way that it has about male ones. Thus I pay attention throughout to the ways in which certain women have inherited and wielded the famed New York School insouciance in surprising, often political ways.

For example, though all of my subjects care deeply about poetry, none has taken part in the kind of scolding, morose, or nostalgic conversations about the fate of the art that have recently preoccupied so many poets and critics, epitomized by book titles such as Dana Gioia’s *Can Poetry Matter?* (1991), Vernon Shetley’s *After the Death of Poetry* (1993), or even Lehman’s *The Last Avant-Garde* (1998). It’s notable—though not surprising—that not one book-length epitaph for “popular” poetry and/or the avant-garde has been penned by a woman or person of color. (Thankfully, much recent scholarship—such as Elizabeth Frost’s *The Feminist Avant-Garde in American Poetry* [2003]—has begun to articulate and explore the many reasons why.) As Marjorie Perloff has written in *Wittgenstein’s Ladder*, “Wittgenstein might have responded by asking Shetley or Gioia what the ‘it’ is that no longer ‘matters,’ the ‘it’ that is by the critics’ testimony so ‘diminished,’ so marginalized, so evidently beside the point in the culture of late twentieth-century America” (2). My study pursues a related line of inquiry, and implicitly questions (with Perloff), “to *whom* poetry *should* matter and why.”¹⁶ To declare the death of an art form—or of the civic value of the academy, for that matter—just as its demographics undergo a profound diversification strikes me as a deeply troubling venture. The whole debate reminds me of the American anxiety over the “death of privacy” which has raged from the Cold War to the present. As Deborah Nelson concludes her treatise on the subject, “[n]o matter how often the media tell us otherwise, ‘we’ never had and do not want to

‘return’ to a genteel, patriarchal, and property-based norm of privacy. But that doesn’t mean privacy is something we can do without” (159). And just so, I would argue, with poetry.

After all, the 20th century opened with a plethora of anti-art movements (the exemplar being Dada) that relentlessly proclaimed the end of art, and I see no need to rehearse in the first part of the 21st century what was performed so brilliantly in the last (though I would be a fool not to acknowledge that such repetitions are, in many ways, inevitable—they’re all part of the ride). Reflecting on the art of the 20th century, John Cage once said, “I may be wrong, but I think art’s work is done . . . as far as I’m concerned twentieth-century art has done a very, very good job.” When asked if he would thus stop composing, Cage replied, “No, no, let’s not be logical. . . I can perfectly well do something illogical. . . There’s no reason why I shouldn’t. I might even from time to time need a little entertainment!” (*Conversations with Cage*, 268). It is my view that the best of the New York School reflects this anarchic, pleasure-oriented twist on negative capability, and that, in the later writing that I consider, the combination of such with feminist consciousness and urgency has made for some of the most “alive” poetry to date. In a 1995 lecture, Notley’s second husband, the late poet Douglas Oliver, put forth the following maxim: “*Each narrowing of what contemporary poetry is supposed to do bears with it an equivalent narrowing in the definition of a human being.*”¹⁷ The sentiment of this statement—which is essentially a more formal version of O’Hara’s stance in “Personism”—informs my study throughout.

Also, though I aim to distinguish certain elements of New York School writing from previous or concurrent poetic trends, nowhere do I aim to seal it off from other movements in order to valorize it. Generally speaking, I treat the various trends of the

20th century—from Warhol to Black Arts to L=A=N=G=U=A=G=E to so-called “identity-based” spoken word poetry—as “one flow,” as Myles has put it.¹⁸ Though there are real and important distinctions between the New York School and the less expressivist or less romantic art of, say, L=A=N=G=U=A=G=E writing, attempts to build partitions between them become more complicated when one considers them through the lens of gender. Language writing is remarkable for being one of the first avant-garde movements with many—perhaps a majority—of female innovators, including luminaries such as Lyn Hejinian, Rae Armantrout, and Leslie Scalapino. Further, there has been a great deal of fluidity and affinity between women writing in the New York School vein and women associated with Language writing: Mayer gets a whole chapter in Anne Vickery’s *Leaving Lines of Gender: A Feminist Genealogy of Language Writing*, and Guest’s writing occupies a central, albeit slippery, position in both realms. The reasons for this affinity are complex, but certainly some of them lie in the fact that many of the women who came to writing in the 70s shared a developing feminist consciousness—a consciousness which challenged and expanded both the New York School’s famed antipathy to politics and the male Language writers’ occasionally monomaniacal focus on warring economic systems. As Notley recently put it, “if I were to say what I feel most a part of, it’s not the New York School, but it is the generation of women poets who are my age, who cut across all of the ways that American poetry is written.”¹⁹

For despite the New York School’s famed aversion to politics, there exists the following, provocative connection: while O’Hara’s poetic insistence that “ideas are inseparable from the people who have them” could hold true in many contexts, it also has a plainly feminist ring to it.²⁰ In a 1978 essay entitled “Taking Women Students

Seriously,” Adrienne Rich wrote: “To think like a woman in a man’s world means thinking critically, refusing to accept the givens, making connections between facts and ideas which men have left unconnected. *It means remembering that every mind resides in a body; remaining accountable to the female bodies in which we live; constantly retesting given hypothesis against lived experience*” (*On Lies, Secrets and Silence*, 245, ital. mine). If you remove the gender specifications from the last part of Rich’s comment, you have a fairly good description of the strain of New York School aesthetics that I will be focusing on throughout. So, is the logical conclusion of this syllogism that O’Hara, Schuyler, and Ashbery thought like women in a man’s world? Not really: such terms don’t really make a lot of sense to us today, especially as we’ve “outgrown” the kind of gender polarity and essentialism that Rich, especially at this phase of her career, is known for. But the connection still intrigues me, as it draws our attention to the spectacle of a group of men who loved men, whose poetry also understood and elaborated this cornerstone of feminist thought (though, again, feminism may have been the last thing on their minds). I think such a spectacle is worth pausing over, and celebrating. In fact, by linking the energy, innovation, and queerness of three “first-generation” New York School men with the subsequent work of three self-described feminist writers, I aim to contribute to the kind of criticism that “evade[s] any insistence that the political dreams of a feminist and of a gay man have nothing in common,” as Wayne Koestenbaum puts it in *Double Talk* (8).

*

In the end, Schor’s preoccupation with “reading in detail” brings her to the following conclusion:

Despite the extensive and highly sophisticated work carried out in recent years by feminist critics committed to uncovering the specificities of women’s artistic

productions, there exists no reliable body of evidence to show that women's art is either more or less particularistic than men's. Indeed, further investigation of this question may lead us to formulate a surprising hypothesis, namely that feminine specificity lies in the direction of a specifically feminine form of idealism, one that seeks not to transcend the sticky feminine world of prosaic details, but rather the deadly asperities of male violence and destruction. (97)

In reading, thinking, and writing about women associated with the New York School, I have avoided looking for or claiming any "specificities of women's artistic productions." But I admit that Schor's "surprising hypothesis"—that is, her sense of a "specifically feminine form of idealism, one that seeks not to transcend the sticky feminine world of prosaic details, but rather the deadly asperities of male violence and destruction"—has gained in force as I have gone along. The writing of this book has been bracketed by violence: I began it in New York City in the fall of 2001, in the aftermath of the terrorist attacks that destroyed the World Trade Center; I finished it in the spring of 2003, in the midst of the massive violence of the American war in Iraq. The relationship of women to war is an immensely complicated one, and not my primary subject here.²¹ But it's worth noting in conclusion that the most recent works by Notley and Myles, for example, are powerful, outraged pieces focused on "the deadly asperities of male violence and destruction." In Notley's experimental essay on *The Iliad*, "Homer and Postmodern War," she argues that "*The Iliad* is the pattern for our civilization. It is war as we still conceive it, even though since 1991 we don't die in significant numbers, only our enemies do." Her essay defiantly concludes: "The poet's job is to unsay Fate . . . /I refuse to live in the ancient world."²² For her part, Myles has recently written a fierce libretto entitled "Hell," which accompanies a score by Michael Webster. "Hell" is a surreal and caustic allegory involving "a presidential character" who rules "what used to be called Hell and is now called Constant." The final line of libretto is: "Get ready for

World War III”—to which the chorus “ALL” responds: “Ow!”²³ I have no idea what the future holds, but I am at least grateful that such outspoken and inventive female voices are accompanying us on this somewhat alarming ride into the 21st century.

It has become a commonplace to say that the Abstract Expressionist moment marked the time at which New York overtook Paris as “the art capital of the world” (as dramatized in the title of Serge Guilbaut’s book, *How New York Stole the Idea of Modern Art: Abstract Expressionism, Freedom, and the Cold War*), and that this ascent was historically linked to the postwar rise of the United States as a military and economic superpower. Writing as I am from New York City in 2003, however, the landscape looks and feels quite different indeed. The predominance of the United States has perhaps never been more controversial, and the events of September 11th, along with the subsequent wars in Afghanistan and Iraq—along with accelerated debates about American unilateralism, militarism, and globalization—have profoundly altered the tenor of the discussion. In a recent email interview, Notley asked me: “Somehow people don’t connect the New York in the New York School with the city itself, why is that?” (2/4/02). Perhaps more than ever, the “New York” needs to be put back into the “New York School”—not only to marvel at the city’s lively history of art and thought in a time of grief, strife, and anxiety, but also because if one ignores its specificity—i.e. the very particular reasons why New York *is* such a great city—or if one simply brags about it with an unmindful provincialism, one may find oneself falling back on the obsolete and potentially lethal assumption that “the greatest city in the world” is the only city in the world, or the only one that matters.

Lastly, in her essay “The Lesbian Poet” (from *School of Fish*) Myles reiterates the feminist maxim that the “anxiety-of-influence” model that still implicitly and explicitly

shapes so much thinking about literary history cannot be easily mapped onto women writers, who are so often engaged in the opposite activity—i.e. actively searching out predecessors and models, instead of feeling oppressed by them.²⁴ “Where’s the mothers,” Myles asks, then answers herself: “Gertrude. Gertrude Stein, of course. And all the living women I know” (127). The present study—which pays a significant amount of attention to Stein, and also to several living women, many of whom I know—echoes this path. Later in the essay, Myles writes: “Women I know are turning around to see if that woman is here. The woman turning, that’s the revolution. The room is gigantic, the woman is here” (130). In closing, I want to acknowledge that I too am one of those women, and this project clearly a result of my own “turning”—my own desire, as poet, fan, and feminist, to recognize some of the women I’ve found in the room.

¹ Lehman's book was published by Doubleday in 2001; the only other book-length study of the "school" thus far is Geoff Ward's *Statutes of Liberty: The New York School of Poets* (Palgrave, 1993). Other recent work includes a 2001 collection of essays entitled *The Scene of My Selves: New Work on the New York School* (eds. Terence Diggory and Stephen Paul Miller, Orono, ME: The National Poetry Foundation), and Daniel Kane's social history of the next generation, *All Poets Welcome: The Lower East Side Poetry Scene of the 1960s* (University of California, 2003). Kane has a broader focus, however, that extends beyond the New York School to include the Umbra workshop, the Nuyorican Poetry scene, and other downtown poetic activities.

² Quoted from Rachel Blau DuPlessis's essay "The Gendered Marvelous: Barbara Guest, Surrealism, and Feminist Reception," in *The Scene of My Selves*, p. 189.

Ward and Lehman both make requisite gestures to Guest and the women of the so-called second generation (Lehman in his Introduction, Ward in a 2001 Postscript), but their general neglect of the subject—epitomized by the book-end locations of each—again reveals something of the difficulty of bringing women into the central narratives of literary history. In his introduction, Lehman writes, "When I lecture on the New York School, I am sometimes asked why relatively few women were involved in the movement. I reply that this is not true of its later manifestations," and later adds that "the leading exponents of the style included Anne Waldman, Bernadette Mayer, Maureen Owen, and Alice Notley no less than Ted Berrigan, Ron Padgett, Tony Towle and Michael Brownstein" (12). Yet when it comes time (in the epilogue) to tell the story of the next generation, it's clear that it's still a story of men: "The Second Generation got its start on the day in 1959 that Berrigan . . . walked into a bookstore where Ron Padgett, then still a high school student, worked part-time. Berrigan was accompanied by a girlfriend, Pat Mitchell . . . Pat Mitchell later married Padgett. Padgett could look back and marvel that he had met his future wife and his closest literary friend on the same day" (364). This mythologized moment is an example of how women can quickly slip from "leading exponents of the style" to backdrops for the activities of male poets.

³ In art history, much "revisionary" work of this nature has been done in recent years—two good examples are Michael Leja's *Reframing Abstract Expressionism: Subjectivity and Painting in the 1940's* and Ann Eden Gibson's *Abstract Expressionism: Other Politics*, both published by Yale University Press (in 1993 and 1997, respectively).

⁴ For Rifkin's work, see www.jacket.zip.com.au/jacket07/rifkin07.html. Other poets and/or critics who have addressed the issue in interviews and/or print include Juliana Spahr, Lee Ann Brown, Anne Vickery, Marcella Durand, Maureen Owen, and others. See also Kane, p. 140: "Women poets were becoming more visible in a way that began to mitigate the overall macho tone set by many male poets and the earlier strangely minor presence of women poets in earlier publications (as opposed to actual readings) associated with the Lower East Side." Kane goes on to discuss the many women poets on the scene in the mid-1960s, including Diane Wakoski, Kathleen Fraser, Carol Bergé,

Barbara Moraff, and Leonore Kandell, and the central positions assumed by younger women poets such as Anne Waldman, Marilyn Hacker, Ruth Krauss, Notley, Mayer, Joanne Kyger, Hannah Weiner, and many others (20, 141). But despite the incipient sexual revolution, Kane rightly notes the insidious sexism of the “progressive” male literati of the period. See his discussion of George Montgomery’s magazine *FEMORA*, and of Paul Blackburn’s comments that women should use “proper speech” in poetry, instead of the “common speech” that was becoming a “fair and valid medium” for male poets (20-21).

⁵ Claudia Rankine and Alison Cummings, “Afterword and Conception,” published in *Fence Magazine*, Spring/Summer 2000, p. 125-126. They also note several exceptions—i.e. women poets who are *not* adverse to talking about their poetics, such as Lyn Hejinian, Rae Armantrout, Annie Finch, Alice Fulton, Joan Retallack, and Rachel Blau Du Plessis.

⁶As for feminist problems with the category “women,” see, for example, Monique Wittig’s 1980 essay “The Straight Mind” (in *The Straight Mind*) in which she famously asserts: “‘woman’ has meaning only in heterosexual systems of thought and heterosexual economies. Lesbians are not women” (32). See also “Questions” in Luce Irigaray’s *This Sex Which Is Not One*, in which she refuses to answer the question “Are you a woman?” (120-122). For an astute consideration of the history of this conflict throughout the past few centuries, see Denise Riley’s book ‘*Am I That Name?*’ *Feminism and the Category of Women in History* (Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 1988). This debate is also intimately related to Judith Butler’s discussion of the materiality of the body in *Bodies That Matter*, in which she does for the category “body” something of what Riley does for “women.”

As for the label “New York School,” I won’t rehearse here all the reasons why it does or doesn’t make sense—as Lehman makes clear, the name was always a joke of sorts, and one which the poets themselves generally rejected (see Lehman, 26). Clearly such groupings are mostly used as critical conveniences, marketing devices, a means of placing oneself or others socially, and so on, and their applications always risk paving over important contradictions and aesthetic differences between artists that most inquiring minds would prefer to highlight and explore. Further, the critical urge to consolidate a “school”—even, or especially, an “avant-garde”—out of an otherwise amorphous amalgam of friendship and happenstance can be an act of power as much as simple advocacy: by creating a team and designating its major players, one determines who gets to play the game—not to mention what game is being played. Indeed, as Michael Davidson and others have pointed out, the field of mid-century, avant-garde poetics in the United States—from coast to coast, as it were—is overwhelmingly dominated by “boy’s club” metaphors, be it the “baseball team” of the New York School, Charles Olson’s tribal fraternity, Robert Duncan’s mystical brotherhood, and so on. Given such a situation, it should come as no surprise that oppositional writing by women throughout the 20th (and now the 21st) century has often worked in tension (if not out-and-out conflict) with the masculinist ideology that underpins prototypical notions of what constitutes an “avant-garde.” This model, however, is not necessarily gender-specific, and most certainly extends to work by men that challenges the avant-garde’s long history of heterosexist and misogynistic rhetoric (though one might remain alert to the fact that any boy’s club, regardless of its sexual proclivities, can render

women invisible with astonishing ease). Yet to then choose to characterize feminist writing as “experimental” rather than “avant-garde” comes with its own set of problems. “Experimental” has a tepid connotation, and doesn’t come close to characterizing the ferocious and transformative nature of much work by women. See the end of Chapter Five for more on this issue, via Myles’ unwillingness to let go of the term “avant-garde,” as explored in her interview with Frances Richard. See also Elizabeth Frost’s *The Feminist Avant-Garde in American Poetry* (University of Iowa, 2003).

⁷ It isn’t just that any category can be as reductive as it is convenient; it’s also that women have a historically different relationship to collective groupings than men have, be it in literature or otherwise. As Davidson has noted, “male bonding often leads to material enrichment [whereas] the same experience among women has no such material base” (“Compulsory Homosexuality,” 201). Though material enrichment may seem to have little to do with poetry, Davidson’s point can certainly be understood metaphorically, if one takes literary reputation as a form of currency. For example, in the field of art and/or literature, when men get together, the grouping is often seen as an aesthetic force; when women join together, the fact of their gender usually overshadows any aesthetic inclination.

⁸ Though it’s not a connection I’m prepared to take up here, Marx’s conceptualization of money as a “real abstraction” is also relevant here. See Anne Carson’s discussion of such in *Economy of the Unlost*, p. 45.

⁹ Given how little work has actually been done on the subject to-date, a premature aversion to the topic cannot help but bring to mind the passage from Sedgwick’s *Epistemology of the Closet* in which she adeptly summarizes the many discouragements that aim (consciously or no) to preempt inquiry into queer issues in the literary arena: “Don’t ask; you shouldn’t know. It didn’t happen; it doesn’t make any difference; it didn’t mean anything; it doesn’t have interpretive consequences. Stop asking here, stop asking just now; we know in advance the kind of difference that would be made by the invocation of *this* difference; it makes no difference; it doesn’t mean.” (Quoted in Richter, *The Critical Tradition*, p. 1485.)

¹⁰ For example, while Lehman grants that “a critic could make the plausible claim that what I have been calling the pursuit of happiness is code for a celebration of a gay sensibility,” one has to wonder what such a claim could really *mean*. The either/or formulation implies that (a) there exists such a thing as a specific, singular gay sensibility, which one could elaborate with, say, a cluster of adjectives, and then map back onto the poets, and/or (b) that a reader or critic could—or should—eventually determine which interpretation is “code” and which one “real.” (John Shoptaw’s recent book, *On the Outside Looking Out*, brilliantly focuses on the intransigence of this problem in Ashbery.) The first option prescribes and contains both the sexuality of each writer and its relationship to his or her writing; the second only makes sense in the “epistemology of the closet,” to use Sedgwick’s phrase, and thus brings us face-to-face with how “outing” functions as “the promise of a disclosure that can, by definition, never come,” as Judith Butler has put it (*The Lesbian and Gay Studies Reader*, 309).

¹¹ Here I'm simply repeating and condensing the many different feminist critiques of deconstruction, made by everyone from Gayatri Spivak to Barbara Johnson. Johnson is especially trenchant on the issue in *A World of Difference*, in which she takes on Paul De Man by asking whether "self-resistance, indeed, may be one of the few viable postures remaining for the white male establishment" (45).

¹² Schor, *Reading in Detail*, p. 17, here quoting Jean Larnac, author of *Histoire de la littérature féminine en France* (1929).

¹³ The terms are from Teresa De Lauretis—see her essay in *The Essential Difference*, where she writes: "The question, for the female philosopher, is how to rethink sexual difference within a dual conceptualization of being, 'an absolute dual,' in which both being-man and being-woman would be primary, originary forms" (16). Her idea of "an absolute dual" both excites and troubles me—it excites insofar as it is part and parcel of some very important practical endeavors, such as the attempt to get the UN to recognize the rights of women and girls as human rights; but it troubles me insofar as it preserves the binarism at the core of so much thinking about gender, even as it attempts to alter its implications (thus all those who feel themselves somewhere "in-between" "being-man" or "being-woman"—which may be, in fact, most people—might get left out in the cold).

¹⁴ Mayer, interview with Jarnot, p. 6; Myles, see "Contributors' Index" in the back of *Out of This World*, p. 663; Notley, from email interview with the author, 2/9/02.

¹⁵ See Myles in *Narrativity*. Virginia Woolf's *Mrs. Dalloway*—which famously charts the progress of a single day in the life of Clarissa Dalloway—is a notable female predecessor here. It interests me, however, that the book's incredible resurgence in popularity as of late is due to Michael Cunningham's book (then movie) *The Hours*, insofar as it represents another mediation of women's lives by a gay man. (Interesting, too, that the film *The Hours* appeared in theaters around the same time as Todd Haynes' *Far From Heaven*—another critically-acclaimed exploration of the quotidian life of a housewife by a gay man.) I'm not suggesting there's anything wrong with this identification, nor with these movies per se. Rather, I'm just curious about how and why the public gets excited about works that center on women's daily experience, and I can't help but wonder how the reception would differ if the directors and/or authors were women or lesbians themselves.

¹⁶ Though the whole topic of whether American poetry is dead may seem a little "over," especially now that the culture wars of the 90s have passed, somehow the conversation still rages on. For example, as I write in 2003, the new, mainstream line seems to be that American poetry apparently "matters" again, partly due to the well-publicized opposition of many poets to the Iraq war (epitomized by Sam Hammill's organized boycott of a White House poetry event, and his consequent decision to create an anti-war poetry anthology to deliver to Laura Bush). But given the disdain for political engagement shown by many of the men who have written about the death of poetry and/or the avant-garde, the circumstances of this "revival" strike me as quite ironic. For more on this issue—particularly as it relates to the rise of MFA programs in the USA—see Eric McHenry's "An Anti Anti MFA Manifesto," in *Poets and Writers Magazine*, May/June

2003, in which McHenry discusses Gioia's "change of heart" in Gioia's new introduction to *Can Poetry Matter?*, as well work on the subject by David Alpaugh and Neal Bowers.

¹⁷ Douglas Oliver, "Poetry's Subject," in *PN Review*, Sept./Oct. 1995, p. 52; originally given as the Judith E. Wilson Annual Lecture on Poetry in the University of Cambridge, 1995.

¹⁸ See Myles with Richard, p. 26. For more on Warhol, see Chapter Two, endnote #29. In his "Post-Post Script," Ward also takes pains to isolate New York School work from "identity-based" poetry: "Sadly, the general shift of interest in the USA has led to canon-busting on behalf of marginalised groups becoming virtually the dominant feature in the teaching of American Literature, with the button worn by the particular group short-circuiting the complexities of literary issues with its simple cue for affirmation. The importance of the formal aspects of a poem . . . is often ignored currently in the automatic rush to discern value in literature on the basis of the author's ethnic origin or social affiliation" (193).

¹⁹ Notley interview with Jennifer Dick, www.doublechange.com/issue3/notleyint-eng.htm. Notley goes on to name Waldman, Mayer, Susan Howe, Fanny Howe, Carla Harryman, Lyn Hejinian, Leslie Scalapino, and Jorie Graham as "women [her] age who are very strong."

²⁰ See Bill Berkson's "Frank O'Hara and his Poems." *Art and Literature* #12, Spring 1967.

²¹ Obviously I'm leaning here in the direction of a certain essentialism that suggests that women are "naturally" anti-war; I know this is a troublesome proposal, complicated by many factors, including the increasing presence of women in combat forces around the world, especially (though not only) in the States. (During the war in Afghanistan, for example, Maureen Dowd reported a story about a female fighter-pilot who yelled, "How does it feel to get blown away by a girl?" as she bombed a Taliban target. It's a complex image, but not a particularly heartening one.) Warfare, as well as women's relation to it, is also ever-changing—and I would here point out the startling statistic that prior to WWII, women and children traditionally constituted about 5% of wartime casualties; now they constitute 95%. Some progress, indeed. For more on the issue, see the timely anthology, *Women on War: An Anthology of Writings from Antiquity to the Present*, ed. by Daniela Gioseffi (NY: The Feminist Press, a not-for-profit NGO of the United Nations, 2003). The book contains 150 perspectives from around the globe, from Sappho to RAWA in Afghanistan, and includes everything from theoretical work to first-hand survival stories.

²² Notley, from "Homer and Postmodern War," a talk given at Poets' House on December 5, 2002, a section of which was reprinted in the guide to the 2003 People's Poetry Gathering, quoted here from p. 5.

²³ As described by Myles in an email to the author, 4/16/03. She continues: "[Hell] opens on a stage with a hole at its center and smoke pouring out of it, and a young man on a cell phone comes stepping out pitching a script called 'Horns of Joy.' . . . There's a

lefty figure called The Gnome. There's an Icelandic band singing in Icelandic. A poet named Raphael."

²⁴ One prototype for this feminist work is Alice Walker's *In Search of Our Mother's Gardens* (1974), and Walker's subsequent work to champion the work of Zora Neale Hurston. In the field of contemporary poetry, I would call attention to the amazing work that Jennie Penberthy has done to bring Lorine Niedecker's life and work to center stage, and Kristin Prevallet's recent work on San Francisco Renaissance poet Helen Adams.

PART ONE

CHAPTER ONE

**Abstract Practices:
The Art of Joan Mitchell, Barbara Guest, and Their Others**

This chapter takes its title from a distinction once made by the poet Robert Creeley, who was not a New York School poet *per se* but who is also known for his affinity with Abstract Expressionist artists, and for his continuing preoccupation with the problem of communicating intimacy and abstraction in words. Creeley writes, “To kick out (one hopes forever) the impediment of ‘representation,’ all that easy mimicry, etc., this had a most obvious virtue: it gave us, in short, what art we have had in the last 50 years. At least that. But danger is very much present in the too simple concept: ‘abstraction.’ The idea of it, rather than the practice” (Yau, 52). Like so many other artists and commentators, Creeley both celebrates abstraction as *the major event* of 20th century art and also feels an intense need to warn of its dangers. Similarly, Gertrude Stein, who perhaps worked harder than any other writer in the 20th century to disrupt the tradition of mimesis as metaphor for and/or goal of artistic practice, was also famous for pronouncing abstract art “pornographic” (see Steiner, *The Color of Rhetoric*, 183). (Most assume Stein didn’t mean it as praise; Andy Warhol, on the other hand, was enraptured by exactly that connection, and eventually developed the ecstatic mantra: “Sex Is So Abstract” [Koestenbaum, *Warhol*, 182].) And while Wallace Stevens stayed busy elaborating the idea of a Supreme Fiction that “must be abstract,” other modernist poets from Pound to Williams were vehemently coming out “on the side of things,” whatever that might mean; as Wendy Steiner writes about the modernist obsession with the

concrete: “writer after writer—no matter how hermetically his work was cut off from the ‘average reader’—vowed his hatred of abstraction” (183).

Although one could date this obsession with how a work of art negotiates its status as both “a sign of the thing-world and a part of the thing-world” to modernism in general (and, as Steiner and others would have it, to cubism in particular), the problem continues to dominate much contemporary discussion about poetry. The varying debates about Language writing and its challenges are the obvious example; in his recent book *After the Death of Poetry*, Vernon Shetley compares the chilly poles of New Formalism and Language writing to conclude that poetry’s cultural reputation has been lost, and can only be restored if it manages to strike some kind of balance between the two extremes—i.e. if the poetry of the future can “bring together the authority of skeptical reflection with that of experience. Neither is adequate by itself” (191). A similar conversation remains ongoing in feminist circles: a 1999 conference at Barnard College, hopefully titled “Where Lyric Tradition Meets Language Poetry: Innovation in Contemporary American Poetry by Women,” served mostly to reify the split between poetry that “privileges the word over the world” and vice versa (the terms were Jorie Graham’s). As Frances Richard later wrote about the event in the Spring/Summer 2000 issue of *Fence* magazine, it was as if “the poetic spectrum had collapsed to navel-gazing lyric or egg-headed language and the twain could never meet” (87). In another statement published in *Fence* after the conference, the organizers (Claudia Rankine and Allison Cummings) asked almost plaintively, “might the opposition between object and representation be addressed in other, less combative terms?” (126)

In this chapter I hope to address this question by focusing on the particular practices of abstraction employed by the painter Joan Mitchell and the poet Barbara

Guest. Unlike Shetley, I'm not interested in what the poetry of the future "should" do—though his intentions seem good, I can't think of anything more deadening to offer poetry than a prescription, and I fear how greatly impoverished we would be if artists and poets stopped staking out impossibly—indeed, indefensibly—extreme positions. And while I clearly mean to call attention to the work of Guest and Mitchell, I'm not holding them up as examples of artists who've somehow "bridged the gap," so to speak; such a goal doesn't strike me as possible or even desirable. As Frank O'Hara demonstrated in his statement for Donald Allen's 1960 anthology *The New American Poetry*, it's the mysterious vacillation between the concrete and the abstract that can be so much fun: "It may be that poetry makes life's nebulous events tangible to me and restores their detail; or conversely, that poetry brings forth the intangible quality of incidents which are all too concrete and circumstantial. Or each on specific occasions, or both all the time" (420). As Wittgenstein might point out—and as Richard Rorty and others have pointed out in his wake—the whole abstract/concrete opposition can be productively considered as a language-game. In *Philosophy and the Mirror of Nature*, Rorty's effort to liberate the Western mind of its "domination by ocular metaphors," Rorty puts forth the bold supposition that the whole question of a Platonic Form, i.e., of an abstract property considered in isolation and considered as capable of sustaining causal relations, is nothing more than "a muddled attempt to talk about adjectives as if they were nouns" (33). Such a Wittgensteinian desire for linguistic clarity is a necessary tool to have, I think, when re-visiting the Abstract Expressionist moment—ground zero, as it were, of the production of discourse about abstraction and materiality in modern art.

Another necessary tool is feminist vision, and an understanding of the immense effort by feminists over the past thirty years or so to lay bare the misogyny which for

centuries has posited women as the antithesis to abstraction and/or transcendence. Ezra Pound sums up this attitude quite well (albeit idiosyncratically) in his essay “The Natural Philosophy of Love,” in which he figures the mind itself as “an up-spurt of sperm,” the act of thinking as “driving any new idea into the great passive vulva of London.” He then concludes that “Woman, the conservator, the inheritor of past gestures, clever, practical, as Gourmant says, not inventive, always the best disciple of any inventor, has always been the enemy of the dead or laborious form of compilation, abstraction” (380-1). Indeed, as annoying as it is, I want this phrase—*Woman has always been the enemy of abstraction*—to haunt this chapter, perhaps alongside Paul Valéry’s equation, “*the more abstract an art, the fewer women there are who have made a name for themselves in that art*” (see Schor, *Detail*, 17) as together they serve as a constant reminder of what’s at stake for women at the heart of the Abstract Expressionist enterprise.

A different but equally necessary feminist approach to keep in mind is the one staged by Judith Butler in *Bodies That Matter*, particularly in her discussion of the French feminist Luce Irigaray. Paraphrasing Irigaray, Butler shifts the terms of the debate: “The problem is not that the feminine is made to stand for matter or for universality; rather, the feminine is cast out outside the form/matter and universal/particular binarisms . . . Irigaray insists that this exclusion that mobilizes the form/matter binary is the differentiating relation between masculine and feminine, where the masculine occupies both terms of binary opposition, and the feminine cannot be said to be an intelligible term at all” (38-39). Irigaray’s wager, of course, is that the repressed feminine—precisely that which cannot be named, being neither a particular nor a universal (these are Plato’s terms)—“emerges within the system as incoherence, a threat to its own systematicity.”¹ It’s important to remember that Irigaray is talking about the feminine, not about women

per se; as she says tartly elsewhere, “for the elaboration of a theory of woman, men, I think, suffice” (*This Sex*, 123). The distinction matters, for without it, one might slip into the expectation that women artists and writers should or could somehow exemplify in some direct way a *peinture* or *écriture féminine*—which is precisely what the female Abstract Expressionists, for example, feared most. As Mitchell once cogently complained, “A man can put on pink [paint] and it’s ‘sensitive.’ A woman puts it on and it’s ‘feminine,’ which is a dirty word” (Benstock, 163).

Indeed, it’s a daunting task to bring a feminist perspective to bear on artists famous for bristling at the very presence of the words “gender” (or “women”) and “artist” in the same sentence. When asked to write a response to Linda Nochlin’s famous 1971 article, “Why Have There Been No Great Women Artists?” Elaine de Kooning sent the following (which then appeared in the collection *Art and Sexual Politics: Women’s Liberation, Women Artists, and Art History*):

I was talking to Joan Mitchell once at a party ten years ago when a man came up to us and said, “What do you women artists think . . .” Joan grabbed my arm and said, “Elaine, let’s get the hell out of here.” That was my first response to Linda Nochlin’s essay. I was curious about how a man would react. Alex Katz thought it would be a cop-out to answer the piece. Sherman (Drexler) thought it would be a cop-out not to answer it. John Cage thought the question “divisive and an over-simplification.” I agree with all of them. (56)

“Let’s get the hell out of here” seems to me an understandable response. But on the other hand, the progress of de Kooning’s comment also fascinates, in that her very next response is to canvas the important men in her life, as if a chorus of male opinion were a prerequisite to knowing what she wanted to say. She then takes an undeniable pleasure in agreeing with the men, and aligning against the feminist scholar. It’s not an unusual stance, especially at that particular cultural moment, but I’d like to steer clear of such polarizations. One way to do so, I think, is to emphasize a certain kind of feminist

reception—one which Rachel Blau DuPlessis has described in an essay on Guest as follows: “a reading strategy that puts no limits on the nature of the work, is agnostic as to whether it conforms to this or that version of womanhood, nor even cares whether the writer can be assimilated to (available, contemporaneous, consistent, or currently approved) feminist positions” (*Scene of My Selves*, 189). Such a strategy doesn’t look for the return of the repressed as much as it aims to pay close attention to art made by women. As Louise Bourgeois once said, fielding the omnipresent question of how she feels about being considered a “woman artist,” “Well, I don’t think it is particularly flattering. My feminism expresses itself in an intense interest in what women do” (*Theories and Documents*, 40). Insofar as the female gender inevitably functions, at this moment, as a mark of difference, I would use such a predicament to remind us of the power of contingency in general, which, according to Jean-Paul Sartre (and here paraphrased by Charles Altieri) is “the experience of existence preceding essence and hence of particulars deforming or differing from the very terms used to impose categories on them” (*Scene of My Selves*, 360). By beginning with Guest and Mitchell, then, I mean to draw attention to the way that their specific practices each can serve as an important mark of difference in their fields: Joan Mitchell’s slowed-down, landscape-oriented practice of abstraction differs tremendously from the more well-known and mythologized accounts of New York School “action painting”; likewise, while Barbara Guest is endlessly referred to as the only woman poet in the first generation of the New York School, her work is strikingly different from that of Ashbery, Koch, O’Hara and Schuyler, and thus does not find—indeed, has not found—an easy home in their “school.” As far as I see it, one could easily consider each woman’s work as either emblematic *or* disruptive of the terms of the movements with which it is associated: the

first rhetorical move aims to shift them to the center; the second to preserve the power of the margin. Both gestures have their temptations, but I suspect the tension between them is more engaging if left unresolved.

One could also easily argue (as Ashbery has done and continues to do) that there are profound aesthetic differences between the male members of the New York School of poets (and, of course, painters) that should not be overlooked, and such an argument would be exactly right. The problem remains, however, that profound differences between male artists do not always preclude their membership in a group or club. In fact, critics often treat such differences as necessary to the formation of a sort of gang of superheros, in which each wields his own special power (i.e. “if each of the four [poets] had a role to play, Ashbery’s was that of the Poet . . . O’Hara was the hero . . . Koch was the madcap,” and so on [Lehman, 72]), or as paradigmatic of important shifts in purpose and/or sensibility (i.e., the alleged split between the camps of Pollock and Willem de Kooning, or the alleged “defacement” of Abstract Expressionist gesture by artists such as Robert Rauschenberg and Cy Twombly, etc.). In fact, in the case of the male Abstract Expressionist painters, the more vociferous the differences among them, the more these differences were heralded as proof of their “irascibile” individuality. This club-by-divergences famously took a literal form for some time as “The Club,” a volatile group formed in 1949 whose New York meetings served as “the primary forum for Abstract Expressionism through the 1950’s” (Kertess, 16).² As far as the poets went, their “club” was more virtual (and more gay)—experienced mostly as friendship, and partially consolidated via association with John Bernard Myers’s Tibor De Nagy gallery, which published books by Ashbery, O’Hara, Schuyler, Koch and Guest. It wasn’t until later that Guest began to be “scandalously excluded” from the movement “in which she had

been a key participant,” as DuPlessis puts it (190)—an exclusion epitomized for many by her absence from *An Anthology of New York Poets*, edited by Ron Padgett and David Shapiro and published by Random House in 1970, which included only one female poet (a very young Bernadette Mayer) among 26 men. Not surprisingly, a parallel phenomenon transpired in the art world around the same time: Henry Geldzahler’s 1969 blockbuster show at the Met, “New York Painting and Sculpture 1940-1970,” included Helen Frankenthaler as the only female among 43 male artists.

Shifting the work of Guest and Mitchell to the forefront of the scene can also be seen in a Wittgensteinian light. At the opening of *Philosophical Investigations*, Wittgenstein counters the glib semiotic system set forth by Augustine (in which every word has a meaning, which correlates to the object for which the word stands) as follows: “It is as if someone were to say: ‘A game consists in moving objects about on a surface according to certain rules . . .’ —and we replied: You seem to be thinking of board games, but there are others. You can make your definition correct by expressly restricting it to those games” (PI #1, #3). Though Wittgenstein was no feminist, a closely-related idea animates Ann Gibson Eden’s 1997 book, *Abstract Expressionism: Other Politics*, in which Gibson reconsiders the Abstract Expressionist canon by focusing attention on neglected abstract work of the period done by women, people of color, gays and lesbians, including Thelma Johnson, Rose Piper, Norman Lewis, Alice Trumbull Mason, Nell Blaine, Beauford Delaney, Ruth Abrams, and many others. As Eden explains in her introduction, she wants to consider “abstract art . . . [as] a sign whose meaning is determined by its use” (xxxvii). My project here is admittedly less ambitious, and less concerned with making a systematic intervention into art history, but I want to begin by echoing this pragmatic insistence.

After all, any discussion of abstraction, be it in painting, literature, or both, gains from being foregrounded by the simple yet forgettable fact that “abstraction,” regardless of its hold on the 20th century imagination, is not any one thing (as a cursory walk through a gallery containing works by well-known “abstract” artists as diverse as Kandinsky, Miró, Rothko, Agnes Martin, Robert Ryman, Bridget Riley and so on, would quickly suggest). As Mitchell was fond of saying, “Abstract is not a style.” Similarly, the various practices of abstraction employed by writers of the past century or so are nothing if not diverse: no one would say that Mallarmé, Stein, Creeley, Celan, and Ashbery, for example, contend with abstraction in the same, or even similar, ways. What’s more, as Wendy Steiner reminds us in *The Color of Rhetoric*, when it comes to abstraction—the “kicking out of easy mimicry,” as Creeley puts it—the painting-literature analogy is by no means a simple one, complicated as it is by “the ability of painting to be utterly abstract and the corresponding inability of literature to be so, since it is composed of words that have preexisting meanings” (65-66). In her study of Stein’s tenacious experiments in non-representational portraiture, *Exact Resemblance to Exact Resemblance*, Steiner concludes: “A literalist interpretation of the direction set for western art by the mimetic program could only lead to defeat, and if for no other reason, we must credit Stein with forcing herself to full consciousness of this fact. The demands of artistry and reference make possible only an uneasy mutual compromise, a compromise in which Stein refused to take comfort” (204-5). In *The Autobiography of Alice B. Toklas*, Stein describes (in third person, of course) her discomfort with this compromise: “she was, and is, tormented by the problem of the external and the internal” (119). Precisely because of her dogged confrontation of this torment—and her generosity in sharing it with others—Stein stands as the towering figure over any discussion of the problem of

materiality and abstraction in 20th century English-language writing. What's more, her enormous body of work reminds us over and over again how misleading the opposition of the two can be. For the more abstract Stein's writing gets, the more concrete it feels; as Ashbery once said about *Tender Buttons*, the writing ends up imparting "an unfathomable solidity" (*Reported Sightings*, 108). (Thinking back to Warhol's "sex is so abstract" for a moment, we can also see how the converse might function: as Koestenbaum explains in his biography, the more blatantly "material" the tools of Warhol's art became, as in his piss paintings and come paintings, the more abstract the work. Warhol also considered his series of Polaroids of cropped body parts—about 70% portray male asses, Koestenbaum testifies—abstract works, and called them "landscapes" [Koestenbaum, 183-5]).

Of course we can quickly recognize this phenomenon as one of the primary lessons of modernist experimentation: when referentiality drops out, the materiality of the form (in this case, of the words) tends to become more acute, as Stein's mantra "a rose is a rose is a rose" famously exemplifies. But although Stein was famously converted by Cézanne's turn to "the reality of the composition," she remained equally enraptured by the endless task of "expressing the rhythm of the visible world" (*ABT*, 119). Mary Jo Haronian and others have usefully connected this dual commitment to Stein's medical training—specifically, to her study of the brain at Harvard, where she researched how thought patterns function as actual neuronal modes (Haronian, 193). The connection is an important one—as is her kinship with the philosophy of William James and Alfred North Whitehead—for it reminds us that the abstract/concrete dyad only makes sense within a certain mind/body split that Stein spent her early career troubling as a medical researcher, and her later career troubling as a writer. And while she may have been

tormented by it, her elaborations of this torment have carried the charge of liberation. For some, the experience of reading a work like *Tender Buttons*—which was, as she puts it, “the beginning of mixing the outside with the inside” (*ABT*, 156)—not only makes palpable the philosophical notion that “we awake in the same moment to ourselves and to things,”³ but also suggests that one simply cannot choose between them. As Stein might say (and perhaps Schuyler after her), you’re better off liking what you have—and in a real and mysterious sense, we seem to have both.

While Stein is generally assumed to be a patron saint of Language writing, her relationship to the New York School has gone fairly unexamined. For example, in Geoff Ward’s *Statutes of Liberty: The New York School Poets*, one of the few full-length studies about the school and its influences, Ward mentions Stein in passing three times, each time only to tell us that she was “a favourite” of O’Hara’s, and that O’Hara’s work “may owe something” to her texts. But what, exactly, O’Hara might have loved about Stein never becomes clear. In fact, while both O’Hara and Ashbery have consistently talked about Stein as an important influence, no one seems overly prepared to take the bait. I find this fact a little odd, insofar as Stein thought and wrote obsessively about the relationship between poetry and painting; the particular relationship Americans have to abstraction (“like Spaniards, [Americans] are abstract and cruel,” she says in *The Autobiography* [91]); the problem of “flat depth” (or, as T.J. Clark once put it in reference to Picasso’s *Ma Jolie*, of a “relentless shallowness” in which “farce and metaphysic” coexist simultaneously [178]); the ontology of the avant-garde; the relations (or lack thereof) between aestheticism and politics; the problems of artistic coterie and general audience; a commitment to charting the “continuous present” and the habits of attention that form consciousness; the related fascinations of identity, money, sexuality, and

temporality, and their various roles in the creative process; and so on—all issues intimate to any conversation about New York School writing. If “chatty abstraction” is indeed a characteristic of the New York School poets, as Eileen Myles has said, Stein’s paradoxical method of troubling referentiality by “flooding the world with her details” is an important forerunner of such.⁴ I would go so far as to say that the core of O’Hara’s mock manifesto “Personism” can be read as a testament to this Steinian revelation, as when O’Hara wagers: “Personism . . . [is] so totally opposed to this kind of abstract removal that it is verging on a true abstraction for the first time, really, in the history of poetry.” O’Hara, Koch, Schuyler, and Ashbery all understood, I think, the potentiality in this flood of detail, with its love for proper nouns, the refuse of speech, and the redundancy of objects. Of course, the fact that Stein was a woman, and a butch lesbian at that, complicates the patrilineal “anxiety of influence” model circulated by Harold Bloom—an issue I will return to in the chapters that follow. For the moment, I simply want Stein to stand as yet another marker of difference in the conversation—perhaps as the apparitional lesbian, to use Terry Castle’s great phrase—whose role as a theoretician of modern art haunts, and perhaps mocks, the supposition that “the more abstract an art, the fewer women there are who have made a name for themselves in that art.”

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Joan Mitchell, with her forty-year career of astonishing and vigorous abstract painting, is another figure who defies such a dictum. Mitchell is constantly referred to as one of the strongest painters of the so-called second-generation of the New York School (a label that the so-called second-generation painters always chafed against, for obvious reasons). In the summer of 2002, the Whitney Museum housed a Mitchell retrospective,

and four New York galleries showed her work⁵—hopefully further evidence that Mitchell is continuing to gather attention in the United States since her death in France in 1992. Because of her lifelong investment in literature, and in poetry in particular (her mother, Marion Strobel, was both a poet and a co-editor of the influential magazine *Poetry*, Mitchell was married for a time to Barney Rosset, founder of Grove Press; O'Hara, Schuyler, and Ashbery were all important friends to her; she and Samuel Beckett were intimate confidantes in Paris; she was also a devoted fan of many other poets, including Rilke, Wordsworth, and Eliot), nearly every monograph on Mitchell begins by citing the importance of poetry to her painting. As Judith Benstock begins hers: "Several themes predominate Mitchell's painting. Poetry, generally, lyrical and rooted in nature, is foremost among these" (11). Benstock then spends considerable time delineating Mitchell's connection to Schuyler's poetry. Mitchell occasionally took titles from Schuyler's poems, such as *A Few Days After II (After James Schuyler)* (1985), and in the mid-70's she did a series of "color abstracts" to accompany the Schuyler poems "Sunset," "Daylight," and "Sunday." Benstock also discusses the relationship between "To the Harbormaster," "Ode to Joy," and other O'Hara poems that Mitchell used as inspirations and titles for paintings. Likewise, in Klaus Kertess's monograph on Mitchell, Kertess relates the "extreme one-to-oneness between viewer and painting" in Mitchell's work to the kind of intimacy proposed in O'Hara's manifesto "Personism" (25). Mitchell also collaborated with John Ashbery: in 1960, Tiber Press published 225 copies of a book of Ashbery poems accompanied by prints of Mitchell silk-screens. And in addition to reviewing her work regularly, Ashbery also wrote the foreword to a 1992 Mitchell monograph.⁶

In contrast, few literary critics have paid much attention to the relationship between Mitchell's particular abstract idiom and New York School poetry, though Mitchell unavoidably appears in historical accounts as a close friend of O'Hara's and one of the few female regulars at the Cedar Tavern (and one of the most ornery). In O'Hara's case, the focus usually remains on the parallel between his famed writing style of "playing the typewriter" and the spontaneity of Action Painting (as epitomized, for example, by the lively poem-paintings he made with Norman Bluhm in 1960), or, more recently, on O'Hara's kinship with the camp and collage of Rauschenberg and Johns.⁷ In Schuyler's case, the attention usually falls on Fairfield Porter, whom Schuyler freely admitted was his favorite painter, and whose soft-focus realism—a realism which presents "an aspect of everyday life, seen neither as a snapshot nor as an exaltation" (Schuyler, *Selected Art Writings*, 16)—makes for a quick corollary to Schuyler's own role as a scribe of days. These parallels are useful and necessary, and I see no need to displace them. Further, I am wary of facile parallels between visual and verbal arts, and thus my discussion of such will not strain for metaphors. Here I simply want to add Mitchell's presence to the conversation, primarily by looking at her connection with Schuyler's poetry.

In a sense, Mitchell's career stands apart from the endlessly repeated art history narrative that charts the move from the high "metaphysical heat" of the first-generation of Abstract Expressionists to the "blague" of Johns and Rauschenberg to the cool vacancy of Pop Art, Minimalism, and Conceptual Art. With her rage and vigor, she also stands apart from the quiet realists often associated with the New York School—Fairfield Porter, John Button, Jane Frielicher, and so on. Kertess succinctly describes

Mitchell's alienation from the critical terms set forth by Clement Greenberg and Harold Rosenberg, the two theorists famous for championing—and perhaps delimiting—New York School aesthetics: “Mitchell made no effort to secure a place in either one of these camps . . . Greenberg's [formalist] theories seemed to foreclose the possibility of a congruence of painting, nature, and consciousness that she was seeking. Nor could her paint, step back, paint, step back, deliberations qualify her for the ranks of Rosenberg's macho warriors armed with gesture” (20). (As Kertess explains elsewhere, her “step back, paint, step back, paint” method was “in part necessitated by Mitchell's farsightedness, present since childhood” [18].) Like Stein, Mitchell was known for a certain unremitting, lifelong dedication to her art with little concern for audience or trends. Once Mitchell discovered abstract painting in the late 40's, she never went back—as Rosset once said, “There was no stopping it . . . In a society that didn't allow abstract painting she would have gone to jail” (Benstock, 19). Further, Mitchell's characterization of her painting method—“Call it . . . whatever you want. I paint with oil on canvas—without an easel. I do not condense things. I try to eliminate clichés, extraneous material. I try to make it exact”—would remain accurate throughout her long career (*Theories and Documents*, 33).

It may be pure perversity on my part to continue to link Stein and Mitchell, and I've found no evidence that either knew or cared about each other's work, but there are many intriguing parallels between their careers. An obvious one is that both were deeply interested in the potential overlaps between visual and verbal arts; another is that while both are known as quintessentially “American” artists, each relocated to France in early adulthood and essentially never went home. Both worked big: Stein on interminable projects such as writing “everybody's autobiography,” Mitchell on huge canvases hung

vertically. Both practices represent what Eve Sedgwick might call “fat art,” and stand as challenges to the assumption that a voracious desire to cover space—to “think big”—is an inherently virile impulse. But there are other, more subtle connections, one of which gets triggered by Mitchell’s above insistence, “I try to be exact.” “Exact” was, of course, one of Stein’s favorite words (as dramatized at length in her “Completed Portrait of Picasso”: “exact resemblance to exact resemblance, the exact resemblance as exact as a resemblance,” etc.). In *The Autobiography*, Stein boils down her own artistic temperament as follows: “Gertrude Stein, in her work, has always been possessed by the intellectual passion for exactitude in the description of inner and outer reality. She has produced a simplification by this concentration, and as a result the destruction of associational emotion in poetry and prose . . . [Poetry or prose] should consist of an exact reproduction of either an outer or an inner reality” (211). Stein’s distaste for emotion as a source of art-making definitely separates her from Mitchell, who repeatedly described her paintings as “remembered landscapes which involve my feelings” (Benstock, 31). Upon scrutiny, however, Mitchell’s approach to the relationship between “inner” and “outer” reality (or “feelings” and “landscape”) is quite subtle, methodical, and even scientific. As Ashbery once quoted her as saying: “I’m trying for something more specific than movies of my everyday life: to define a feeling” (*Reported Sightings*, 101). Stein and Mitchell both remained deeply committed to nonrepresentational investigation, but unlike so many of their comrades, they did not conduct their investigations in service of the mythic, the transcendent, the sublime, or even the subconscious. Rather, both were interested in charting the fact of feeling, and its peculiar relation to “outer reality,” exactly.

Another provocative parallel between the two has to do with the question of audience. It would be an erasure of both artists' ambition to imply that neither cared about finding an audience or achieving worldly success. Each worked hard to get her work into the world, and each had, I think, a deep conviction of her own genius. (Stein, of course, ended up the prototype of the avant-garde artist who becomes famous for not being understood, thus setting the stage for the simultaneous glorification and derision of a figure like Pollock.) This phenomenon doesn't interest me quite as much, however, as the question of what kind of audience each had in mind while composing. And both women often conceptualized—or actualized, as may be more accurate—this audience as a dog. Stein famously said that she wrote for herself and strangers, but she also consistently connected her identity—specifically her creative identity—to that of her dog (presumably her beloved poodle, Basket). In *Everybody's Autobiography*, which documents the identity crisis and writing block that followed the publication of *The Autobiography of Alice B. Toklas*, Stein's primary conflict vacillates between, "I am I because my little dog knows me" and "perhaps I am not I because my little dog knows me." As Koestenbaum has observed, contemplating Stein's impossible career, "she wrote without an audience, and she wrote against the idea of an audience . . . Stein's ideal audience is a dog, mute and loyal" (*Cleavage*, 327). In Mitchell's case, when asked in a 1986 interview, "Whom do you paint for?" Mitchell responded, "I suppose I must paint for me and my dogs. We are in the studio and they watch" (*Theories*, 33). Some of Mitchell's best and most well-known paintings—*George Went Swimming at Barnes Holes, but It Got Too Cold* (1956), *Skyes* (1960-1), and *Iva* (1973)—refer to her dogs (George was a poodle; Skyes a terrier; Iva a German shepherd). Throughout her life, Mitchell had thirteen dogs—many were gifts, and her sister was a breeder. In one interview, she unhesitatingly names "music, poems,

landscape, and dogs” as the things in life that made her want to paint. She is frequently quoted as saying she prefers the company of dogs to people (Benstock, 43).

So, what’s with the dogs? Part of the reason why I’m drawing attention to the dog-as-audience or dog-as-muse concept—beyond the fact that it demonstrates, in Mitchell’s case, the pleasure to be found in her honest, deadpan deflation of Abstract Expressionist rhetoric—is that it stands in such sharp contrast to the notion of inspiration, artistic identity, and creative performance as necessarily tethered to humans or a human audience—even, or especially, the human audience of literary and/or art history, as in Bloom’s every-poem-is-really-about-another-poem schema. Many might agree with Patricia Yaeger’s statement that “[t]he claim of the sublime is that we can—in words or feelings—transcend the normative, the human” (192), but I imagine that only a few would immediately link this sublimity to a canine audience. It also throws a wrench—a third term, if you like—into the customary binaries of “artist” and “Nature,” or “artist-as-subject” and “world-as-object,” and instead begs a different question: What happens when the human is not the only measure or witness? It is a question that has significance in relation to Notley and Myles as well as to Stein and Mitchell. It also relates to Schuyler’s poetry, in which landscape, light, color, and weather function as his intimate, even social, companions. (See his poem “I think,” for example, which begins: “Dear June Fifth,/you’re all in green, so many kinds,” and ends by imploring the color itself, “Green,/stick around/a while” [*Collected*, 161].) Like Schuyler, who is known for his urban pastoral, Mitchell blurred the customary division between city and country—perhaps reminding us that in the New York School, getting *out* of the city is often as important as being *in* the city. In 1958, Mitchell told an interviewer, “I am very much influenced by nature as you define it. However, I do not necessarily distinguish it from

‘man-made’ nature—a city is as strange as a tree” (*Theories*, 31). (The structural similarities between the early paintings *Evenings on 73rd Street* and *Hemlock*, for example—both from 1956—seem to bear this attitude out.) At times Mitchell goes a bit further: in a 1986 interview, she tells the following story of her paintings leaving her studio for a show in New York: “I was in the garden and the trees and the garden were beautiful and there was a beautiful light and I saw the paintings moving. A big strong man lifted moved them with great ease and I saw all their colors between the trees moving and it was like a parade and I was happy” (*Theories*, 34). The anecdote indicates something of the deep pleasure to be found in the blurring of boundaries between art and nature, pigment and color, human and non-human animal, aesthete and naturalist, and so on—not to mention the profound gratification of evacuation, of getting rid of one’s art, and of watching it join the procession of objects in the world (as Warhol later celebrated with his floating silver pillows).

Unlike Stein, however, who explicitly envisioned modernist experiment (hers and Picasso’s, primarily) as necessarily destructive of that which had come before (i.e. the 19th century, the mimetic direction of Western art since the Renaissance, etc.), Mitchell did not invest much in the avant-garde fetishes of innovation and/or knocking down one’s predecessors—fetishes that characterized much New York School painting of both the first and second generations. “Lots of painters are obsessed with inventing something,” Mitchell explained. “When I was young, it never occurred to me to invent. All I wanted to do was paint” (*Theories*, 34). Consequently, Mitchell was not enthralled by the work of Picasso or the Surrealists. Her list of favorite painters included Matisse, Van Gogh, and Monet—hardly the usual roster of influences for an Abstract Expressionist associated with “the greatest painting adventure of our time,” as Motherwell termed it. In fact,

Mitchell's move to France in 1959 (a move which parallels Ashbery's, who lived in Paris from 1958-1965, as well as Notley's) removed her from the heyday of New York School painting at a critical juncture, and served instead to align her with the very "School of Paris" that others slightly before her had worked to "overthrow." I don't want to make too much of these moves—people relocate, after all, for personal and inscrutable reasons—but Mitchell's move gains in significance when linked to broader cultural currents, some of which have to do with gender and sexuality. For as Leja argues in a chapter entitled "Narcissus in Chaos," during the postwar period, Abstract Expressionism's "aura of masculinity" and obsession with originality together served as "a crucial component of cold war U.S. national identity, differentiating the nation politically and culturally from a Europe portrayed as weakened and effeminate" (256). Seen in this light, a withdrawal from the New York scene at this time and a relocation to Europe (Mitchell in fact ended up living on the same property as Monet had in Vétheuil) cannot help but represent an abstention from, if not an aversion to, this kind of differentiation.

For while many of Mitchell's paintings bespeak a tremendous urgency—indeed a violence—they don't necessarily feel reactionary or iconoclastic. As Ashbery wrote in a 1965 review of her work, "There are new forms, new images in this work, but no more than were needed at a given moment . . . these unelaborated planes happened to suit Joan Mitchell only once or twice, after which she discarded them, for the time being at least" (*Reported Sightings*, 99-100). A suspicious reader might recall Pound's remark about Woman being "the inheritor of past gestures . . . not inventive, always the best disciple of any inventor," and attempt to cast Mitchell as a case in point. (If any explicit contrarior from the period were required, I might point toward Helen Frankenthaler's experiments

with color in the 1950s—specifically, with staining the unprimed canvas—which became hugely influential.⁸⁾ At any rate, difficult as it may be to hammer out the specifics of a relationship between Mitchell’s gender and her skepticism about innovation, I think it quite possible that one exists. After all, a commitment to innovation *qua* innovation presupposes an investment in lineage—a feeling, perhaps teleological at its core, that one’s work will somehow *matter* in the scheme of things, that it will have a significant part to play in the course of art or literary history. Though there are certainly women (like Stein) who have had this feeling—and certainly many men who haven’t—it isn’t a feeling that can be divorced from the historical fact of women’s presumed irrelevance to these histories. This fact becomes particularly acute within Abstract Expressionist rhetoric, which, as Leja has pointed out, worked together with “a broad range of cultural productions from this time . . . popular psychology, *film noir*, cultural criticism, and popular philosophy” to construct a discourse he calls “Modern Man discourse,” from which women were structurally excluded (258). Mitchell’s negotiation of subjectivity and landscape did not necessarily form in reaction to this discourse, but it nonetheless stands apart from the dominant Abstract Expressionist trend of replacing the tradition of female-as-subject-matter (specifically, the female nude) with a journey toward a feminized “other within,” which, as Leja puts it, could then stand for “primarily the unconscious, primitive instincts and residues, vague irresistible forces, or all of these” (258).

Ashbery’s observation that Mitchell uses then discards new forms is intriguing for another reason as well: it evokes Wittgenstein’s famous line about his philosophy (or to be exact, his propositions) being analogous to the act of discarding a ladder that that one has just climbed up (*Tractatus*, #6.54). Indeed, it is precisely this method that Rorty

celebrates as characteristic of “edifying” philosophers (i.e. the later Wittgenstein, the later Heidegger, Kierkegaard, Nietzsche) as opposed to “systematic philosophers” (i.e. Husserl, Russell, Descartes, Kant). “Great systematic philosophers are constructive and offer arguments,” Rorty writes, while “[g]reat edifying philosophers are reactive and offer satires, parodies, aphorisms . . . Great systematic philosophers, like great scientists, build for eternity. Great edifying philosophers destroy for the sake of their generation. Systematic philosophers want to put their subject on the secure path of a science. Edifying philosophers want to keep the space open for the sense of wonder which poets can sometimes cause—wonder that there is something new under the sun” (370). Rorty also notes the omnipresent connection between edifying philosophers and poetry (despite the fact that Plato would have rejected the possibility of such an alliance). Is there such a thing as an edifying painter? I think Mitchell may be one: she hints as much when she insists, “My painting is not an allegory or a story. It is more like a poem” (*Theories*, 33).

Though Mitchell uses a simile here, when considering her “field composition” paintings from the 70s, one might be inclined to take her comment more literally. As a critic once remarked about her haunting triptych, *Clearing* (1973), the panels seem to communicate three “self-contained episodes—or, better, interrelated stanzas” (Livingston, 35). “Stanza” is an Italian word meaning “an apartment, chamber, or room,” which traces back to the Latin verb *stāre*, “to stand.” As its etymology indicates, “stanza” signifies a stopping place, a place to stand, a space for a “stance,” i.e., for an idea or conviction. Many of Mitchell’s paintings from this period are polyptychs—such as the overwhelming *Wet Orange* (1972), or the exquisitely muted *Field for Skyes* (1973)—each of whose several panels represents a stanza, a “room for an idea.” (“I want to paint the

feeling of a space,” Mitchell once said [*Theories*, 34]). Further, *within* each of these panels, Mitchell often paints a variety of rectangular blocks clearly reminiscent of stanzas on a page of poetry. Her polyptychs are thus *doubly* stanzaic in that they echo the part of poetry that has to do with holding and/or vacating space, of intimating the places in a form where words might appear (as in the generalized outline of a sonnet or sestina), but, in this case, have not.

In paintings such as the gigantic *Wet Orange*, there are dozens of such place holders—skinny and fat rectangles in a spellbinding array of colors (orange, most notably, but also brick red, lavender, a thin red, veridian, a watery lime, ochres and browns, and so on). The orange brush-strokes in the foreground dance over the entire structure, unifying the panels even as they smutch them up. In contrast, works such as the triptych *Field for Skyes* present fat, squarish blocks that dominate the foreground in primarily one color—here, a deep viridian verging on teal—and block out whatever might have lain behind them. (Mitchell repeats this effect at the top of the central panel, where lavender blocks obscure an anemic red.) The overpainting has a violent beauty to it, reminiscent of official documents in which enormous sections of controversial text have been blacked out. On the one hand, the move here is towards silence, as the ever-encroaching white impasto on the edges suggests. On the other, the painting also hoists images of text—or, rather skeletons of text—before us, and lets the green say what it has to say. Clearly one could also relate paintings such as *Field for Skyes* to what Charles Olson termed “composition by field” in his influential “Projective Verse” manifesto of 1950. But Mitchell’s practice diverges from the scenario envisioned by Olson’s manifesto—which remains fixated on the white page and the performance of the authorial body composing upon it (“Action Painting” by typewriter)—in several

interesting ways. For her interest in “fields” never elides those of nature—i.e. the actual green fields that a dog might play in, as her title suggests. Thus the fascination of *Field for Skyes* lies in its ability to invoke green fields of nature *and* fields of textual or stanzaic composition, while also calling attention to its status as a material art object via its immense size and the autonomous wonder of its pigments.

Mitchell always insisted she was “a visual painter”—i.e. hostile to linguistic explication, and averse to issuing “pithy statements about her work,” as Bill Berkson once put it.⁹ It is more customary to talk of, say, Cy Twombly as a “literary” painter, due to his many poetic allusions and scribbling on the canvas—scribbling which borders on, and often develops into, actual script. (As Heiner Bastian once wrote, “No artist has in his work, as radically as Cy Twombly, substituted language for an expression that suspends and interrupts the discourse”; Bastian then goes so far as to suggest that Twombly’s overall project is to convey “the Fury of a hermetic language” [*Theories*, 34].) But Mitchell’s painting incorporates her interest in writing just as fiercely as Twombly’s, but in a different way—one which has less to do with *language* and the authorial hand, and more to do with *poetry*, or poetry as form. Indeed, her polyptychs address two fundamental compositional questions in poetry: “how does this look next to this?” and “should this stay or should this go?” (Side-by-side comparisons were in fact key to Mitchell’s process, especially as she did not compose the panels of her polyptychs together, but rather worked on them each separately and then decided on their sequence after the fact. Her studio at this time could apparently fit only two panels next to each other at one time, so she had to move them around quite a bit. [Livingston, 64]). She does not unite her polyptychs (as many other painters do) with brushstrokes that bleed from one panel onto the next. Consequently, her panels retain a sense of isolation within

their unity. And although I overheard a docent at the Whitney instructing her group to consider the end-pieces of Mitchell's quadriptych *La Vie en rose* as prologue and coda to the central action, I have found that Mitchell's large works often repel a narrative tact. (Or, in this case, as the central panels of *La Vie en rose* chronicle a heart-wrenching degeneration into embers—a kind of extinguishing, or vanquishing, of the choppy black strokes—it must be said that if Mitchell is telling a story, she means to emphasize the hollowness at its center.) Mitchell often arranged her work in sequence, but she did so with the goal of creating an overall effect, ideally taken in all at once from a distance. For this reason, she hung long-distance mirrors in her studio. Given the New York School obsession with spontaneity (an obsession shared by the Beats, the Black Mountain writers, and many other poetic groups of the 20th-century) it makes sense that poets such as O'Hara would deeply envy painting's immediacy—i.e. its “all-at-onceness,” its failure to unfold sequentially. And it was precisely this element of painting that enraptured Mitchell, who loved the idea that “painting never ends, it is the only thing in the world which is both continuous and still” (*Theories*, 32). In this sense, Mitchell's endless, stanzaic paintings may best represent the dream of a poetry in which form is truly content.

Wittgenstein often said that his goal was not to construct a philosophical system, but rather to “sketch out the landscape”; many of Mitchell's comments echo such a claim. As I suggested earlier, within this claim, making space for wonder—via silence, or white space—is paramount. Over the course of Mitchell's career, her paintings seem to chart a dialectic between white space (or white paint, as is often the case) that surrounds and defines intense action or clots of color (as in *Girolata Triptych*, 1964), and the suffocating euphoria of all-over color (as in *La Grande Vallée* sequence, 1983). (As with

all of Mitchell's colors, "white" is never a stagnant entity, but rather always on the cusp of shifting into the palest of yellows, grays, blues, etc.) And just as Wittgenstein stubbornly refused to move off from the bare-bones basics of philosophy—as demonstrated in *On Certainty* #467: "I am sitting with a philosopher in the garden; he says again and again, 'I know that's a tree,' pointing to a tree that is near us. Someone else arrives and hears this, and I tell him, 'This fellow isn't insane. We are only doing philosophy'"—Mitchell aimed to work from a similarly basic place: she describes her painting-self as "a little child coming up out of the basement and saying, 'who put the sidewalk there, who put the tree there?'" (Benstock, 67).

It seems no accident, then, that both Mitchell and Wittgenstein were fascinated by color, as it is the phenomenon of color that brokers out—indeed, is somehow paradigmatic of—the mysterious relationship between subjective and objective reality.

As William Gass explains in *On Being Blue: A Philosophical Inquiry*:

There are particular pieces of the world which essentially serve the abstract (dominos, for instance, standing armies, monetary prose), and there are fragments of mind which nevertheless pretend to be (like men of good will and the data of sense) residents in the realm of things. It is around these coins, twin-headed and treacherous, that the quarrel which concerns us has centered, for there is clearly a similar conflict between the way we customarily experience color and the way we have historically tended to think about it. (70)

Wittgenstein puts the mystery more succinctly: "An object must occur, if it occurs at all, in a certain coloured state of affairs, though in itself it is, so to speak, colourless." And Mitchell's paintings are famous for their astounding colors. Indeed, standing in front of paintings from the 70s such as *Blue Territory*, *Salut Sally*, or *Mooring*, it almost seems as though Mitchell is saying, *Here are the most beautiful colors in the world, no holds-barred. Enjoy.* Again, the paintings are not exactly spontaneous outpourings—Mitchell was known for planning each brush stroke—but in her chromophilia, she holds nothing back. Her use

of color is not chaotic, but it is shockingly generous. By all accounts, Mitchell was enthralled by the rush of glorious pigment. She had the money to buy high quality paint, but she tended to privilege instant color gratification over longevity. As a friend once explained, “She was focused on *color*, not the durability . . . She used a lot of turpentine, repeatedly thinning and rethinning her paints, which would sometimes sit in her studio (usually in large dog food cans), often unlidded, for months, and even years, waiting to be reconstituted when the need arose” (Livingston, 26).

Mitchell’s unrestrained chromophilia plays an undeniably large part in the visual pleasure of her work. This pleasure, however, has also engendered a certain amount of critical wavering. Near the beginning of his *New York Times* review of Mitchell’s 2002 Whitney retrospective, Michael Kimmelman writes: “The impact of her works, especially the later ones (she died of lung cancer 10 years ago, at 66), is so immediately intoxicating that a natural reaction is to distrust the art. Paintings this suave and sure-footed must be glib and manipulative, you may be excused for telling yourself” (31). Though the next paragraph advises the reader to “[d]istrust your distrust,” the suspicion with which he opens his review interests me, as it recurs in many reviews of Mitchell’s work. On the one hand, a patent distrust of beauty can be read as a modernist tic, and the urge to judge it as “glib and manipulative” perhaps a postmodernist extension of the same. (Not to be myopic, I should note that a distrust of beauty—especially when aligned with the feminine—goes back a long way. At least to Eve in Eden, probably earlier.) On the other, in Mitchell’s case, I wonder if it has something to do with the tacit relation between chromophobia and gender. As Mitchell (and Frankenthaler) well knew, being labeled “a colorist” is about as feminized a designation as art history has to offer. While the robustness of Mitchell’s paintings disallows a dismissal of them as “decorative,” her

paintings remain peculiar in the Abstract Expressionist pantheon for their furious insistence on visual pleasure. This insistence may partially explain why Mitchell never found a Greenberg nor a Friedman to champion her work in writing. Its commitment to pleasure, and specifically, to the pleasure of color, has produced a sort of forcefield around it, and a certain imperviousness to words.

In his slim and lovely book *Chromophobia*, David Batchelor meditates on precisely this problem. First he charts how Western art has an “intimidating and ancient tradition of *disegno versus colore*”—line versus color—in which line is figured as masculine and color as feminine (53). To make his point, Batchelor quotes the 19th century French color theorist Charles Blanc, who articulates the idea with the utmost clarity: “The union of design and colour is necessary to beget painting just as is the union of man and woman to beget mankind, but design must maintain its preponderance over colour. Otherwise painting speeds to its ruin: it will fall through colour just as mankind fell through Eve” (23). Batchelor then goes on to explore how for centuries various Western artists and art theorists have linked color—specifically color-as-corruption—with the feminine, the “Orient,” the infantile, and the homosexual.¹⁰ In a fascinating chapter on color and language, Batchelor argues that “[t]o fall into color is to run out of words . . . To attend to color, then, is in part to attend to the limits of language. It is to try to imagine, often through the medium of language, what a world without language might be like” (79). If you put together these two lines of inquiry—i.e. the characterization of color as “feminine, oriental, cosmetic, infantile, vulgar, narcotic, and so on,” with the observation that the visceral experience of color somehow repels verbal expression—you get an enriched sense of the problem Mitchell’s work presents. It’s too butch to write off *or* to

exalt as an instance of feminine chromophilia, just as it's too involved with poetics to write off *or* to exalt as simply "beyond words."

Gass's book *On Being Blue* takes up the problem of language and color from a slightly different angle: he is curious about how texts become visual. He argues, seemingly against conventional wisdom, that "fiction becomes visual by becoming verbal." Mitchell in fact discovered something of the same when she attempted to collaborate with Beckett on his 1959 radio-play *Embers*. The collaboration was to focus on the role of color in Beckett's play, with Mitchell painting watercolors to accompany the text. But she abandoned the project, deciding that the play was already visual enough "without a single visual description in it." Speaking about Beckett's work elsewhere, Mitchell praised a related phenomenon: "if something is green you know it's green but he doesn't say it's green" (Benstock, 108).¹¹ The exact opposite might be said about Schuyler's writing, which labors endlessly at visual description—and, in particular, at the task of describing colors. (As indicated earlier, green is, in fact, one of his obsessions, as evidenced by the "November 7" part of "The Vermont Diary," in which he aims to distinguish three particular greens: "In the sky a gray thought/ponders on three kinds of greens:/Brassy tarnished leaves of lilacs/holding on half-heartedly"; "behind the lilac/on a trunk, pale Paris green/as moonlight," and "another green, a dark think green/ to face the winter, laid in layers on/ the spruce and balsam" [109]). Indeed, it would not be a stretch to read Schuyler's entire *Collected Poems* (and, perhaps, his diaries as well) as a testament to Wittgenstein's remark: "Colors present us with a riddle, a riddle that stimulates us—not one that disturbs us" (*Culture and Value*, 67e). The notion of the riddle is crucial here. Although many laud Schuyler's humble desire "merely to say, to see

and say, things as they are” (“Dec. 28, 1974”), Schuyler is no spokesman for certainty. He constantly questions his powers of perception, and constantly gauges his desire and/or responsibility for exactitude: “I have always been/more interested in truth than in imagination. I/wonder if that’s/true?” (“A Few Days,” 362). In an essay in *Parnassus* called “Epitaph on 23rd Street: The Poetics of James Schuyler,” Koestenbaum repeatedly calls attention to this aspect of Schuyler’s writing—Schuyler’s “this is this, this is not this” manner of identifying and misidentifying, his habit of asserting then self-correcting. Koestenbaum keenly locates this stutter at the center of one of the repeated lines of Schuyler’s villanelle, “Poem”: “What is, is by its nature, on display” (45). What is, is, indeed; but the comma necessary for clarification also renders the proclamation awkward, revealing that even for the nominalist, the act of perceiving what’s “on display,” and of then translating it into language inevitably courts a certain self-consciousness and cleavage. But—and this is the crucial point—it is a cleavage that Schuyler experiences more as a koan than as postlapsarian trauma.¹²

Consider, for example, the following conundrum of color he relates in “The Cenotaph”: “I have a red toenail./It is red dye from orange socks bought in Vermont./If sweat causes the sock to dye the nail red why won’t the dye wash off of the nail?/It is incomprehensible./ I cannot understand it” (95). As per usual with Schuyler, such mysteries occasionally make him a bit cranky, but not despondent. More often than not, they provoke a bemused sense of wonder, often of the synesthetic variety: “What is that gold-green tetrahedron down the river?/ ‘You are experiencing a new sensation,’ ” he writes in “Freely Espousing” (3). As much as Schuyler aspires to the simple task of “seeing and saying,” he is equally aware of the fact that the action goes both ways: by perceiving, and by extension, by writing, he also colors the world: “September day, how

shall I color you?”, he asks in “A Few Days” (“In blue/and white and airy tones,” he then answers [374]). At times he takes great pleasure in such; at other times he grows agitated, as in the middle of “Hymn to Life”: “I hate fussing with nature and would like the world to be/All weeds. I see it from the train, citybound, how the yuccas and chicory/ Thrive. So much messing about, why not leave the world alone?” (218). One of the great tricks of Schuyler’s work is that it seems to accept Emerson’s dictum that “the universe wears our color,” while it also gives off the impression of—or makes space for—the feeling of a world left “as is.” In this sense, a ray of relation passes between Schuyler and Emerson, insofar as both seem to offer a conception of the universe as “at once a succession of moods (inner matters) and a succession of objects (outer matters),” which are not at odds, but rather enjoined in a state of romance.¹³

Part of this trick has to do with privileging juxtaposition over metaphor—a typical New York School move. A miniature example is “Daylight,” one of the Schuyler poems from *Hymn to Life* that Mitchell chose to color. In entirety, the poem reads:

And when I thought,
 “Our love might end”
 the sun
 went right on shining
 (183)

Benstock interprets this poem as being about “the indifference of nature to man’s personal sorrows,” and I suppose in a sense, it is. But “indifference” may put too fine a point on it. There are other dances going on here—most notably, perhaps, the dance between one’s emotion and one’s thought-in-language—an interaction Schuyler calls attention to with quotation marks. More than indifference, the poem postulates relation via the dialectic of a haiku: the two thoughts—each taking up equal halves of the poem—somehow need each other. Mitchell’s “color abstract” with the poem suggests as

much: a stout, Rothko-esque block of yellow dominates the page, and gives way at the bottom to the typed poem; the words are then set off by a diminutive smear of violet-blue pastel, a few marks of which stray off into the yellow above. Of course the small, typed words cannot bear up under the intensity and weight of the yellow, and the scribbling, delinquent blue suggests that they don't even try. Nonetheless, together they create a ratio, a ratio in which mass and detail presuppose each other (recalling, perhaps, the fact that our experience of color itself is essentially the apprehension of a ratio of frequencies). As Schuyler's poetry suggests elsewhere, the presumed oppositionality of the abstract and the concrete is often a misunderstanding produced by the problem of scale. Look closely enough at anything, he shows us, and it becomes abstract, as in the opening lines of "Running Footsteps"—"A thin brown stain/down the white brick wall" (114). Then pull back a bit further, and it becomes concrete, "I guess yes/the new roof leaks." But pull back further still, and it becomes abstract again: "sleet down the chimney:/a rustle broken/ into dots and dashes," and so on.

In reviewing a 1965 Mitchell show, Ashbery was perplexed by a related phenomenon. Noting that the forms in *Girolata Triptych* "look very much like a fairly literal impression of the face of a cliff pocked with crevices," Ashbery then asks, "ought abstract painting to stay abstract? Things are not clarified by artists' statements that their work depicts a 'feeling' about a landscape, because in most cases such feelings closely resemble the sight which gave rise to them. What is the difference, then, between Joan Mitchell's kind of painting and a very loose kind of landscape painting?" (*Reported Sightings*, 100). Later in the review, he comes up with this answer: "There will be elements of things seen even in the most abstracted impression; otherwise the feeling is likely to disappear and leave an object in its place. At other times feelings remain close to the

subject, which is nothing against them; in fact, feelings that leave the subject intact may be freer to develop, in and around the theme and independent from it as well" (100). This comment may represent Ashbery at his most elliptical, but one way of interpreting his remark is to say that Mitchell's work creates a space similar to that of Schuyler's poetry: a space where self-expression and leaving the world "as is" need not contradict nor compete with each other. Both Mitchell and Schuyler are enthralled by the riddle of subject/object relations, but neither has a compulsion to settle the matter. Each seems instinctively to appreciate the fact that despite centuries of philosophical speculation, "[n]o one has ever come close to explaining the objective appearance of perception," as Gass has bluntly put it (65).

William James, of course, took a stab at it (though his theory reflects his own predilection for indecision)—in *Principles of Psychology*, he describes reality as that which we habitually choose to pay attention to: "the mind is at every stage a theatre of simultaneous possibilities. Consciousness consists of the comparison of these with each other, the selection of some, and the suppression of the rest by the reinforcing and inhibiting agency of attention." Interestingly, the best analogy James can come up with to describe this process of selection and rejection is an artistic one: "The mind, in short, works on the data it receives very much as a sculptor works on his block of stone. In a sense the statue stood there from eternity. But there were a thousand different ones beside it, and the sculptor alone is to thank for having extricated this one from the rest" (288-289). Taken as a whole, the meandering attention of Schuyler's *Collected Poems* speaks eloquently to such a process. But instead of emphasizing the heroics of extricating "his statue from the rest," or mourning his inevitable aporia, Schuyler builds a poetics out of a celebration of both selection and omission. His daily poems thus seem

to say, *Here is today's poem, but it could have been otherwise. There could have been a different one; there could have been more; there could have been no poem at all.*

“February,” a poem that stands very nearly at the head of the *Collected*, is a remarkable performance of this vacillation. Ostensibly a list of what he can see from where he’s sitting, it begins: “A chimney, breathing a little smoke./The sun, I can’t see/making a bit of pink/I can’t quite see in the blue” (4). The “pink in the blue” is abstract, but also literal—in this way, Schuyler suspends us, momentarily, in that peculiar gap between form and meaning. He sees and says, but often reports only failure: he squints at the world as much as, or more than, he stares it down. The poem goes on to extend the trope: “The green of the tulip stems and leaves/like something I can’t remember,/finding a jack-in-the-pulpit/a long time ago and far away.” The desire for exactitude is real, but not rigorous. There’s pleasure in remembering, but also in forgetting. As far as colors go, again, there’s a riddle: “a woman who just came to her window/and stands there filling it/jogging her baby in her arms./She’s so far off. Is it the light/that makes the baby pink?” Who knows? The unanswered question accepts color as the most relative of phenomena, one whose appearance depends entirely on its context. As Josef Albers, famed painter and teacher of color, puts it in *Interaction of Color*, “We are able to hear a single tone./But we almost never (that is, without special devices) see a single color/unconnected and unrelated to other colors” (5). “February,” like so many other Schuyler poems, ends up a hymn to such interrelatedness. “I can’t get over/how it all works together,” he writes, in an echo, perhaps, of Mitchell’s late-in-life comment about painting: “The way to do it is relationship, relationship. That is what you learn as you grow up” (Benstock, 35).

In an essay entitled “Sight into Insight,” Annie Dillard tells how the blind, upon having their sight restored, often initially see the world “as a dazzle of ‘color-patches.’” Dillard mourns the fact that, for a normally-seeing person, the color-patches of one’s infancy get lost as soon as meaning fills them: “I live now in a world of shadows that shape and distance color, a world which makes a terrible kind of sense.” She can momentarily force herself to see an orchard of peach trees, for example, as a color-patch, but she can’t sustain it—“Form is condemned to an eternal danse macabre with meaning: I couldn’t unpeach the peaches” (1190). From presumably opposite ends of the abstract/concrete dyad, Schuyler and Mitchell meditate together on this issue, as illustrated by their joint interest in bluets. In 1973, Mitchell painted a large triptych, *Les Bluets*. In 1981, she returned to the theme—albeit in a very different style—with a series of smaller canvases all entitled *Bluet*. In the 1973 triptych, the title, by designating a particular flower, announces the “danse macabre with meaning.” Each panel of the painting, on the other hand, simply contains color-patches—a variety of blues, some violet and white—against a cream background. Again, the painting feels vaguely textual, as the patches are arranged on the white surface roughly in quadrants, each patch suggesting a different mood or possibility (a dark cobalt square stays intact; a bright solid disintegrates into drips; others implode; others bespeak a hollowness; one is translucent). Schuyler knew the painting, and celebrates it in a prose nugget entitled “Footnote”:

The bluet is a small flower, creamy-throated, that grows in patches in New England lawns. The bluet (French pronunciation) is the shaggy cornflower, growing wild in France. “The Bluet” is a poem I wrote. *The Bluet* is a painting of Joan Mitchell’s. The thick, hard blue runs and holds. All of them, broken-up pieces of sky, hard sky, soft sky. Today I’ll take Joan’s giant vision, running and holding, staring you down with beauty. Though I need reject none. Bluet. “Bloo-ay.” (238)

The address of the piece is funny, in that its earnest desire to clarify and inform contrasts with its floating status—it bobs up in the middle of the *Collected*, seemingly untethered to any other text, simply to tell us that there are many bluets—some verbal, some visual; some art, some life; some American, some French—and Schuyler’s self-appointed job is to clue us into the list. Wittgenstein (predictably) always treated color as a problem of language (i.e. “How do I know this is the colour red? –It would be an answer to say: “I have learnt English” [PI, #381]). Schuyler veers this way, too, by calling attention to the word “bluet” via repetition, and by finishing his footnote with an emphasis on its sound. In the end, however, he doesn’t choose—or, rather, choosing Joan’s vision today doesn’t preclude a different choice tomorrow, or in five minutes. “Though I need reject none” is the key line here—it’s as if he’s suddenly talking to an invisible interlocuter, one who threatens to make him choose between the many pleasures he has laid out before him. Then, as if to reassure himself that he doesn’t have to reject any of them, he repeats the word he loves, which now, perversely, stands for all—then he pushes it further still, into the realm of the queer: “Bloo-ay.” (You can almost hear the schoolkids laughing, but Schuyler doesn’t care: the poem is a safe space, and he uses it.) I don’t mean to keep corralling Schuyler into close quarters with philosophers, but I would note that “Footnote” produces an effect reminiscent of the stance assumed by Stanley Cavell, when Cavell’s own imaginary interlocuter asks him, “So doesn’t this just affirm that nothing other than language, on your view, counts?” and he replies, “In a way that is utterly false and in a way utterly true. What I think can be said is that while of course there are things in the world other than language, for those creatures for whom language is our form of life . . . language is everywhere we find ourselves” (118). “Footnote,” like the rest of Schuyler’s poetry, echoes such a proposition. Instead of emphasizing

language's tyranny or inadequacy, Schuyler accepts its omnipresence, its occasional paltriness, and its pleasures. Like Mitchell's paint, it both runs and holds. ("Running and holding" is actually a great description of Schuyler's experiments with line breaks, as his poems often choose between clipped lines animated by enjambment, or long lines that flirt with prose.)

Schuyler is a miniaturist insofar as he likes to memorialize the small scale, i.e., the individual flower—"So small, a drop of sky that/splashed and held," as he describes the title flower of his poem "The Bluet"—but by proclaiming his solidarity with Mitchell's "giant vision," he also asserts his own fat art. Likewise, Mitchell's love for Schuyler draws attention to the detail and dailiness at play within her work, otherwise known for its more grandiose existential drama. If I were to continue in this direction, I would call attention to Mitchell's *Between* paintings of 1985—paintings which the poet Kathleen Fraser has described as "small pictures in which each initially empty canvas isolated and captured a detail up-close—as in a lens marking arbitrary boundaries within which a small part of a larger, perhaps more complex and amorphous landscape can be looked at in blown-up detail" (*Moving Borders*, 645). It would also be worthwhile to consider the various parallels between Mitchell and Ashbery. Think, for example, about the ebb and flow of Ashbery's long poem *Flow Chart*, and the furious, yet curiously serene, motion of a Mitchell painting such as *Hudson River Day Line* (1955). In "The New Spirit" in *Three Poems*, Ashbery writes, "I thought if I could put it all down, that would be one way. And next the thought came to me that to leave it all out would be another, truer way"; famously, he never really decides. Mitchell's career evidences a similar rage to include that vies with her rigorous commitment to "eliminating all extraneous material." While never approaching minimalism *per se*, Mitchell's body of work runs the gamut from

deeply melancholy, frozen paintings such as *Mooring* (1971) to the hyperactive chaos of *Two Sunflowers* (1980). Remember, too, that Ashbery's first five books of poetry have been collected under the title, *The Mooring of Starting Out*. Further, Ashbery's description of Mitchell's work—here quoted from his foreword to her 1992 monograph—as driven by “an energy that seemed to have other things in mind than the desire to please,” as well as “a fierce will to communicate and an equally frantic refusal to make this task any easier for the sender and the receiver,” could easily serve as an apt description of his own process and temperament (1). There also exist interesting links to O'Hara. Beyond the obvious (though not exhausted) relation of his poem “To the Harbormaster” to Mitchell's painting of the same title—an overlap which draws attention to the less-insouciant side of O'Hara, the side that maintains a consistent, sometimes muted dialogue with collapse, violence, and mortality—there are other connections: their dual interest in charting “the memory of a feeling”; their compulsion to capture the texture of events (especially as that texture swerves from commotion to order and back again); the kinship between the blazing particularity of Mitchell's colors—her “theater of color,” as Ashbery terms it in his foreword—and O'Hara's euphoric celebration of the specific; and so on. But I leave these discussions to another time and place, and turn now to the poetry of Barbara Guest—the entire body of which could also be called a “theater of color.” (In fact, in 1960-1, Mitchell painted a work entitled *The Green Book of Barbara Guest*—the title alone is a canny merging of painting, color, and text.)

*

Guest's ongoing commitment to potential fluidity of poetic form and the mysteries of color-in-language perhaps constitutes the strongest testament of all the New

York School poets to Schuyler's oft-quoted statement (from *The New American Poetry*) that "New York poets, except I suppose the color blind, are affected most by the floods of paint in whose crashing surf we all scramble" (418). Guest's poems explore color as relentlessly as Schuyler's, but in a different way. She doesn't fumble to describe the colors of the world accurately as much as she creates a synesthetic universe in which it makes sense to say, "Sometimes this mustard feeling/clutches me also" ("A Reason"), or "he felt a little blue tinge in his arm" ("Green Awnings").¹⁴ In her poem "The Screen of Distance," Guest writes: "I/created a planned randomness in which color/behaved like a star" (132); such a line could serve as a sort of artist's statement for Guest's work (not to mention that of Mitchell and Schuyler). A stanza from an early Guest poem, "On the Way to Dumbarton Oaks," provides a good example of the kind of movement between concrete and abstract color that Guest's poetry often creates:

Chinese tree
 your black branches and your three yellow leaves
 with you I traffick. My three
 yellow notes, my three yellow stanzas,
 my three precisenesses
 of head and body and tail joined
 carrying my scroll, my tree drawing

(*Selected*, 15)

The lines begin with attention to landscape, then quickly move into the realm of "yellow stanzas"—a near-exact rendition of Mitchell's process. In both cases, the goal isn't to represent the tree's yellow leaves, but rather to "traffick" with them. The effect of this trafficking is odd, for Guest's continual naming of colors eventually creates a universe that often feels colorless, or at least one in which color hovers between sensation and idea, never quite landing in either place. In this sense, Guest's work speaks to the paradoxical conclusion Batchelor arrives at in *Chromophobia*: "Colour is universal—but

colours are contingent . . . Color is in everything, but it is also independent of everything” (94-5). Like Mitchell and Schuyler, Guest couldn’t really care less about being saddled with the feminized and/or queer designation of “colorist.” As her poem “The Poetess” makes clear, Guest embraces the role of “poetess” and “colorist” (though not without some irony): “coriander darks thimble blues/red okays adorn her/buzz green circles in flight/or submergence?” (78).

As I’ve already made clear, I’m not going to argue that Guest be returned her rightful status as one of the core members of the New York School, in part because I’m aware of the fact that “the very designation ‘New York School of Poets’ was at least as much a self-aware spoof as a movement,” as Ward has put it (see *Jacket* #10), thus it’s a little difficult to take the label and its contents too seriously. However, the fact that Guest does not appear at all in the major, recent accounts of the period is telling, insofar as it reiterates the tension between the drive toward constructing a consolidated, traditional literary history and the difficulty of effortlessly slotting women into its workings. Picking up on this tension, and perhaps addressing Guest’s absence from *Statutes of Liberty*, Ward writes in a review of Guest’s *If So, Tell Me*:

It is possible to reconfigure the New York School showing Barbara Guest to be of marginal, or equally, of major importance. There are obvious links. She connected with the world of visual arts, and indeed her work may be more genuinely influenced by abstract painting than is the male poets’ . . . However it is in part the quality of the *parallel* that finally sets her apart from the male poets with whom she conversed, and for much of the time her work does not resemble theirs at all . . . The two wider traditions in which it might be even more useful to situate her work would be those of modernist women’s poetry (particularly given her biography of H.D.), and ultimately, aestheticism. (*Jacket* #10)

I agree with Ward’s tacit point, that there’s no “correct” way of constructing a movement—that the very construction of one endlessly invites being “reformulated, expanded, or exploded by reading different texts,” as he says elsewhere. Surely that’s all

part of the critical dance, and without it, many would be out of a job. But despite Guest's real affinity with H.D. and other modernists, the idea of situating her work with other "women's poetry" gives me pause, as it cleaves Guest from her milieu, not to mention modernist women from modernist men. Certainly there's much intrigue and excitement to be found in the idea of a parallel tradition, but there's real conflict, too. (It immediately brings to mind, for example, the concern in academic circles that Women's Studies [or Gay/Lesbian Studies, or African American studies, etc.] will continue to exist as "parallel" departments, conveniently cordoned off from mainstream Liberal Arts [and, perhaps, from each other]; thus, revolution devolves into elective.) In this case, the construction of a parallel tradition for Guest runs the danger of overlooking the fact that women—including Guest—were everywhere in the second-generation of the New York School, as John Bernard Myers recounts in his memoir, *Tracking the Marvelous: A Life in the New York Art World*: "Grace Hartigan and Jane Freilicher divided O'Hara and Ashbery between them. Nellie Blaine latched onto Koch. Helen Frankenthaler and Mary Abbot took up with Barbara Guest, as did Robert Goodnough" (147). Later in his memoir, discussing the Artist's Theatre formed in 1953, Myers writes:

Our program that first year consisted of four one-act plays written for us: Tennessee Williams' *Auto-Da-Fé*, with decor by Robert Soule; *Try! Try!* by Frank O'Hara, décor by Larry Rivers; *Presenting Jane* by James Schuyler, film sequence by John Latouche, décor by Elaine de Kooning; and *Red Riding Hood* by Kenneth Koch, set by Grace Hartigan . . . We moved to the Comedy Club for our next presentation . . . We used for this program a play by John Ashbery, *The Heros*, decor by Nellie Blaine, *The Lady's Choice* by Barbara Guest, decor by Jane Freilicher, and *The Bait* by James Merrill, décor by Albert Kresch. (166)

This brief snapshot suggests not only the flavor of the artistic production of the place and period, but also the novelty of men (primarily gay men) and women working side-by-side in that production, taking each other's writing and art seriously—a trend that didn't necessarily extend to other mid-century avant-garde scenes, such as the

homosocial environments of the San Francisco Renaissance or Black Mountain College.

On the other hand, you have to be careful what you wish for. As Ashbery asks in his book *Other Traditions*, “is there something inherently stimulating in the poetry called ‘minor,’ something that it can do for us when major poetry can merely wring its hands?”

(6) It’s entirely possible that Guest’s work finds its home—indeed, its freedom—here, for as Robert Kaufman recently wrote, “[Guest’s] work, judged, for example, in terms of the language poetry or mainstream lyric which it is not—does not behave according to any current canons” (12). Curiously, it is also true that compared to the men of the New York School, Guest’s work is by far the most explicitly involved with “canonical” writers and issues. Whereas Schuyler, O’Hara, and Ashbery all cultivate the camp pleasure of eschewing the major and privileging the minor, Guest’s work converses throughout with heavy hitters, as dramatized in her book, *Rocks on a Platter: Notes on Literature* (1999), in which each of the four sections begins with an epigraph from a notable male: I.

Hölderlin (“To live is to defend a form”); II. Dr. Samuel Johnson (“To invest abstract ideas with form, and animate them with activity has always been the right of poetry”);

III. Hegel (“... the empirical inner and outer world is just what is not the world of genuine reality, but is to be entitled a mere appearance more strictly than is true of art, and a crueller deception”); and finally, IV. Adorno (“The Moment a limit is posited it is

overstepped, and that against which the limit was established is absorbed.”) As is

apparent from these epigraphs—particularly from the Adorno—Guest’s

experimentation is of a far more skeptical sort than the brash, anti-academic battle cry of

Koch’s “Fresh Air,” for example, the 1958 poem in which a speaker who is fed-up with the stodginess of mid-century academic poetry asserts, “It is time to strangle many bad

poets.” In short, as Lynn Keller summarizes, “Guest’s poems don’t have the same

counter-cultural flair, the in-your-face defiance of social convention that catches us up in the fifties and sixties work of Ginsberg, O'Hara, Duncan, Olson, or even Ashbery" (*Scene of My Selves*, 215).

Likewise, though Guest and O'Hara were good friends, and their work most certainly overlaps—specifically in their adaptation of a Surrealist sensibility to an American idiom—in a sense Guest's unironic investment in aesthetic theory and philosophy couldn't stand further apart from O'Hara's "There's nothing metaphysical about it" attitude performed in "Personism." And though Ashbery certainly gets metaphysical, none of the New York School men really holds a candle to the degree of abstraction of Guest's writing, which approaches (and even occasionally surpasses) Mallarmé in its commitment to lyrical opacity. In a 1986 talk appropriately titled "Mysteriously Defining the Mysterious," Guest said, "In whatever guise reality becomes visible, the poet withdraws from it into invisibility."¹⁵ Even Ashbery, with his famed evasiveness/ closetedness (i.e. writing "as though to protect/What it advertises," as he wrote of Parmigianino's hand in "Self Portrait in a Convex Mirror") doesn't court the same withdrawal Guest is talking about—a withdrawal more mystical, more Platonic, and, perhaps, more hopeful about lyric poetry's capacity to contain, veil, and thus act as guardian to wonder. While Ashbery's voluminous poetic output often plasters the radar screen, visually as well as critically (at times his poetry has bulged into pages and pages of unbroken prose, as in "The System" from *Three Poems*, or swelled into 216-page book-length poems, as in *Flow Chart*)—Guest's poetry gives off the feeling that it is always just flickering across the screen, sending quiet but steady beeps out into the void. This effect stems in part from the visual experience of her work: as a flip through her *Selected Poems* quickly indicates, Guest uses the entire page as her compositional field, with no fidelity

to the left margin. Read a Guest poem once, quickly, and you might feel as though nothing happened: in fact, you may feel as though you missed it altogether. (Here is a whole page, for example, from *Rocks on a Platter*. “Wet earth disinters itself./With aplomb/bestows/“The Kiss Behind the Counter’ ” [9]). Ashbery also plays with this phenomenon; as he explains on the opening page of *Flow Chart*: “*It seems I was reading something;/I have forgotten the sense of it or what the small/role of the central poem made me want to feel. No matter.*” But where Ashbery allows—indeed encourages—a kind of amnesia (“No matter”), the carefully-scored quality of Guest’s work suggests something quite different: that to hear it we must listen very closely, as if listening to something that isn’t entirely sure it wants to be heard, much like a Morton Feldman composition. As Kaufman suggests, the problem that Guest’s work thus presents to its reader evokes a larger problem, i.e. “that of hearing lyric at all in our culture; and of hearing a specifically difficult lyric whose seeming abstractness or hyper-distillation may appear willfully recondite” (12). (It’s tempting, and somewhat accurate, to charge the hyper-stimulation of contemporary culture with creating and abetting this difficulty, but it may help to remember that back in the 1890’s, Mallarmé was addressing himself to the same issue, and offered the following reminder: “I become obscure, of course! if one makes a mistake and thinks one is opening a newspaper.”¹⁶)

Kaufman’s use of the word “distillation” also offers a good clue into Guest’s particular abstract practice. The common slippage in Abstract Expressionist rhetoric from “abstract” to “nonobjective” doesn’t really make sense in relation to Guest, whose poetry is quite concerned with objects. The title of her first book is, in fact, *The Location of Things*. Literally, “abstract” derives from the Latin *abs* (off, away) + *tractus* (past participle of “to draw”)—thus, “to abstract” means “to draw away.” It is this etymology

that lends the word its scientific usage: in chemistry, “abstraction” is used synonymously with “distillation.” While my discussion of Mitchell focused on how her painting complicates the definition of “abstract” as meaning “to consider apart from material embodiment, or from particular instances,” with Guest I want to look at how her poetic practice locates itself at the very heart of the verb “to abstract,” which has withdrawal as its core gesture. “In whatever guise reality becomes visible, the poet withdraws from it into invisibility,” she insists.

Taken together, the epigraphs in *Rocks on a Platter* testify to Guest’s distrust of “the empirical inner and outer world,” which, as Hegel says, “is just what is not the world of genuine reality, but is to be entitled a mere appearance more strictly than is true of art, and a crueller deception.” Coming from Hegel, this prescription sounds quite dire. Guest has considerably more fun with it, as in the opening lines of the poem “The Location of Things”:

Why from this window am I watching leaves?
 Why do halls and steps seem narrower?
 Why at this desk am I listening for the sound of the fall
 of color, the pitch of the wooden floor
 and feet going faster? Am I to understand change, whether remarkable
 or hidden, am I to find a lake under the table
 or a mountain beside my chair
 and will I know the minute water produces lilies
 or a family of mountaineers scales the peaks? (*Poems*, 11)

And thus Guest begins her (published) poetic career with questions—big, unanswerable questions, such as: *Why am I here, and not somewhere else? Do objects change, or only our perception of them? Does color make sound, i.e., can there be true fluidity between distinct sense-perceptions? If so, will I ever understand how they function? Is the marvelous right around the corner, indeed right under the table? How can any of us presume to know what will happen next? Are all material events somehow interrelated? If so, how attuned am I as an instrument to perceive their correspondence; how attuned can*

(my) poetry be? These are not necessarily depressing questions, and Guest is not melodramatic about them. Still, Hegel's notion of the perceivable world as a cruel deception lurks not too far off in the distance. Especially in her early poetry, Guest's surrealist buoyancy ("a lake under the table/or a mountain beside my chair") co-exists with a real sense of dread—a dread that comes, perhaps, out of her dual urge "to cement connection while insisting at times alarmingly on the separateness of things," as Ward has put it (*Jacket* #3). Though Guest often delights in specificity, she doesn't echo O'Hara's jubilant celebration of objects, as in his poem "Today": "Oh! kangaroos, sequins, chocolate sodas!/You really are beautiful! Pearls,/harmonicas, jujubes, aspirin! all the stuff they've always talked about//still makes a poem a surprise!/These things are with us every day/even on beachheads and biers. They/ do have meaning. They're strong as rocks" (*CP*, 15). Instead, for Guest, often "solid objects are merciless" (*Rocks*, 16). The poem "The Location of Things" ends with a related, albeit muted species of this dread:

through this floodlit window
or from a pontoon on this theatrical lake,
you demand your old clown's paint and I hand you
from my prompter's arms this shako,
wandering as I am into clouds and air
rushing into darkness as corridors
who do not fear the melancholy of the stair.

The syntax is tricky, but the implication seems to be that the corridors don't fear "the melancholy of the stair," but the speaker very well may. (Note the similarity of this latter phrase to O'Hara's comment in "Personism" that "the choice between 'the nostalgia *for* the infinite' and 'the nostalgia *of* the infinite' defines an attitude towards degree of abstraction. The nostalgia *of* the infinite representing the greater degree of abstraction, removal, and negative capability [as in Keats and Mallarmé]" [*CP*, 498].) Standing at the

head of Guest's career, the above stanza functions as an odd self-portrait and/or invitation: she passes off the comical, phallic shako—a “stiff, cylindrical military dress hat with a metal plate in front, a short visor, and a plume” (*AHD*, 1125)—she won't be needing *that* on her journey—and then wanders off, not as a hero charging off into the great abyss, but as a drifter—indeed, a drifter amongst the drifting, i.e. “clouds and air.” “Air” only gains in meaning throughout Guest's oeuvre, as in the title of her 1978 novel, *Seeking Air*, a phrase lifted from her poem “Roses” in *Moscow Mansions* (1973): “there are nervous/people who cannot manufacture/enough air and must seek/for it when they don't have plants,/in pictures. There is the mysterious/traveling that one does outside/the cube and this takes place/in air” (*SP*, 71). This last line practices a Hegelian inversion: where one might customarily think life is the vast action that takes place apart from, or alongside, art, here life suddenly shrinks to “the mysterious/traveling that one does outside/the cube.” Again, Guest here implies that this inversion is somehow rooted in nervousness—or perhaps a Heideggerian sense of “anxious care.”

As the Language poets who celebrate Guest's work know well, her abstract wandering does not imply a withdrawal from the materiality of language, but rather heightens and dramatizes her connection to it. While O'Hara exalts the things that “are with us every day,” happily calling them “strong as rocks,” the “rocks” in *Rocks on a Platter* refer more metaphorically to the act of arranging words on a page as one might rocks on a platter (not that one arranges rocks on a platter too often, but no matter). “Dreams set by/ typography,” Guest calls such a process (*Rocks*, 3). She explicitly sets out to conflate word and object (“Rocks, platter, words, words . . .”). Consequently, she does not spend much time ruing the supposed rift between them—the rift that bothered Jack Spicer so much, for example, in *After Lorca*, as when he writes, “Dear Lorca, I

would like to make poems out of real objects. The lemon to be a lemon that the reader could cut or squeeze or taste—a real lemon like a newspaper in a collage is a real newspaper” (Spicer, 33). Guest’s wry anecdote from *Rocks on a Platter* comments further on this topic:

It had been a vagabond voyage and the entrepreneur was fatigued, yet held up his head inflamed with “LITERATURE, the ABSURD.” Ideas dropped out of vines and into his mouth. An idea fell off a SECULAR vine roaming his head: BAKED APPLES!

Among his listeners, a waterer of his vines, was a beautiful girl who hand-typed A BOOK CALLED “BAKED APPLES.” THESE ARE STORIES THAT “MELT IN YOUR MOUTH,” said the critics.

THE KING READ *BAKED APPLES 100*,
AND GAVE HER AN APPLE TREE GROVE.
THE KITCHEN MAIDS, who had written JONQUIL TALES, asked the king for a jonquil grove. “I prefer BAKED APPLES,” said the King.

TEARFUL, THE KITCHEN MAIDS CLOSED THEIR KITCHEN AND OPENED A JONQUIL STORE IN BUDAPEST, WITH YELLOW DOORS, and GREEN CEILINGS THAT VERY SOON APPEARED IN A FILM, “THE BRIGHTENING OF BUDAPEST.”

(The King, who liked the film, donated 25 white Palace chairs.) (4)

Characteristically, this short tale offers many enigmatic pleasures, many of which would be squashed by reducing them to paraphrase or allegorical wrangling: the strange freshness of the words “Baked Apples” and “Jonquil Tales”; soft jesting at a Newtonian narrative of inspiration; vague but potentially trenchant innuendo about the alliance of art and business; confusion about authorship and gender—does the beautiful girl act as creator, thief, or scribe?; a loose mockery of literary taste and critical reception (the King’s taste is, apparently, all in his mouth); a humorous glance at class issues, in the form of the tearful kitchen maids who must strike up a business on their own; and finally, a postmodern doubling, in which the King donates chairs only because he is

moved by a cinematic representation of gentrification. Spicer may gape after the taste of real lemons, but here it is the critic, not the poet, who wants “stories that melt in your mouth.” One senses the speaker’s skepticism about such a leap, particularly as it casts literature as a consumable good.

In the end, however, the tale is too cryptic to proselytize. Guest is more concerned with the construction of an imaginative language-game in which “Baked Apples” (like “Bluet”) signifies more than one thing. She then plays within the game, finding subtle comedy in the King’s proclamation, “I prefer BAKED APPLES.” The tale reminds you that, as Creeley once put it, “Words are things just as are all things—words, iron, apples—and therefore they have the possibility of their own existence” (*Tales*, 50). But while Creeley’s main goal is the deflation of lofty poetic principles such as the “objective correlative,” Guest has a more extreme vision in mind. For Guest—as for Mallarmé, and, perhaps, Stevens—poetry is not just a part of reality; it is also a reality unto itself—and a separate, perhaps truer one at that. And here Guest differs in sensibility from some of the Language poets who have learned from her work, for while Guest’s writing certainly speaks to Charles Bernstein and Bruce Andrews’s wish for a poetry that “does not involve turning language into a commodity for consumption; instead, it involves repossessing the sign through close attention to, and active participation in, its production” (*The Language Book*, x), Guest customarily shuns the political ramifications of such a project, and instead insists on separateness. As she said in her remarks published in *Fence*, “The poet is always outside society. The moment the poet enters society, strange things happen” (123). And although Guest’s work has some things in common with Lyn Hejinian’s, for example, Hejinian’s deep-felt conviction that “[a] poetics gets formed in and as a relationship to the world,” (*Fence*, 114) chafes a bit

against Guest's desire to keep poetry as far as possible from "anything that is going to damage it as it moves along the page."

Clearly there's a puritanical streak here: Guest's poems are experimental compositions, but not in the neo-Dadaist sense celebrated by Duchamp, Cage and Ashbery, who welcome background noise and garbage into the fabric. An early Guest poem, "Sadness," ends with the lines: "A speck of coal dust floated down and settled on my lapel./Quickly with your free hand you rubbed out the spot./Yet do you know I shall carry always/that blemish on my breast?" (*Poems*, 33). The sadness of the title seems to be located right there, in that blemish. Guest doesn't try to rub it away, but it's clear that the world's arbitrary markings are not always to be celebrated. The blemish evokes *The Scarlet Letter*: like Hester's "A," the blemish is actually on the speaker's lapel, not on her body; but nonetheless, she will always carry it. But while Hester is tortured, Guest is quietly bemused by the disjunct. In the end, however, I suspect that this scene in "Sadness" has more in common with the opening lines of the George Oppen poem, "Myself I Sing," in which Oppen inverts the Whitmanic boast to find existential uncertainty: "Me! he says, hand on his chest./Actually, his shirt./And there, perhaps,/The question" (35). Also, while Guest isn't averse to accident, her acceptance of it co-exists with a drive toward a more Surrealist ideal of purity. As in Breton, chance is exalted, but also somehow overdetermined. As Guest explains in her statement in *Fence*, "[The poem] goes to place to place trying to find an identity. It goes anywhere it wants to go. . . . A poem will find its own subject . . . I think that it is 'the beautiful voyage' " (124).

It seems that for Guest, James' notion of reality as that which we habitually choose to pay attention to does not go quite far enough. She would prefer to propel the

problem beyond the bounds of the subject/object dyad, as evidenced by the title of her poem, “An Emphasis Falls on Reality,” in which the perceiver has apparently vacated the field.¹⁷ No heroic subjectivity dividing the world into the “me” and the “not-me,” here—rather, an emphasis simply falls, like light or rain, unprovoked. (One might recall here Wittgenstein’s question in *Philosophical Investigations* #501: if the purpose of language is to express thoughts, then “what thought is expressed, for example, by the sentence: ‘It’s raining?’” And so we move, apparently, into the realm of a thought without a thinker.) Myles once suggested that Ashbery could be considered the theorist of the New York School; based on “An Emphasis Falls on Reality,” I could imagine a similar case being made for Guest. Here are its final stanzas:

The necessary idealizing of you reality
is part of the search, the journey
where two figures embrace

This house was drawn for them
it looks like a real house
perhaps they will move in today

in ephemeral dusk and
move out of that into night
selective night with trees,

The darkened copies of all trees. (123)

Read in this light, one might ask: in what ways do O’Hara’s “I do this, I do that” poems, and Schuyler’s “things as they are” poems idealize reality? In what ways is O’Hara’s “Personism,” which imagines the poem “at last between two persons instead of two pages,” also angling toward “the journey/where two figures embrace”? Though I don’t imagine that Guest was thinking this way, the idea of a poem drawing a house for two people to live in has a potentially queer inflection as well: will the domicile remain, like

gender itself, “*a kind of imitation for which there is no original*,” to use Butler’s famous phrase? Indeed, the lovely, final phrase “the darkened copies of all trees” leaves little space for an original. Instead, Guest puts a different spin on Plato: the trees the poet draws for us are not simply shadows of other, real trees, but nor are they simply derivations of one, original “treeness.” Rather, with one, deft phrase—“all-trees”—Guest postulates a sphere as multiplicitous, populated, and mysterious as the one we currently inhabit and then collapses the two together. The phrase also echoes the title of Ashbery’s first book, *Some Trees* (1956), but with a difference: “all trees” reflects Guest’s drive toward a mystical unity; Ashbery’s “some trees” reflects his hesitation, his aversion to absolute gestures. I’ve tried, but I’ve found little point in pushing too hard at Guest’s phrase for more meaning—as Ashbery memorably writes in “The New Spirit,” the point may simply be that “life holds us, and is unknowable” (*Mooring*, 314).

*

In an essay comparing Guest with Mallarmé (who was also quite concerned with the ineffable and the unknowable), DuPlessis notes that while the subject of *Un Coup de Dés* is “absence, struggle, the void, shipwreck, and the intangible,” Guest’s work—specifically, *Quill, Solitary, APPARITION* (1996)—centers on “presence, pleasure, adequacy, buoyancy—and the intangible” (212). Part of what constitutes this difference, I think, is Guest’s sly feminist consciousness, which generally stands in the shadows but occasionally steps out to mock—however faintly—the kind of access to the transcendent and/or intangible traditionally offered to women (i.e., mediated through a male figure). If one takes the “my love” in the poem, “Parachutes, My Love, Could Carry Us Higher,” as a male addressee—and it seems fairly certain that the poem is toying with conventions of

heterosexual romance—the opening lines of the poem take on a particular resonance: “I just said I didn’t know/And now you are holding me/In your arms,/How kind./Parachutes, my love, could carry us higher” (16). For a poet known for her tact and civility, “how kind” pushes as close to sarcasm as Guest gets; it would seem as though this patronizing protector is pushing her quite close to the brink. In fact the speaker is irritated from the get-go—*I just said I didn’t know, and now look*—plus, later on she has to repeat herself: “Now the suspension, you say,/Is exquisite. I do not know.” Elsewhere in her poetry, Guest privileges a state of suspension, but here it’s clear that this version is not going to do the trick. For the time being, apparently, a man’s kind arms will only be an impediment to the kind of transcendence she imagines in a poem such as “The Open Skies”: “Noiseless hour/span of float and flight// Sky without lever or stress (. . .) Tough the cone to shelter/Ecstatic harking to upward dome,” and so on (*Poems*, 82).¹⁸

Though I would hate to tether Guest down from this “ecstatic harking,” I want to draw our attention for a moment to “a discourse, which is fully and historically specific, in which transcendence is not a way of being that women seize for themselves but something handed to them with all the weight of male sexual fantasy and demand,” as Jacqueline Rose has put it (149-50). In *The Haunting of Sylvia Plath*, Rose brilliantly identifies this discourse as one of the principal subtexts in the writing of Sylvia Plath. Rose argues that Plath’s writing, via its multitude of rising, burning, and otherwise self-immolating female figures, returns us again and again to the problem of “the very form in which (female) transcendence can be thought” (149). While the introduction of Plath may seem incongruous here, her “haunting” may also suggest that her so-called confessional poetry and the more abstract, ekphrastic idiom associated with Guest are

not necessarily as far apart as they may initially seem. Though clearly we save a lot of time and trouble by simply admitting that Guest and Plath come from different poetic climates and have divergent poetic projects, I've also found it worthwhile to consider their work together. The opening lines of Guest's novel *Seeking Air*, for example, seem to me quite engaged with what Foucault has called "the imperative to confess," though the speaker then withdraws from it: "*Begin with telling her everything, she had said. This provoked me into wanting to say less and less. Yet there was such a marvelous, such an extraordinary circumference around what I might or might not tell.*" The speaker then meditates on this circumference "into the reaches of the night" (7). (These lines also recall the Ashbery lines from "The New Spirit" cited earlier: "I thought that if I could put it all down, that would be one way. And next the thought came to me that to leave all out would be another, and truer way.")

At first one might be tempted to cast Plath on the confessional, "put it all in" side, and Guest on the anticonfessional, "leave it all out" side, but Plath's form is incredibly lean and chiseled—certainly as deliberately scored as Guest's, though in a different idiom; further, both Plath and her posthumous editors have been consumed by the saga of what content to include and what to omit, as Rose's study explores at length. In her essay "Reading Barbara Guest: The View from the Nineties," Linda Kinnihan unearths a 1962 review in which William Dickey disdains Guest's work as reflecting "a self . . . curiously without coherence," and applauds Plath, on the other hand, for her "consistent, personal tone of voice" (*Scenes*, 233). Clearly Plath's address is more "blood-hot and personal" (as Plath says of the world in her poem "Totem"), but thematically speaking, the idea of "a self curiously without coherence" obsesses both poets. Everywhere in Plath's work, we find first-person speakers dissolving: "I break up in

pieces that fly about like clubs,” (“Elm”), “all night/I have been flickering, off, on, off, on,” (“Fever 103^o”), “And now I/Foam to wheat, a glitter of seas,” (“Ariel”), “I am your valuable, The pure gold baby//That melts to a shriek. I turn and burn” (“Lady Lazarus”), “I am breaking apart like the world” (“Three Women”), and so on. Far from postulating a coherent identity, Plath’s poetry—particularly the later poetry—devotes itself to the endless chronicle of “selves dissolving, old whore petticoats” (“Fever 103^o”).

For Plath, this dissolution is both desirable and traumatic, its pain seemingly stemming from the fact that it always remains tethered to a speaker who can testify the experience of it. Guest’s relationship to such dissolution is less tormented and more elliptical, as in these lines from her poem “Sunday Morning”: “I am talking to you/with what is left of me written off,/On the cuff, ancestral and vague,/As a monkey walks through the many fires/Of the jungle while a village breathes in its sleep” (*Poems*, 26). Somewhat typically for Guest, the lines begin with a first-person speaker addressing the reader, but with each line that follows, that speaker leads us further and further away from the self that began, so that by the time the sentence draws to a close, we are out in the jungle, holding no one’s hand. For Guest, too, this dissolution is desirable, but instead of trauma, it is often the agent of ecstasy. As Susan Gervitz has said of Guest’s work, “the body by itself is ecstatic, flying to pieces, marvelous in its occupation of the place no story can fully enter” (*Jacket* #10). Yet just as the similarity between Gervitz’s phrase “flying to pieces” and Plath’s “I break up in pieces that fly about like clubs” suggests, the interest in transcendence shared by Plath and Guest at mid-century draws them toward uncannily related imagery. Compare, for example, Plath’s famous combustion in “Lady Lazarus” (“Ash, ash—You poke and stir”) to Guest’s “Ash and ember/creature and skin// Soft body of unprotected gilt” in “The Open Skies.” Again,

Guest's ascents are often rapturous affairs—"Ecstatic harking to upward dome"—while Plath's tend toward the pissed-off and gory (as in "Lady Lazarus," which ends with the revenge of the incinerated spirit: "Out of the ash/I rise with my red hair/And I eat men like air.>"). Given such divergences, it's easy to see why people have felt the need to take sides—to many Plath fans, Guest's ascent into "float and flight" seems hopelessly "ancestral and vague"; to many Guest fans, Plath can seem mired in loathsome sexual scenarios that some feel we'd be better off without.

In fact, much feminist criticism of Plath throughout the 70s and 80s was fierce in this latter sentiment—as Jane Marcus said of Plath in her 1988 book *Art and Anger: Reading Like a Woman*: "May her nets and hooks soon be in a mausoleum of memory of what a dependent woman's pain and anger looked like, and Plath's name on its wall as its best recorder" (65). There is, in Marcus's comment, an echo of Elaine de Kooning's earlier distaste for Linda Nochlin's essay—a tacit (or not so tacit) impatience with an emphasis on difference as opposed to an empowered assumption of equality. De Kooning is in fact quite extreme in this view, and extends it beyond the bounds of the "woman question." As she writes in her response to Nochlin: "To be put in any category not defined by one's work is to be falsified. We're artists who happen to be women or men among other things we happen to be—tall, short, blonde, dark, mesomorph, ectomorph, black, Spanish, German, Irish, hot-tempered, easy-going—that are in no way relevant to our being artists . . . There are no obstacles in the way of a woman becoming a painter or sculptor, other than the usual obstacles that any artist has to face" (57). *Stop complaining and just do it* seems to be the message, and certainly it has its attractions.

I think, however, that reading Plath and Guest together can keep the need to take sides in abeyance. Guest herself is known for non-polarizing (if somewhat vague)

statements such as, “I think all poetry is confessional”; at the Barnard Conference in 1999, she stated, “I don’t think that there’s a poem written that isn’t experimental, because the poem presents itself on the page to us and has its own way of being. That’s the glorious part of what is known as ‘the beautiful voyage’ that Ulysses made. We don’t always know where we’re going” (*Fence*, 122). In her essay about the Plath/Guest divide, Kinnihan explains how this “critical division between the expressive (those advocating the accessible voice of female experience) and the experimental (those concerned with the coded play of language)” has “become standard in literary criticism” (234). Kinnihan then makes the following, critical point: “This oppositional division, taken up by and experienced by women poets, seems sustained by an unfortunate resistance to examining its contradictory connections to male-derived discourses already set up, in the late fifties and early sixties” (236). This point is especially important as it wrenches our attention away from symptom and back to cause, and thus back to questioning the underpinnings of the abstract/concrete dyad that is the subject of this chapter.

One could also extend Kinnihan’s point even further, and into the realm of the debate over the role that universalism should (or shouldn’t) play in feminism in general. As Joan Scott explains in a brief but illuminating essay entitled “Universalism and the History of Feminism,” the apparent choice between the particular (sexual difference) and the universal (equality)—has not really been a choice at all. Considering the history of feminism in France, Scott explains this dynamic: “To the extent that it acted for ‘women,’ feminism produced the ‘sexual difference’ it sought to eliminate. This paradox—the need both to accept *and* refuse ‘sexual difference’ as a condition of inclusion in the universal—was the constitutive condition of feminism as a political movement throughout its long history” (7). Scott goes on to explain how such dilemmas

were “not wholly of [feminists’] own making,” and are better understood as “symptoms of the contradictions of individualism.” I don’t want to get too far afield here: the point is that although the “equality/ difference conundrum returns whatever side feminists appear to take,” it helps to place this recurrence, as Scott does, within the history of feminism itself—which is not, as Scott puts it, “the history of available options or the unconstrained choice of a winning plan (either equality *or* difference),” but rather “the history of repeated attempts to solve the unsolvable” (11). I’m less sure about Scott’s following point—her deconstructive wager, as it were—that “it is precisely in the disturbing spectacle of a critique that cannot resolve the contradictions it sets out to correct that feminism gains its politically subversive effect” (11). Certainly I would like to believe it. But then again, she’s talking politics, and I’m talking poetry.

Nonetheless, this “disturbing spectacle of a critique that cannot resolve itself” recurs throughout discussions about art and feminism, especially abstract art. Listen, for example, to the artist Johanna Drucker, here explaining her personal progression: “[In the early-70s], I was terrified by the idea of becoming a feminist . . . I longed for transcendence out of gendered identity through my work, not identification with it. It took a decade of professional life and attendant subtle and not-so-subtle abuses for me to understand the need for feminist consciousness.” But Drucker then adds, “[b]ut it has always seemed to me that the real triumph of feminism is the moment when women can work without a sense of obligation to overt feminist concerns. . . . I’m not suggesting ignoring the lived realities of feminist politics, but I support the possibility of separating them from artistic expression if one so desires” (13).¹⁹ Some might call this formulation “post-feminist,” and perhaps it is. But it is a mistake, I think, to think of “post-feminism” as “feminism-that-has-done-its-job,” or “feminism-thankfully-evaporated,” or

worse, “feminism-after-being-scaled-back-by-backlash.” Instead, Drucker here suggests that one might simultaneously maintain a feminist consciousness while also making a sort of space—perhaps a space outside time—for the kind of investigations into “female transcendence” that Mitchell, Guest, and Plath performed at mid-century. And as Drucker’s phrase “if one so desires” suggests, there might be more to be gained from focusing on the *desire* for this space, rather than the fantasy of “unconstrained choice.”

In an essay on Greenbergian formalism, the painter Shirley Kaneda observes: “I have found that some feminists and postmodernists seemingly cannot get beyond abstract painting’s association with modernism and formalism and tend to privilege more conceptual or mimetic forms of representation” (19).²⁰ Thankfully, I think, we’ve moved away from that cultural moment. Likewise, when considering the painter/feminist theorist Mira Schor’s related question: “does feminist practice, in art, teaching, and critical writing, always have in some sense to be representational?,” (*Art Journal*, 23), I would say that the answer has been increasingly *no*. (Or, rather: it has become more obvious that any answer to the question reflects shifting political strategy or personal idiosyncrasy as much as, or more than, any teleological certainty.) In a sense, these questions have quickly become outdated, as generations of young artists and writers collage, steal from, reject, ignore and/or worship the diversity of practices that have come before them, be they abstract, representational, gestural, conceptual, pre-feminist, feminist, post-feminist, all or none of the above. Even so, just as I don’t want to seal Plath’s name off in a “mausoleum of memory,” I don’t think we’re entirely ready to leave behind the trove of intrigue and difficulty produced by the mere coupling of the words “women and abstraction,” and I hope this chapter has at least gestured toward the potential interest of the subject.

The other main point of this chapter has been to spark interest in the work of Guest and Mitchell—and by extension, other women artists associated with New York School—by means of emphasizing both their contribution to and deviance from New York School tropes. Perversely, however, I think I want to give the last word to Plath, whose poem “Magi” (1960) remains one of the most memorable and incisive meditations on the so-called “dangers of abstraction” that I know:

The abstracts hover like dull angels;
 Nothing so vulgar as a nose or an eye
 Bossing the ethereal blanks of their face-ovals.

Their whiteness bears no relation to laundry,
 Snow, chalk or suchlike. They're
 The real thing, all right: the Good, the True—

Salutary and pure as boiled water,
 Loveless as the multiplication table.
 While the child smiles into thin air.

Six months in the world, and she is able
 To rock on all fours like a padded hammock.
 For her, the heavy notion of Evil

Attending her cot is less than a belly ache,
 And love the mother of milk, no theory.
 They mistake their star, these papery godfolk.

They want the crib of some lamp-headed Plato.
 Let them astound his heart with their merit.
 What girl ever flourished in such company? (148)

As it has become somewhat commonplace to say, Plath was writing on the cusp of the women's movement, whose first move was to trouble the public/private divide that Plath here pictures as the Platonic whiteness of “the abstracts” vs. that of laundry and milk. She was also writing from deep within the New Critical moment, a moment which both compelled and caged her (and understandably, as Plath had a wickedly keen sense

of the complications of being female in intellectual, artistic, and academic realms).

Whether abstraction always need imply the loveless realm of “dull angels” and “papery godfolk”—and whether Plath’s final question—“What girl ever flourished in such company?”—need remain a rhetorical one, I leave up to the reader.

¹ As put by Butler in *Bodies*, p. 39. Strangely enough, Irigaray's investment in the idea of the feminine as that which cannot be thematized or figured dovetails with Wittgenstein's commitment to a philosophy devoted to "signifying what cannot be said, by presenting clearly what can be said."

² Originally The Club intended to exclude women and homosexuals from its meetings, but Mitchell ended up one of a handful of female members invited to join. O'Hara was also a regular visitor. See Eden, xxv.

³ The quotation is by the philosopher Maritain, as quoted by George Oppen as an epigram to his collection, *The Materials*.

⁴ Myles as quoted by Lehman, p. 368; the phrase "flooding the world with her details" comes from Myles' "The Lesbian Poet," in *School of Fish*, p. 131.

⁵ The galleries were Cheim and Read ("The Presence of Absence: Selected Paintings 1956-1992"); Lennon, Weinberg ("Petit: Small Paintings, Works on Paper"); Edward Tyler Nahem Fine Art; and Tibor de Nagy ("Working with Poets: Pastels and Paintings").

⁶ The silk-screens, along with Mitchell's collaborations with Schuyler and the poet J. J. Mitchell, were all on view at the Tibor de Nagy in the summer of 2002, in a show titled "Working with Poets: Pastels and Paintings." The monograph with the foreword by Ashbery is *Joan Mitchell 1992* from the Robert Miller Gallery in New York.

⁷ I'm thinking here of Marjorie Perloff's influential book *Frank O'Hara: Poet Among Painters*, which usefully focuses on O'Hara's relationship to Action Painting; in the New Introduction to the Second Edition, Perloff discusses how she missed or underplayed the Johns/Rauschenberg connection the first go-round. Lytle Shaw has written a book on exactly that connection, forthcoming from University of California Press.

⁸ See Sandler's description of the influence of Frankenthaler's "breakthrough" painting *Mountains and Sea* (1952) in *The New York School*, pp. 59-68. His discussion is particularly relevant to this chapter in that it spends time exploring Frankenthaler's discovery of "false space" through stain-gesture—a space which is somehow both "atmospheric and flat"—and her experiments with "drawing in color," experiments which explicitly complicate the *disegno* vs. *colore* dichotomy as laid out by Batchelor later in this chapter.

⁹ See Berkson's short essay on the gallery card for Mitchell's *Working with Poets* show at the Tibor de Nagy in the summer of 2002.

¹⁰ Batchelor also notes that Derek Jarman, the experimental gay filmmaker who died of AIDS in 1994, took up this last connection in his book *Chroma*, written while he was going blind, in which he observes that "[c]olour seems to have a Queer bent." See Batchelor, 64.

¹¹ For this story about Beckett and *Embers*, see Benstock, p. 108. It's interesting that Mitchell isn't the only one to note this feature of Beckett's work; Gass also quotes a passage from Molloy (the stone-sucking passage, which doesn't mention any colors) and calls it a "very blue passage." Gass probably is going for the double entendre about "blue passages," but still.

¹² Koestenbaum also connects this stutter with Bishop's last line in "One Art" ("though it may look like [*Write it!*] like disaster"), and suggests that both can be read as "two great postmodern statements of the poetics of the closet," as "[a]t the center of definition, exposition, or declaration, lies a stuttering repetition."

¹³ See Stanley Cavell, "Thinking of Emerson," in *Senses of Walden*, pp. 127-129. Here Cavell is drawing a distinction between Emerson and Kant; the argument goes something like this: Kant also says the universe wears our color, but extrapolates that subjectivity is inherently solipsistic. Emerson, on the other hand, via his implication that "sense-experience is to objects what moods are to the world," is out to "destroy the ground on which [the problem of subjectivity vs. objectivity] takes itself seriously."

¹⁴ See Guest's *Selected Poems*, pp. 34, 21. One could also see Guest's poetic investigation of color and mood as prefiguring the obsession with "red feelings" that saturates Anne Carson's 1998 novel-in-verse, *Autobiography of Red*.

¹⁵ Susan Gervitz quotes Guest's talk in her essay, "Belief's Afterimage," published in Jacket #10, at www.jacket.zip.com.au/jacket10/guest-by-gervitz.html.

¹⁶ Quoted by Charles Rosen in "Mallarmé the Magnificent," *New York Review of Books*, vol. 46 #9 (May 20, 1999), online at www.nybooks.com/articles/article-preview?article_id=487.

¹⁷ James too moved this way: his 1904 essay, "Does Consciousness Exist," aimed to dismantle further the distinction between mind and matter.

¹⁸ My discussion here echoes that of Lynn Keller in "Guest and the Feminine Mystique," in *Scene of My Selves*, p. 217-218.

¹⁹ Drucker's essay, printed in *Art Journal*, is part of a larger forum on feminism entitled "Contemporary Feminism: Art Practice, Theory, and Activism—An Intergenerational Perspective," in which the editors asked several women artists and feminist theorists to answer a series of questions, such as "How would you place your own work within a historical continuum from 1970s feminism to the present? Has the influence of feminist theory affected your practice as an artist, teacher, critic, or historian, and has that changed in the last (five, ten, fifteen, twenty) years?" (See *Art Journal*, Winter 1999, p. 8.) The respondents included Amelia Jones, Susan Bee, Shirley Kaneda, Johanna Drucker, and several others; the occasion was a thirty-year retrospective of feminist art-making, and coincided with several other events, including the symposium "The F-Word: Contemporary Feminisms and the Legacy of the Los Angeles Feminist Art Movement" at the California Institute of the Arts in Valencia (1996) and the panel discussion "What

Ever Happened to the Women Artist's Movement?" at the New Museum of Contemporary Art in New York (1998), organized by Mira Schor.

²⁰ See also Kaneda's article "Painting and Its Others: In the Realm of the Feminine, in *Arts Magazine*, Summer 1991, pp. 58-64, where Kaneda attempts to theorize a " 'feminine' painting that disregards the gender of its maker," in an effort to think about abstract painting by women that does not fit into (male, modernist) paradigms.

CHAPTER TWO

**Getting Particular: Gender at Play in the Work of
John Ashbery, Frank O'Hara, and James Schuyler**

Many champions of the New York School of poets, from the sixties to the present, have downplayed its gay import, perhaps feeling as though an emphasis on the poets' homosexuality somehow diminishes or misconstrues the work. Likewise, those who have recently focused on the issue on either a textual or biographical level (John Shoptaw, in his study of "homotextual cryptograms" in Ashbery, or Brad Gooch, in his much-maligned biography of O'Hara, *City Poet*, which many feel unfairly paints O'Hara as a "gay gigolo") have sometimes found themselves at odds with those who would rather soft-pedal the role of the poets' homosexuality in their life and work—a group which has included, on occasion, the poets themselves. Certainly there are exceptions to this trend, which has changed with the times—Joe LeSueur's lively 2003 memoir, *Digressions on Some Poems by Frank O'Hara*, for example, is perhaps the queerest portrait of the scene yet.¹ This chapter also calls attention to the queerness of the scene and of the writing, and considers the subject in relation to the valorization of contingency, detail, dailiness, and "personalism" that has become associated to varying degrees with the writing of O'Hara, Schuyler, and Ashbery. Yet as my larger focus on women artists and the "true abstraction" of the feminine indicate, I am also interested in how questions of gender interweave with those of sexuality, and this chapter thus aims to consider the two categories as "distinct though intimately entangled axes of analysis," rather than as "continuous and collapsible categories," as Sedgwick puts it in *Tendencies* (157).

In contrast to those who would downplay the role of homosexuality in New York School writing, in the introduction to the 1997 reprint of her 1977 book *Frank O'Hara: Poet Among Painters*, Marjorie Perloff seems genuinely astonished that she missed the importance of O'Hara's gay sensibility on the first go-round. Perloff reconsiders several early reviews of O'Hara—reviews that remark on his “late Victorian camp,” “Paterian pop,” and “mental chatter and drift”—and notes that while “twenty years later, we recognize these as code terms for ‘queer,’” throughout the sixties and seventies, “no direct reference [was] made to the poet's homosexuality,” even (or especially) amongst O'Hara's friends (xii). She continues:

I remind the reader of these conventions of the seventies so as to provide the context for my own historical/critical study on the role the sexual played in O'Hara's oppositionality. That he was a radical and “different” poet was my premise, but I regarded that oppositionality (to the aesthetic, not only of Robert Lowell, which he criticized openly, but also that of the then counterhero, Charles Olson) as a question of individual ethos rather than as, in any profound way, constructed by the poet's culture or sexual identification. (xiii)

Perloff and others may have missed (or intentionally coded and/or ignored) the difference of O'Hara's sexuality, but his contemporaries did not. The Beats thought the New York poets “silly and effete” (Lehman, 335), as evident in the infamous 1959 exchange at the Living Theater between Gregory Corso and O'Hara, in which Corso said (onstage) to O'Hara, “You see, you have it so easy because you're a faggot. Why don't you get married, you'd make a much better father than I would.” (When Ginsberg then interjected, “Shut up and let him read,” Corso shot back, “And you're a fucking faggot too, Allen Ginsberg.”) The evening ended with O'Hara walking out on his own reading after being relentlessly heckled by Kerouac, who earlier had told O'Hara backstage, “I'm

sick and tired of your 6,000 pricks” (Gooch, 322-3). But lest it seem as though the phrase “gay sensibility” could ever possibly refer to one monolithic voice, style, or program, it’s crucial to remember that other gay poets of the period also took pains to differentiate themselves from the New York School. Jack Spicer, for example, found the New York School poets unbearably effeminate—as Michael Davidson relates in an important essay, “Compulsory Homosexuality: Charles Olson, Jack Spicer, and the Gender of Poetics”: “When asked about Spicer’s relation to the New York School, Landis Everson said that, ‘he didn’t like them. He disliked John Ashbery intensely. He called him ‘a faggot poet.’ John’s first book was called *Some Trees* and Jack always made a point of pronouncing it ‘Some Twees’ ” (209).

O’Hara had the aplomb to shrug off such scenes (“It really was quite a witty evening all in all,” he wrote of the Living Theater exchange); apparently he also tolerated Pollock calling him a *fag* to his face at the Cedar Tavern, forgiving such behavior, as Gooch writes, “in the name of genius and art” (204). As much as one might admire O’Hara’s resilience—which was, by all accounts, a key part of his personality and aesthetics—it would be a mistake, I think, to let it entirely obscure the implications of such ridicule, which extended beyond the jeering in the Cedar and into the literary and art world at large. As the poet/performer John Giorno recently put it in an interview in *Nerve* magazine: “The art world of de Kooning and Pollock hated gay men. I mean, their wives were fag hags, and they knew a lot of gay men, but to them, a gay man could not be an artist of their caliber or on their level. Andy [Warhol] and Bob [Rauschenberg] and Jasper [Johns] were terrified that they weren’t going to sell their work . . . if you ever mentioned anyone was gay [in *ArtForum* and other publications], you’d risk being excommunicated.”² Likewise, though O’Hara was never closeted, and was generally

“relieved and content to be queer,” as LeSueur describes it (68-69)—in the 1950s and early 60s there was clearly no place in the mainstream for overtly gay poems. As LeSueur says in reference to O’Hara’s poem “At the Old Place,” “Frank couldn’t have gotten it published even if he had tried, since in those days, in the unenlightened fifties, there was no place to send it. Significantly, it saw the first light of day a few months after Stonewall, in the November 1969 issue of a short-lived magazine called *New York Poetry*” (54).

Yet despite this homophobic atmosphere, and despite the intense machismo of Abstract Expressionism, gay men occupied the very center of the art world in New York. Indeed, from a certain perspective, you could say they ran it: think of prominent gallery owners such as Myers, poet-critics such as O’Hara or Denby, up-and-coming visual artists such as Rauschenberg, Johns, and Warhol, composers such as Cage, choreographers such as Merce Cunningham and Alvin Ailey, celebrity poet-activists such as Ginsberg, and so on. And despite the real and often dangerous problems faced by gay men in the period, and despite (or because of) their air of insouciance, the male New York School poets most definitely found comfortable—and occasionally powerful—positions at the center of the New York art world. By LeSueur’s account, many of their friends experienced being queer as having as many or more freedoms and advantages as dangers and estrangements: “‘Be glad you’re gay’—that was how Jack Larsen put it once, trying to talk some sense into a confused, self-pitying youth who didn’t understand that turning queer was his escape hatch from the dreary middle-class fate had assigned him. . . . [G]oing to bed with our own sex was just part of it, the great freedom we enjoyed assuming such importance that in [O’Hara’s] view it was more than sufficient for being thought of as sexual pariahs and, in some quarters, detested perverts” (68-9). A

recent book, *The Crimson Letter: Harvard, Homosexuality, and the Shaping of American Culture* (2003), by Douglass Shand-Tucci, argues something similar, as it explores how Harvard University nurtured many powerful gay male intellectuals and artists even as it occasionally subjected them to intense harassment. For these reasons and others, more often than not the poets seemed quite confident that their voices mattered. O'Hara was famous for his confidence, which some thought bordered on arrogance; Schuyler, who was perhaps the least outgoing or ambitious of the bunch (and the only one who didn't attend Harvard), once wrote in a 1959 letter to Ashbery, "Secretly, I don't think K. [Koch] believes anybody except you, he, Frank & me has anything to offer."³

As intriguing as this paradox can be, the phenomenon of an artistic gay male brotherhood at the heart of a heterosexist, homophobic culture is not new nor unfamiliar. Further, in and of itself, it makes no guarantee against the kind of misogyny that can exist in homosocial circles, be they gay or straight or any variation thereof. As Davidson points out in his "Compulsory Homosociality," one should not assume that "because underground literary movements are marginal to the dominant culture, they are therefore more tolerant and progressive. Such assumptions need to be historicized by asking *for whom* progress is being claimed and *by what* aesthetic and social standards" (197-8). For example, though there were many queer Beats—Ginsberg, Burroughs, Spicer, Paul Bowles, and so on—generally speaking, Beat rhetoric treated homosexuality as yet another way in which a heroic, male individual could escape the deadening—indeed castrating—influence of familial obligation: i.e., women, children, and the shackles of domesticity.⁴ Thus, radical as the Beats may have been, Ginsberg's early rants about men who "lost their loveboys to the three old shrews of fate the one eyed shrew of the heterosexual dollar the one eyed shrew that winks out of the womb" link him with his

more mainstream and academic counterparts, from Jung's mythos of the "Terrible Mother," to Freud's anxiety about the "Universal Tendency to Debasement in the Sphere of Love," to Robert Lowell's gothic depiction of heterosexual pathos in suburbia, to Robert Graves' elaboration of the White Goddess, the psychotic flip-side of the "one-eyed shrew" who imposes domestication on the male.⁵ In short, a principal strain of Beat male bonding, via its championing of the "rough camaraderie of men 'on the road,'" was at always pains to distance itself from the "faggy," and, by extension, the feminine (as the OED reminds us, "faggot" was originally "a term of abuse or contempt applied to a woman" (949).

Yet on both a social and a textual level, the New York School writers at issue in this chapter actualized a different kind of environment—one in which women were present and pivotal as fellow artists, collaborators, friends, and literary predecessors. Though in some sense predicated on a gay male coterie, the environment nonetheless differed from the homosocial environments of, say, the San Francisco Renaissance or Black Mountain College, in which the absence of women "was a structural necessity for the liberation of a new, male subject," as Davidson has put it ("Compulsory Homosociality," 198).⁶ LeSueur makes this point again and again throughout his memoir, in which he characterizes "the way O'Hara lived his life as a homosexual" as follows: "[O'Hara was] adamantly opposed to the gay ghetto principle as exemplified by Cherry Grove on Fire Island, Lenny's Hideaway downtown, the Bird Circuit uptown, any gay gathering where straights were excluded or not wanted—in other words, a way of life that promoted compulsive cruising, misogyny, and homosexual separatism," while also deeply committed—"as a point of pride and as a moral obligation"—to "hammer[ing] home to straight people the clear, unmistakable message that he was an uncontrite,

arrogant queer who was not about to sing *miserere* or fall on his knees to anyone” (227).

LeSueur elaborates on the subject in a discussion of the marriage of Patsy Southgate and Mike Goldberg, in which he conjectures that

Patsy wouldn't have fallen in love with Mike, much less married him, if his rough manner and bravado had not been offset by what his two gay friends [i.e. O'Hara and LeSueur] embodied, a homosexuality that was gracefully assimilated into straight society without being closeted, a homosexuality that was carefree without being giddy, a homosexuality that was also gentle, amused, and ironic, and a homosexuality that embraced what so many gay as well as straight men abjure, the inner feminine part of the male personality known as the anima, of which my analyst made me aware. Oh, and one more thing, actually, what's most important, what I suppose is related to the Jungian concept of the anima, a homosexuality whose proscription of misogyny Patsy could only have found novel and reassuring, a comfort and a boon she'd doubtless never known in heterosexual circles dominated by sexist, egocentric males who thought of themselves as, to use Patsy's most damning epithet, 'entitled.' (178)

LeSueur's assessment may sound utopian—and, one suspects, a hair self-congratulatory—but the difference he is describing matters, in part because it points us toward at least one reason how and why New York writing subsequently found so many female—indeed feminist—admirers.

On a textual level, the writing of Ashbery, Schuyler, and O'Hara has become known for the following decidedly not-macho set of characteristics: a mixture of high/low sensibilities, including the impertinent habit of venerating “minor” artistic figures over “major” ones; the repeated use of localized names, dates, and places, along with a positive focus on the detritus of “everyday life,” including (or especially) that produced by consumption and domesticity; a distaste for grandiosity of all kinds, from institutional pretense to linguistic tropes that grope at metaphysical symbolism; a love of chatter, via such ephemeral modes of communication as lunch dates, telephone calls, and postcards; an abiding commitment to the occasional and the ephemeral, and a related

fascination with non-linear time—with how phenomena such as lacunae and amnesia structure, or disrupt, a life in writing; an attention to the action at the margins of consciousness, be it background noise, a Proustian web of involuntary memory, or simply the random flow of changes that constitute life on a city street; and so on. All the items on this list have been historically aligned, in some way or another, with the feminine. But unlike other “revolutionary” poetic movements—and I’m thinking here of Wordsworth’s Romanticism, Breton’s Surrealism, and the Imagism of T. E. Hulme and Pound, to cite just a few examples—the New York School poets did not use these feminized modes as a springboard from which to depart in order to take their place as serious artists—artists who then often gain in seriousness by either setting themselves apart from these modes and/or bemoaning their alienation from them as the cause of an irreparable sense of rupture and loss.⁷

As Geoff Ward and others have pointed out, the particularly macho rhetoric of this last example—i.e. of Pound, Hulme, and other “Men of 1914”—can be traced, at least in part, to the fierce desire to contradict the effects of Oscar Wilde’s 1895 trial, which Ward aptly terms “the queer birth of the English avant-garde,” insofar as it cemented the alliance of “the Artist with the Homosexual.” But while Wilde’s trial may have crystallized this alliance, Ward also points out that

the stereotyping of the Lake Poets as Nature-lovers, together with the shrillness of Shelley and the aestheticism of Keats, had already compromised the social normality of the Poet before first Swinburne and then Arthur Symonds’ 1890’s Decadents dished it entirely. T.S. Eliot, of course, never got into fistfights: but then Eliot drew directly on *fin de siècle* Dandyism, and had been corrupted by the exposure to the feminine Frenchness of Baudelaire and Mallarmé. (122).

The issue of corruption via feminine (not to mention French) identification is critical. As feminist scholars such as Barbara Johnson have pointed out, one main tendency in male

Western lyric poetry throughout the ages has been its urge to idealize, identify with, and/or perform the feminine while also taking care to disavow it. In her 1998 essay “Gender and Poetry” (in *The Feminist Difference*) Johnson sets forth the fascinating—if somewhat alarming—argument that femininity is not only “the privileged topic of male lyric poetry,” but that the male appropriation of the “right to play femininity” constitutes the condition of possibility for male privilege itself (127-8). “Why is it,” Johnson asks, “that Petrarch is not called a masochist, even though Louise Labé, using exactly the same conventions, is? Why are there books published on Baudelaire’s sadism but not on his masochism? Why is male masochism the secret that it is lyric poetry’s job to keep?” (123).

These are good questions, and Johnson returns to them up in a related essay, “Muteness Envy,” in which she considers how and why female muteness has served as “a repository of aesthetic value” in lyric poetry. Johnson traces the problem back to one of Western literature’s primal scenes—that of “Apollo’s pursuit of the nymph Daphne and her transformation into a laurel tree.” At the end of this pursuit, Daphne turns into a tree “in a last desperate attempt to avoid rape”; Apollo subsequently plucks the leaves of the tree, and makes a wreath that henceforth serves as a “sign of artistic achievement.” Thus, at the very core of one of lyric poetry’s most persistent stories and symbols lies the notion that Apollo’s failed rape is a “tragic loss,” a loss for which his poetic crown stands in as a sort of “consolation prize” (135, 153).⁸ This is a deeply vexed scenario for the female subject, not to mention the female poet. When considered against this backdrop, the poetry of O’Hara, Ashbery and Schuyler seems astonishingly uninterested in this dance of displaying and disavowing the feminine. Nor does it seem particularly invested in shoring up male privilege by means of standing apart from the feminine or

the faggy in various postures of conquest, admiration, lament, nostalgia, condescension, and/or disgust.

To insist simultaneously on the importance of the poets' homosexuality and their various feminine identifications is tricky business. It could be seen, for example, as falling directly the trap of trying to make "male homosexuality *about* women," as Butler has put it in regard to a certain mode of feminist analysis.⁹ "At its extreme," Butler explains, "this kind of analysis is in fact a colonization in reverse, a way for feminist women to make themselves the center of male homosexual activity (and thus to reinscribe the heterosexual matrix, paradoxically, at the heart of the radical feminist position)" (*Bodies*, 127). (O'Hara himself notes this problem, albeit more lyrically, in "Meditations on an Emergency": "Heterosexuality! you are inexorably approaching. [How discourage her?]") Such a focus also neglects the rich variety of same-sex imaginings in the poetry, as in O'Hara's phenomenal oral sex poem, "Poem": "Twin spheres full of fur and noise/rolling softly up my belly beddening on my chest/then my mouth is full of suns" (*CP*, 405). Needless to say, I don't agree with Helen Vendler, who says with more than a hint of condescension: "[O'Hara's] sex poems aren't very good, though they try hard and are brave in their homosexual details" (194).

Many people (myself included) find the notion that effeminacy that is somehow at the heart of every gay man (and butchness at the heart of every lesbian)—antiquated, totalizing, and/or just plain ignorant. Perloff grapples with just this problem in her 1997 Introduction, via a disagreement with another critic's reading of O'Hara's poem, "The Day Lady Died." The critic, Andrew Ross, makes the following point:

In fact, the hectic itinerary followed by [O'Hara] could just as well be that of a genteel lady about town . . . "the day lady died" is an account of a lady's day, played out by a man through an imagined lunch hour that is the very opposite of

the power lunches being eaten in restaurants in the same few blocks by the men who make real history. (xvii)

In contrast, Perloff wants to reject the idea that O'Hara's poem necessarily embodies the "social contours of gay masculinity of 1959," as well as any narrow vision that would see such contours as "allow[ing] the poet no choice but to assume a feminine role." Her trepidation is understandable. But her subsequent argument—"[t]o say that the poet's itinerary is conceived as the daily shopping round of a genteel lady glosses over precisely those images and phrases that make 'The Day Lady Died' the bittersweet, poignant elegy it is" (xix)—seems to sidestep the point, and rehearse yet another instance in which femininity and literary value appear as mutually exclusive. Of course it isn't *exactly* a lady's day—not at all. As Perloff points out, the activities O'Hara talks about—such as a shoeshine—along with the implicit claim he makes on public space as observer and flâneur—can certainly be gendered masculine. But O'Hara's self-conscious play with the conflation of "lady" and "day" courts Ross's point, even if it eventually subverts it, and the consequent dissonance is the source of much of the poem's energy, specificity, and originality. Given the stakes of "playing femininity" as laid out by Johnson, and given my later focus on women influenced by New York School writing, I am not as anxious as Perloff to move off the connection.

The question hovering in the wings here—that of the relationship(s) between effeminate signifiers (i.e. feminized tropes, queen taste, drag, camp names—all of which add another dimension to the category of women as a "true abstraction")—and actual women (i.e. fellow artists and writers, predecessors, collaborators, muses, romantic interests [platonic or otherwise], mothers, protégées, and so on—many of whom may not be the least bit "feminine")—is a thorny and perhaps essentially rhetorical one.

Feminists and queer theorists have found much to debate here, but at present I want to remain focused on how the poetry at issue here often *avoids* the misogynistic structures that Johnson and others have shrewdly located at the heart of much lyric poetry.¹⁰ For example, in her essay “Manifests,” DuPlessis explains how “the ideology of the muse deflects attention from or disengages from the actual historical presence and activities of women” (37). But in O’Hara’s case, for example, the exact opposite is true: his use of female “muses” repeatedly returns the reader to their historical presence and activities. At the same moment that Robert Graves was busy making Laura Riding into the White Goddess, and Ted Hughes and Sylvia Plath were collaborating on her role as such, O’Hara was pinpointing the activities of women he admired in space and time, like Billie Holiday at the 5-Spot (“she whispered along the keyboard/to Mal Waldron and everyone and I stopped breathing”); thanking friends like Lang (“you enable me, by your least/remark, to unclutter myself”); expressing solidarity with both celebrities such as Lana Turner (“oh Lana Turner we love you get up”) and peers such as Guest (“oh Barbara! do you think we’ll ever/have anything named after us like/*rue Henri-Barbusse* or *canard à l’Ouragan?*”); and memorializing the image of his painter-friends (like Mitchell) at work in their studios (Ah Joan! there/you are/surrounded by paintings”). The range of these examples indicates how far O’Hara goes beyond the stereotype of invoking women only or primarily as fetishized camp icons. In fact, O’Hara reconfigures the writer/muse dyad so completely that the word “muse” no longer seems right. Despite some interesting recent attempts to reconsider the role of the muse (as in Francine Prose’s 2002 book *The Lives of the Muses: Nine Women and the Artists They Inspired*), we may well end up celebrating O’Hara for showing us how to transform the ideology of the muse

beyond recognition. Given the stakes of the claim DuPlessis makes above, O'Hara's difference is a point of real significance.¹¹

And while some critics may feel a conflict between championing the greatness of New York School writing and focusing on its various feminine identifications, the poets themselves did not. One primal scene of this identification, so to speak, can be located in Schuyler's magnificent long poem, "The Morning of the Poem," in which he tells the following story: "When I first knew John Ashbery he slipped me/One of his trick questions (we were looking at a window/full of knitted ribbon dresses): 'I don't think/James Joyce is any good, do you?' Think, what did I think! I/didn't know you were allowed not to like James/Joyce. The book I suppose is a masterpiece: freedom of choice/is better" (*CP*, 286-7). Far from being an incidental detail, the "window/full of knitted ribbon dresses" appears here as the condition of possibility, as they say, from which the freedom to dismiss a literary "master" such as Joyce arises. Schuyler's sly parenthetical weaves this literary "freedom of choice" in with the freedom to stop on the street, with another man, to contemplate some knitted ribbon dresses. There's no way of knowing, of course, how "true" Schuyler's story is, but it doesn't really matter—a quick survey of Ashbery's career reveals a persistent fascination with girlie things, from his early poem "Europe" (which is a cut-up of *Beryl and the By-Plane*, an Edwardian book for girls), to later poems with titles such as "Thoughts of a Young Girl," to his 1999 book-length poem *Girls on the Run*, which takes as its point of departure the work of "outsider" artist Henry Darger, whose epic narrative/painting *In the Realms of the Unreal* chronicles the adventures of a group of young vigilantes called the Vivian Girls. As Ashbery explains in an interview about *Girls on the Run*: "I was fascinated by little girls when I was a boy, and their clothes and games and dolls appealed to me much more

than what little boys were doing. Therefore, I was sort of ostracized.”¹² I have no idea what Ashbery makes of the fact that Darger’s paintings scandalously portray the Vivian Girls as possessing penises (no one knows what Darger was thinking either, as *In the Realms* was discovered in his Chicago apartment after his death), but the question is certainly intriguing, especially as it dramatizes a certain puzzle about Ashbery’s career: how he manages to represent both the faggy, “outsider” poet and the famous, major poet, buoyed by big-time critics such as Harold Bloom and Helen Vendler, who at times seem intent on making sure Ashbery’s reputation keeps its phallus securely strapped on.¹³

Perhaps because of the intrigue of this dual stature, combined with the legendary opacity of his writing, the subject of Ashbery and influence has proved a popular one. Perloff and Vendler, for example, have been involved in a longstanding, not-altogether-unfriendly debate about whether Ashbery should be tethered to a lineage that would include the Romantics, Eliot, and Stevens (as Vendler would have it), or a “poetics of indeterminacy” as represented by agitators such as Rimbaud, Pound, Cage, and the Language poets (as Perloff would have it). As if exasperated by all the conjecture, Ashbery himself has finally weighed in on the subject in his book of lectures, *Other Traditions*, in which he explains:

How does it happen that I write poetry? What are the impetuses behind it? In particular, what is the poetry that I notice when I write, that is behind my own poetry? Perhaps someone wondered this. In the end, I decided this possibility was the one most likely to fulfill expectations. I’m therefore going to talk about some poets who have probably influenced me (but the whole question of influence appears very vexed to the poet looking through the wrong end of the telescope, though not to critics, who use this instrument the way it was intended—but I don’t think I’ll go into that now, though it may well creep in later. (4)

The lectures that follow discuss the “certifiably minor poets” John Clare, Thomas Lovell Beddoes, Raymond Roussel, John Wheelwright, Laura Riding, and David Schubert: in short, none of the usual suspects on either Vendler’s or Perloff’s list.

But this chapter is not about Ashbery in isolation, but rather the aesthetic inclinations he shares with O’Hara and Schuyler. And one such inclination that I want to call attention to is a re-valorization of female predecessors (as influences) and female contemporaries (as discussed earlier *vis à vis* O’Hara). Though Riding is the only woman Ashbery discusses in *Other Traditions*, elsewhere he has spoken quite a bit about Bishop, Moore, and Stein (all of whom he mentions in a list of “major writers” who have influenced him). About Moore, he says: “I am tempted simply to call her our greatest modern poet. This despite the obvious grandeur of her chief competitors, including Wallace Stevens and William Carlos Williams” (Shoptaw, 113). Add to this list Jane Bowles, Djuna Barnes, Virginia Woolf, Ivy Compton-Burnett, and Jean Rhys, and you have the beginnings of a list of the women writers that O’Hara, Ashbery, and Schuyler venerated. (Note that over half the women on this list are bisexual and/or lesbian.) There’s something refreshing about the image of the young O’Hara confiding to his journal that his literary models are “*Between the Acts*, *Nightwood*, *The Tragic Comedians* (in a special way), *The Waves* (perhaps most of all), *Ulysses*, and *Prothalamium*” (Gooch, 131), or of the young Schuyler in the Buffalo Public Library, sitting in his overcoat, poring over Moore’s *Selected Poems*.¹⁴ Schuyler was also a Woolf fan: her diaries were “favorite books of [his] which he reread often,” and Schuyler refers to them throughout his own diary, such as in the entry for 1/19/85: “Now to get ready for Hy Weitzen—shave, shower, wash my hair. Surprise! I have! So I can spend a couple of hours with the depressing last volume of Virginia’s diary. Such a waste! Poor lovely lady.” Elsewhere, in a poem called

“Virginia Woolf,” Schuyler celebrates “Angular Virginia Woolf, for whom/words came streaming/like clouded yellows over the downs” (*CP*, 321).

With the exception of Woolf’s famed “stream-of-consciousness,” most of the writers listed above are not known for a flowing, jouissance-laden “écriture féminine,” but rather for their terse, often searing, dialogic wit. The prose of Compton-Burnett and Bowles—like that of the queer aesthete Firbank—is often indistinguishable from their plays. Such prose most certainly served as a model for the joint novel by Schuyler and Ashbery, *A Nest of Ninnies*, which primarily consists of witty remarks devoid of the logic of plot, characterization, or even sequential linkage: “‘But wouldn’t you like to get out of those wet things?’ ‘I’m afraid some of the details are not clear to me,’ Henry said, ‘About the pub and the animal hospital, for instance—I don’t quite see the connection.’ ‘There is none,’ Fabia said. Henry, taking this for a witticism, said, ‘I see,’ and laughed heartily” (161). The influence of Dada is obviously important here, and yet *A Nest of Ninnies* is not a hostile spoof of the bourgeois family. In fact, the novel does not lampoon the nuclear family as much as it ignores it, or treats it essentially as a non sequitur. Much like Bowles’ novel *Two Serious Ladies* (or her stories “A Quarrelling Pair” or “Camp Cataract”) the principal characters of *A Nest of Ninnies* are sets of siblings (Alice and Marshall, Fabia and Victor, and the Parisians Claire and Nadia Tosti), with parents that quickly blur into a mesh of Mr. Bridgewaters, Mrs. Kelsos, Mr. Turpins, and so on. It’s nearly impossible to keep the families straight, and the amnesic flow of the novel suggests there’s no reason to try. In such a context, W. H. Auden’s blurb on the back cover becomes quite amusing: “My! What a pleasant surprise to read a novel in which there is not a single bedroom scene.” Indeed, there are no bedroom scenes, there are no Oedipal triangles. The novel presents a wash of proper names and couplings, and steadily imparts the

refreshing feeling that a travelling companion can be as important as one's parent, a waitress as important as one's fiancé, and so on.

Another dominant characteristic of novelists such as Rhys, Barnes, Bowles, Compton-Burnett, and Woolf is a profound impertinence, often nascently or explicitly feminist in nature, that signifies an audacious willingness to take on (or ignore, as the case may be) one's patrician elders. As Ashbery once said about Mitchell's painting, their writing most certainly has "other things in mind than the desire to please." They are, in short, blessedly difficult women and difficult writers, whose weapon against hateful situations is often a "thorny wit," as Truman Capote said about Bowles. This wit can be as humorous as it is devastating, and often reflects a deep distrust of the values and standards of a literary history characterized by a paucity of female voices. And here, camp meets up with feminism; as Ward has put it in his discussion of O'Hara's poem, "Biotherm" (specifically, in reference to the lines, "better a faggot than a farhead/or as fathers have often said to friends of mine/ 'better dead than a dope'"), "to be gay is to spit in the face of the patriarch . . . to enclose the word 'father' in 'farhead'" (52). (Ashbery often shares this scatological insubordination: "Excuse me while I fart," he writes in *Flow Chart*, "There, that's better. I actually feel relieved" [201].)

In her discussion of perversion in the writing of Roland Barthes, Jane Gallop makes a similar link: "Feminism shares with Barthes the goal of an impertinent stance toward the father and a reconciliation and valorization of the mother." Elsewhere, Gallop claims that "for Barthes, the writer is that kind of pervert: 'The writer is someone who plays with the body of his mother'" (115). Obviously O'Hara, Ashbery, and Schuyler revered many male writers; my point here is simply that their work also evidences the presence of this perversion—a perversion I obviously wish there were

more of—that is, a willingness to play with the bodies of one’s mothers in the textual sense of the phrase. LeSueur’s discussion of “matriarchal tyranny” vis à vis gay male writers is also relevant here—he writes, “At this point some readers—straight readers—might be wondering about Dad’s role in all of this. Well, only rarely does he figure in the scheme of things—it’s Mom who casts her long, intimidating shadow over our lives” (226).¹⁵ If one extends this comment metaphorically into the realm of literary influence, the classic Oedipal scenario no longer seamlessly applies. Camp wit and feminist resistance are distinct phenomena, and the differences between them matter. But in taking the work of their female predecessors seriously, the poets who are the subject of this chapter call attention to—even if inadvertently—their potential nexus.¹⁶

*

One such point of intersection is the talent for finding pleasure in adversity—for treating deadly-serious, indeed life-or-death matters, with a certain irony or lightness of touch. The poet and playwright V. R. (Bunny) Lang, O’Hara’s good friend and muse, was another woman with this gift for “perfect light tragedy,” in her life as well as her art. Lang died of Hodgkin’s disease in 1956 at age 32; it wasn’t until 1975 that Random House collected her work in a volume entitled *V.R. Lang: Poems and Plays*. The book jacket assures us that “the fame [of Lang’s poems and plays] has spread,” but I think it’s safe to say that this trend has reversed over the almost-thirty years since their publication. The Random House edition is prefaced by a 70-page memoir by Alison Lurie, a writer who was a friend of Lang’s.¹⁷ In her memoir of Lang, Lurie writes, “If [Lang] had lived, she would certainly have taken her place in the so-called New York

School of poets, along with her friends John Ashbery, Kenneth Koch, and Frank O'Hara. (Her poems are occasionally so much like O'Hara's that one which was found among his papers, "To Frank's Guardian Angel," was printed as his in the recent collected edition)" [xvi].) Indeed, it's easy to see how Lang's sensibility, which remained buoyant and theatrical throughout her illness, would have attracted O'Hara. For example, here is an excerpt from one of Lang's letters to Lurie, in which Lang describes her illness: "I am diseased again, as of this week. Every six months to the day we go through this farce endlessly the dragon said. Bought a really dramatic jacket at the buckingham clothing sale wait till you see it is a burgeoning white fox collar . . . I have got to get out of my nightgown and go to the Death Ray Parlor now. Love, Bunny" (56). At a recent panel, Ashbery reiterated the fact that he and his cohorts at mid-century desperately wanted to escape the seriousness of poets such as Lowell and his aptly-titled "Lord Weary's Castle"; Lang's productions at the Poets Theatre in Cambridge epitomized such an escape. One good example is Lang's disobedient production of Cid Corman's play *The Circle* in 1952. As Lurie recounts, *The Circle* was a "tragic and symbolic" play populated by allegorical figures such as "A Child," "The Old Man," and "The Philosopher." For costumes, Lang chose union suits dyed salmon-pink and straw hats with chiffon streamers; for music, the Elephant Polka. At one point during the play, to simulate a mob scene, she had one half of the cast chant, "rhubarb, rhubarb," and the other "vichysoisse, vichysoisse." By the end of the play, after "The Stranger" had been killed and Lang had lying him on the floor in a pose of *rigor mortis*, an offended Corman stormed out of the production (21-23).

Like Guest in the Tibor de Nagy circle in New York City, Lang was pretty much the sole prominent woman writer on the Cambridge scene. The other writers at the

Theater included Richard Wilbur, John Ciardi, Richard Eberhart, Hugh Amory, Ashbery, Edward Gorey, Donald Hall, William Matchett, George Montgomery, O'Hara, and Lyon Phelps (13). As Lurie notes, Lang was “a feminist before the movement was reinvented, in the dark ages of the early 1950’s when it was much less popular to be a single female of independent mind and professional ambition than it is now” (xvii). Indeed, Lang’s best-known play, *Fire Exit*, is a proto-feminist rewrite of the myth of Orpheus and Eurydice, set in a burlesque house in New Jersey. At its end, Eurydice chooses to be alone rather than get back together with a bullying, self-pitying Orpheus. “Once,/I almost died for grief, because of you,” Orpheus complains, “I ate nothing and drank no water./I lost thirty pounds.” “You look fine,” Eurydice replies; “I gained them back,” quips Orpheus. In the final scene, after Orpheus badgers her, “Get your coat! I don’t care/What you are, or what you’ve been,” Eurydice announces, “I’m not going with him.” Eurydice then ends the play with multivalent lines: “Perhaps it was better this way./I wanted him to look at me” (252).

Lang’s poetry is uneven, but never boring. Her voice is snappy, driven, and vaguely formal. Sometimes she goes in for Auden-esque or ornate lyricisms (“When you were in despair/I grew there”; “Spring you came marvelous with possibles”); more often she practices a kind of prosy, “unlovely” poetry which bears some kinship with Riding, and, occasionally, with Moore (“Old crab bit my finger;/Searching under the rock to touch it/As it should be touched, lingeringly,/It bit me. Wicked secret crab.”). Her intentional awkwardness can be disquieting, as in “You Kill Me,” which reads (in entirety): “You kill me. Yes, you do./I know no one else who’d/Buy a sparrow (I/didn’t even know they *sold* sparrows)/Just to feed it watermelon/And in public, too.//Every afternoon I think of you/Out there, flushed and fair,/Scraping the exhausted rind with a

spoon./Every day! All winter” (115). It pleases Lang’s ear to hang phrases like “Every day! All winter” out to dry at the end of a poem, i.e., after the rhyme of “too” and “spoon” has already stitched it up. She also likes to begin poems with weird questions, such as “Why else do you have an English horn if not/To blow it so I’ll know to let you in?” She typically addresses surreal conundrums with urgency, as in the title: “How to Tell a Diamond from a Burning Baby,” and enjoys inscrutable, banal epigraphs such as “ ‘The tongue is a great magnifier, Mrs. Dubois.’ —*My sister’s dentist.*” She frequently makes grand, romantic gestures, only to undercut them with qualifications: “When I came back up out of the dark (Tuesday),” and when she gets personal, she often unsettles the reader by recounting moments more odd than confessional: “I stayed at home,/I stayed and I stared at a fingernail./ Now I stare at a bird (. . .) He isn’t like the birds I’ve known/And I’ve been places, and I’ve seen birds” (131). Throughout her *Poems*, one feels the power of a tremendously agile and ambitious mind moving in and out of imitations and exercises, and at moments, striking out with confidence (and perhaps loneliness) into its own queer idiom: “It was desolate, walking alone,/Talking to no one,/Thinking: seeing me like this/Walking, talking to myself/That couple will have said I’m queer” (142).

In the end, the feeling that Lang’s work is uneven probably stems less from any incompetence in her writing and more from the visceral sense that she did not live long enough to come fully into her own as an artist. It was precisely this feeling that bothered O’Hara so much after her death. As Gooch writes, “With Lang’s death O’Hara came to grapple with the notion expressed in the title of his grieving poem dedicated to her, ‘The Unfinished.’ She was obviously someone of enormous talent who had not had time to make a coherent statement out of her many talents.” But O’Hara was not one to be

frightened off by incoherence. To the contrary, in the making of Lang's *Collected*, O'Hara wanted to see her unfinished poems included. As Gooch puts it, "Revealing something about his opinion of his own irregular poems, O'Hara counseled against tidying up" (286). Indeed, in a late poem, "Poems to Preserve the Years at Home," Lang herself sanctions this approach. Lang begins the long poem with the exasperation of being buried in the garbage of the mundane:

. . . all around me boxes, papers, papers, drawers,
Files, filing cabinets, especial drawers.

The typewriter which jams. The voice downstairs
That calls. The telephone which enters.
The emergency. The caller. The hot water heater that breaks.
I can't remember I can't remember
I put something here, I had something to do,

Someone to telephone, some letter to answer. (142)

The poem goes on to record the deep frustration of not being able to navigate through it all: "I don't seem to be able to accomplish/*Anything*. Everything begun./ Nothing ever finished./Heaps and piles of waste." But as the poem moves along over several pages, it ends up charting a move from exasperation to acceptance: "The morning's mail or the bills—/So what. So they'll get put on bureaus (. . .) The disorder/Is my own." By the end, she has reversed course entirely, and asserts: "*Not to finish* becomes the challenge."

Of course, the blunt interpretation of the poem is that to finish is to die, and the poem closes down with the stark admission: "I never once thought about death/Before I started to die. Time grows thin." But if we put aside Lang's biography for a moment, her eventual embrace of the "heaps and piles of waste" that constitute an "unfinished" career or life—i.e. all of our careers or lives, until we die—points us in a different direction. It is the opposite direction to the one Eliot famously took in his prose poem

“Hysteria,” in which he writes: “I decided that if the shaking of her breasts could be stopped, some of the fragments of the afternoon might be collected, and I concentrated my attention with careful subtlety to this end.” (Indeed, Lang’s celebration of her brief stint as an exotic dancer, as immortalized in her poem “Anne, A Chorus Girl, Quitting the Line, To Society,” which begins, “Don’t stop loving me when/I leave the Line Next week’s routines/are done with roses and balloons/And one with garlands, all the girls in green” literally shakes its breasts in the face of such a sentiment [96].) Eliot may remain most famous for his poem “The Wasteland,” but its title signifies a grim and tortured attitude toward waste, not a celebratory one. In a sense, the fame of the “The Wasteland” lies precisely in this ambivalence: the poem is celebrated for both its inclusion of waste into the poem’s fabric—i.e. the inclusion of languages other than English, the voices of women and people of lower classes (in a poem haunted by the specter of infertility, what could be more “wasteful” than the woman in the pub blabbering on about inducing an abortion?)—and, at the same time, for the ostentatious erudition of Eliot’s footnotes, which scramble to gain mastery over the chaos that precedes them. In short, as a professor once put it to me, Eliot’s notes pretend to explicate, but their truer function is to piss on the poem. Thus if one reads the poem and the notes together as a sort of an anxious dyad, one can see Eliot grappling with Hegel’s infelicitous conviction that “the invasion of everyday life by ‘the prose’ of the world signifies the death of the Gods.”¹⁸

*

As fleshed out by Hegel (and consequently explored by Schor in *Reading in Detail*), this “prose of the world” often signifies the domestic realm of drudgery and

materiality occupied by women. By this logic, the particular—i.e. the second sex—invariably becomes the vehicle for pollution. Clearly this is an old story—older than Eliot’s “Hysteria” or “Wasteland”; older, in fact, than Genesis; and at least as old as Greek antiquity, as Anne Carson makes clear in an illuminating essay, “Dirt and Desire: Essay on the Phenomenology of Female Pollution in Antiquity.” Carson here traces the myriad of ways in which Greek society, philosophy, and poetry consistently regarded women as “pollutable, polluted and polluting” (143). Working on this same theme but in a context closer to the present, Schor has usefully tracked the presumed intimacy between women and refuse through the birth of psychoanalysis at the end of the 19th century. Schor explains how hysteria, paranoia, and obsessional neurosis—the provinces of primarily female patients—were treated as “pathologies of the detail, reflecting a society sick with the detail, so to speak” (*Detail*, 70). She also explains how the deep hope of Freud’s “talking cure” was that it could somehow convert, or inflate, “the refuse of the day’s residues” into meaning—that interpretation could somehow “connect the detail with the whole which it represents,” and thus lead down “the royal way to the unconscious” (71).

Like Stein, who expressed only disdain for the idea of the unconscious, and whose love of the infantile both repels interpretation and welcomes the “pollutable, polluted and polluting,” Ashbery, O’Hara, and Schuyler were not particularly smitten by the above narratives. O’Hara’s oft-cited denigration of Lowell’s poem “Skunk Hour”—yet another 20th century poem famous for its disconsolate probe of garbage—points us toward this profound difference in attitude. About Lowell’s poem, O’Hara said, “I don’t think that anyone has to get themselves to go and watch lovers in a parking lot necking in order to write a poem, and I don’t see why it’s admirable if they feel guilty about it.

They should feel guilty. Why are they snooping? What's so wonderful about a Peeping Tom? And then if you liken them to skunks putting their noses in garbage pails, you've just done something perfectly revolting" (Lehman, 347). Lehman rightly points out that O'Hara's scolding stemmed from the fact that "'Skunk Hour' stood for everything that [O'Hara] detested in American poetry: didacticism, symbolism, and the grandiose egoism of a speaker who likens the welfare of the body politic to the state of his psyche and quotes Milton's Satan, 'Myself am Hell,' without a saving irony" (348), but I would push the difference further still. After all, what's "perfectly revolting" is not the necking nor the garbage, but Lowell's metaphor-making, which sets him apart from both in the role of spectator, and evidences a certain skittishness about getting down and dirty. It isn't just that Lowell's poem is symbolic, but that its symbolism casts Lowell as literally looking down on a mother skunk getting creamed in the face by a waste product: "I stand on top/of our back steps and breathe the rich air—/a mother skunk with her column of kittens swills the garbage pail./She jabs her wedge-head in a cup/of sour cream, drops her ostrich tail,/and will not scare" (90).

O'Hara's reaction to "Skunk Hour" also deepens in meaning when placed in the context of the specific discourse on privacy that proliferated in Cold War America.¹⁹ As Deborah Nelson explains in her brilliant study of confessional poetry and constitutional privacy doctrine, *Pursuing Privacy in Cold War America* (2002), the "governing paradox" of the Cold War was that "in the interests in preserving the space of privacy, privacy would have to be penetrated" (xiii). (Clearly our own "war on terror" has proved that this paradox is still strongly with us.) But then as now, "these deprivations were unevenly distributed"—and Nelson discusses how in the Cold War, "categories of citizens—women or homosexuals—rather than unlucky individuals were banished to the

deprivation, rather than the liberation, of privacy” (xiii). Nowhere is this distinction sharper than in the comparison of the Supreme Court decisions *Griswold v. Connecticut* (1965)—which affirmed the right of married couples to use contraception in the privacy of their own bedrooms—and *Bowers v. Hardwick* (1986), which denied gay men a right to privacy in theirs. (“*The issue presented is whether the Federal Constitution confers a fundamental right upon homosexuals to engage in sodomy,*” wrote Justice White in *Hardwick*, totally ignoring the question of whether or not it is constitutional for a policeman without a valid search warrant to barge into anyone’s bedroom or home [see Nelson, 147].) I don’t want to keep using Lowell as a patsy, for as Nelson rightly notes, “[Lowell’s] innovation was to make himself. . . available, not as the abstract and universal poet, but as a particular person in a particular place and time” (45)—a project related, albeit in a complicated way, to the New York School.²⁰ But O’Hara’s negative reaction to Lowell’s voyeurism takes on another dimension when we think about the different positions Lowell and O’Hara occupied in a society obsessed with police surveillance and purges of homosexual men. “Why are they snooping? What’s so great about a Peeping Tom?” O’Hara asks—questions that one might well have posed to McCarthy himself.

When read in this light, O’Hara’s insouciant, “not caring” attitude can also be read as a defensive stance—a kind of preemptive I-wouldn’t-want-to-be-a-part-of-your-club-anyhow line, when you know you aren’t going to get in. For if the New York School of poets did, indeed, constitute an “avant-garde,” it differed profoundly from prior avant-gardes in its total lack of interest in affecting, much less revolutionizing, culture at-large. O’Hara’s claim that he could care less about “clarifying experiences for anyone or bettering (other than accidentally) anyone’s state or social relation” could not in fact stand further apart from the impulses of Futurism, Dada, Surrealism, the Beats, or

Black Arts, to name just a few movements which strove to transform the “state or social relation” of both individual and polis. But instead of venerating this “not caring,” apolitical stance as desirable and timeless, we might also consider it in the context of being queer in the mid-50s, where explicitly same-sex poems had to wait until after Stonewall to see the light of day, and where, in certain forums outside one’s coterie, “if you ever mentioned anyone was gay, you’d risk being excommunicated,” as Giorno put it. In such a context, O’Hara’s poetry instead celebrates the merits of a “don’t bother me and I won’t bother you” mode of living. In “Mothers of America,” for example, he pleads with mothers everywhere to “let your kids go to the movies!,” so that the “little tykes” can have “their first sexual experience/ which only cost a quarter.” As in several other O’Hara poems, the movies here represent a space in which one maintain a sort of privacy in public—a place where a populace can sit together in darkness, partaking in the same event but not policing each other’s activities.

O’Hara wrote often about public gay sex, an activity presumably not as “all-American” as a couple necking in a parked car. But like the wedge-headed skunk, perhaps, O’Hara’s poetry “will not scare” off of such probing. In fact, one of his most euphoric embraces of garbage is found in a poem titled “Homosexuality,” in which O’Hara writes:

I start like ice, my finger to my ear, my ear
to my heart, that proud cur at the garbage can

in the rain. It’s wonderful to admire oneself
with complete candor, tallying up the merits of each

of the latrines. 14th Street is drunken and credulous,
53rd Street tries to tremble but is too at rest. The good

love a park and the inept a railway station,
and there are the divine ones who drag themselves up

and down the lengthening shadow of an Abyssinian head
in the dust, trailing their long elegant heels of hot air

crying to confuse the brave "It's a summer day
and I want to be wanted more than anything else in the world." (*CP*, 182)

Putting his own special spin on the cliché of "writing from the heart," O'Hara starts with his "finger to his ear," i.e. probing his own orifices, as a segue to his heart, which he describes as a "proud cur at the garbage can"—a subtle if inadvertent inversion of Lowell's furtive skunk, and one that instead imagines a cur—i.e. "a dog considered to be inferior or undesirable; a base or cowardly person" (*AHD*, 349) (or, as my thesaurus puts it more simply, "a bitch")—full of pride. The poem then jump-cuts to an inventory of various public sites around the city to get laid (notably, latrines—ground zeros of waste emission), and touches obliquely on one of O'Hara's ongoing fascinations: oral sex with black men (here coded as "Abyssinian head").²¹ While Lowell snoops around watching for "love-cars" and concludes afterward, "My mind's not right," O'Hara instead affirms that "[i]t's wonderful to admire oneself with complete candor," even, or especially, if that means admiring one's proficiency in the rituals of public sex.

Throughout O'Hara's poetry, he sings the praises of the bond between refuse, sexual attraction, and urban living, as in the poem "Song":

Is it dirty
does it look dirty
that's what you think of in the city

does it just seem dirty
that's what you think of in the city
you don't refuse to breathe do you

someone comes along with a very bad character
he seems attractive. is he really. yes, very
he's attractive as his character is bad. is it. yes

that's what you think of in the city
 run your finger along your no-moss mind
 that's not a thought that's soot

and you take a lot of dirt off someone
 is the character less bad. no. it improves constantly
 you don't refuse to breathe do you (327)

Here O'Hara balances the mania of living in a dirty city like New York, where one is constantly worrying, "it is dirty?" or "does it just seem dirty?" with a memorable mantra of acceptance: "you don't refuse to breathe do you." The point is clear (and wildly pre-AIDS): to refuse the dirt is to refuse to be alive. What's more, he connects this acceptance of dirt to giving into the seduction of an attractive man, a man as "attractive as his character is bad." The poem postulates that you are what you ingest—and that in a city full of attractive strangers with whom one is constantly being thrown into close contact, it's nearly impossible not to have, quite literally, a dirty mind. Certainly there are moments in O'Hara's poetry in which he presents this acceptance in a less exalted manner, such as in the opening lines of "Spleen": "I know so much/about things, I accept/so much, it's like/vomiting" (187), but even here the back-and-forth between reception and emission—between, perhaps, getting fucked and fucking—is as provocative as it is guiltless.

In "The Morning of the Poem," Schuyler pays his own tribute to the scavenger-in-the-garbage motif. Here is his account, set in his mother's home in western New York:

The other evening my mother and I were watching TV in the living
 room when something fell, a metal clang on the
 Back stoop. I went and put the outside lights on and looked:
 the trash-can had been knocked off and
 Perched on the can full of trash was the biggest raccoon I've

ever seen: he turned his head and looked me
 In the eye, hopped down and walked sedately off into the shrubs.
 I put the lid back on and dragged the can into
 The vestibule. "I wish you had seen him," I told my mother, "he
 was beautiful: he was so big!" "Maybe he
 Was a dog," she said, deep in her program. I don't know why,
 but that breaks me up, like telling someone
 You've seen a rat, and they say, "Maybe it was a fat mouse."
 I'd love to have picked him up and held him,
 Only, frankly, I thought he might incline to bite. (*CP*, 298)

Schuyler's rendition is remarkable for its humor and compassion ("I would like/to put
 food out for him, but how could I know/He was eating it and not the dogs that swarm
 around this hill?" he continues). There's also something erotic about the exchange—
 "he/ was beautiful: he was so big!" he exclaims, and then expresses a desire to pick the
 animal up and hold him. His desire to share his excitement with his mother—who
 typically deflates the scenario with inadvertent wit: "Maybe it was a dog"—is equally
 puerile and perverse. Like O'Hara, Schuyler eschews the self-loathing that animates
 "Skunk Hour," and instead celebrates the proud animal in the trash and its various
 attractions. The moment makes clear both Schuyler's appreciation of the subtle
 amusements of human interaction as well as his quiet amazement at the grace of the
 non-human.

Ashbery's poetry is in fact famous for its embrace of waste—of "the dump
 dumped dumping." As he writes in *The Vermont Notebook*: "I will go to the dump. I am to
 be in the dump. I was permanently the dump and now the dump is me, but I will be
 permanently me when I am no longer the dump air" (Shoptaw, 31). As Shoptaw points
 out, this "waste heap" obviously alludes to other famous heaps—"The Wasteland," of
 course, and also Stevens' man "taking a dump on the dump"; it also parallels the trash
 aesthetic elaborated in the period by Rauschenberg and others. Given such associations,

it's not a stretch to imagine a homoerotic circle anally focused on "the dump, dumped and dumping." But the similarity between this phrase and Carson's "pollutable, polluted, and polluting" points toward another dimension as well. At a recent talk, I was intrigued to hear Ashbery describe his work as kindred in spirit to a *Symphonia Domestica*—a reference, I assume, to Richard Strauss's 1902-1903 symphony which was notorious for polluting itself with "the blatant realism of the 'domestic' scena," i.e. "the inclusion of the screaming child Franz, the fights with his wife Pauline, and the sheer realism of the 'love scene' between composer and wife, which Romain Rolland decried as one of the most audacious challenges Strauss had 'hurled against at [good] taste and common-sense.'"²² Of course, neither Ashbery, Schuyler, nor O'Hara had a traditional "scene de *famille*" complete with man, wife, screaming child, and the heterosexual drama of "differentiated male and female orgasms" to include in their work. (Strauss's symphony even includes a sex scene in which "the woman's motive is very excited figuration, the man's quickly subsiding," as Strauss explains in an unpublished note on the short-score.) So to be clear: when I talk about these poets as embracing the domestic, I don't necessarily mean the normative conception of such, as elaborated in Strauss's symphony. The embrace I'm talking about has more to do with the "urban gay fetish of 'interiors'" that characterized 1950's gay taste in New York, a phenomenon Koestenbaum has explained as follows: "In the bleak McCarthy era, gay culture paradoxically flourished in the home—safer than police-threatened bars and tearooms. The private apartment—or townhouse—became a Joseph Cornell shadow box, a vitrine, an inside-out Brillo carton; in the domiciles, queers amassed artworks, cleansers, masks, records, and receipts . . ." (*Warhol*, 51). At the panel, Ashbery didn't elaborate on the *Symphonia Domestica*, but he did say that he admired its inclusion of the "leftover pieces" of life—a good description

of the kind of queer domicile Koestenbaum describes. “I think that any one of my poems might be considered a snapshot of what is going on in my mind at the time—first of all the desire to write a poem, after that wondering if I’ve left the oven on or thinking where I must be in the next hour,” Ashbery has said [*Scene of My Selves*, 37], once again linking his process to fragments of the domestic scene (in this case, the oven).

At the same panel, Ashbery iterated his admiration for Cage—an admiration which has persisted for fifty years, and which many have treated as a kind of latent threat to Ashbery’s work (including his fellow panelist Larry Rivers, who quickly intervened to announce that he would never understand what Ashbery got out of Cage’s music). As Ward puts it in his chapter on Ashbery, “the aleatory has been felt by both British and American readers to be (Ashbery’s) most dangerous temptation, and one that has been there throughout” (89). Regardless of one’s opinion about this “temptation,” the link between Strauss’s symphony and Cage’s most famous experiments, such as “Music of Changes,” or “4’33”” is obvious: the intent is to let in the garbage. In remembering a performance of “Music of Changes” in which Cage played the radio at random, Ashbery recounted how beautiful and hilarious it was when the radio happened upon a Mozart piece amidst the static, and the audience—being so relieved to hear a lovely, familiar piece of music—burst into applause. Ashbery plays with a similar phenomenon in his long poems, which tend to spin and sputter mercilessly, then occasionally eddy out into coherent, sometimes formal, lyric moments (such as the double sestina in the middle of *Flow Chart*). This pattern is perhaps a microcosm of his career at large, with the following lines from *Flow Chart* an apt description of this ethos: “How all that fluff got wedged in with the diamonds in the star chamber/makes for compelling reading, as does the heading ‘Eyesores,’ though what comes under it/e.g. ‘Nancy’s pendant’ is a decidedly

mixed bag” (168). The phrases “eyesores” and “a decidedly mixed bag” may echo common charges leveled against Ashbery’s work, but he happily deems such things “compelling reading,” echoing his contention in *Other Traditions* that “good things sometimes come in mixed bags” (6). And as soon as he lets in the “fluff” along with the “diamonds,” the feminine streams in—here in the form of “Nancy’s pendant.” (And of course it’s “Nancy” – “Nancy” being slang for “fag.” “Pendant” is more inscrutable, but also manages to combine the femme and the phallic: as a noun it signifies a necklace; as an adjective, “hanging down; dangling; suspended,” or “projecting; jutting; overhanging” [AHD, 917].)

Unlike the *Symphonia Domestica*, however, and unlike the poetry of O’Hara or Schuyler, Ashbery’s poetry does not focus overtly on autobiographical and erotic particulars. But as Shoptaw has pointed out, from a certain perspective, his work can be read as an ongoing speculation about—indeed a theorization of—the metaphysics of particulars. Or, better put, it can be read as a constant challenge to the assumed relationship between the particular and the universal. Shoptaw explains: “Traditionally, poets have been said to represent the universal through the particular . . . Ashbery’s misrepresentative poetics operate differently: the poem represents no experience in particular” (43). At the same time, critics such as David Kalstone have gone so far as to assert that in Ashbery’s work, “the enemy, over and over again, is *generality*” (*Scene*, 45). Many Ashbery readers might have trouble buying the latter argument, for as Thomas Lisk has pointed out, “general nouns unsupported by clear relevant details are exactly what we find over and over again in Ashbery’s poetry.” Lisk goes on to prove his point by describing Ashbery’s obsession with “the most general possible word, ‘thing,’ ” as well as his habit of “linking abstract subjects with concrete verbs, and vice versa” (45). Faced

with this dilemma, I think we might save some time and trouble by recalling a comment Ashbery makes in *Other Traditions*: he says he stands by Williams' famous slogan, "no ideas but in things," but with the crucial caveat: "for me, ideas are also things" (2).²³

This idea, along with the related conviction that ideas are inseparable from the people who have them, is critical to the personal poems of O'Hara and Schuyler. Here I simply want to suggest, after Shoptaw, that Ashbery is preoccupied with the same problem, only from a different angle: as he puts it in the start of *Flow Chart*: "And the horoscopes flung back/all we had meant to keep there: *our* meaning, for us, yet/how different the sense when another speaks it!" (4). As Lisk has suggested, Ashbery's many rhetorical tropes, which work together to maintain his particular brand of opacity (Lisk's short-list: "sentence fragments, unclear pronoun references, unattributed quotations, clichés, wordiness and vague generalities" [35]) leave the peculiar impression of speaking for everyone, for no one, and, eventually (whether he likes it or not), for himself very specifically, as he has created a voice that remains decidedly his own, despite the fact that it has been ceaselessly imitated.²⁴ Key to this phenomenon is the line "how different the sense when another speaks it!", as it draws us into a principal aspect of Ashbery's work: its relentless, campy urge to quote and italicize. (Indeed, some of Ashbery's most famous lines appear in quotation marks—most notoriously, "Once I let a guy blow me"—a line which Ashbery says he cribbed from a letter. He has repeated this alibi to many different audiences over the years with varying degrees of irony.) Shoptaw usefully connects this penchant for quotation to Stein's ambition to write "everybody's autobiography," and describes *Flow Chart*, for example, as "anybody's autobiography, but nobody's in particular" (302).

But some clarification is necessary here, for despite the real plurality and

multivalence of Ashbery's vision—"What I am trying to get at is a general, all-purpose experience—like those stretch socks that fit all sizes," he explains (Shoptaw, 1)—his work is decidedly *not* a direct sampling of the diverse plethora of voices that constitute the polyglot of contemporary America—a project that held more interest even for Williams, say, in *Paterson*, or for Eliot in "The Wasteland." The idiom that attracts Ashbery most consistently is the fuddy-duddy argot of WASPy, early to mid-century American speech, often with an "aw-shucks" twist: "As for Jenny Wren, she cares, hopping about on her little twig like she was tryin' to tell us somethin', but that's just it, she couldn't even if she wanted to," he writes in "For John Clare," suddenly possessed by the ghost of inept dialect (*Mooring*, 250). This point is an important one, insofar as it underscores Ashbery's attraction to the intensely normative, and, perhaps, his dirty desire to transgress it by removing it from its original context. And here I mean "dirty" in all senses of the word, for as Carson has explained, "'Dirt' may be defined as 'matter out of place.' The poached egg on your plate at the breakfast table is not dirt; the poached egg on the floor of the Reading Room at the British Museum is. Dirt is matter that has crossed a boundary it ought not to have crossed. Dirt confounds categories and mixes up form" (*Men*, 145).

I know of no better way to describe the impression left by the exhibition of Darger's *In the Realms on the Unreal*, on permanent display at the American Folk Art Museum in New York. ("Returned again to the exhibition," Ashbery writes in *Girls on the Run*, "How strange it is that when we least imagine we are enjoying themselves, a shaft of reason will bedazzle us" [12].) Darger based his drawings of the Vivian Girls on hundreds of clippings of little girls from coloring books, comic strips, and advertisements for clothing, cookery, or other domestic goods gathered from

mainstream magazines; he then copied, traced, or collaged these clippings directly into the watercolor paintings that illustrate his epic saga. A Civil War buff, Darger also collected commemorative issues about the war published by *Life* and other magazines, and pored over their illustrations of battle scenes. But here's the rub: whereas everyone is supposed to appreciate the cuteness of cherubic little girls in pigtails stirring cookie batter or toweling off after a bath, and everyone's supposed to take a patriotic interest in the vicissitudes of American military history, you're not supposed to then place those little girls *into* the scenes of war and horrific violence, much less take their jumpers off, paint them with dancing penises, and copy such scenes obsessively throughout a lifetime. In his collecting, collaging, and cutting, Darger revealed his perversion, joining the ranks of those "pioneers in understanding how perverse sexuality interrupts the distinction between public and private space," as Koestenbaum has said in a different context (*Warhol*, 51).

Further, if you're going to go ahead and indulge your perversion, you might as well make something coherent out of it—i.e. a narrative epic—but neither *In the Realms* nor *Girls on the Run* is overly concerned with such a goal (though it's important to note that Ashbery knew he was writing a book, and a book that would be published by Farrar, Straus, and Giroux, while Darger labored in a self-imposed, superstitious obscurity: "All the Gold in the Gold Mines/All the Silver in the world,/Nay, all the world/Cannot buy these pictures from me," he warns).²⁵ Given that Ashbery is "devoted to the impossible," as Schuyler once said, I imagine that part of his attraction to Darger's work—especially at this late point in his career, after he has been consistently deemed one of the 20th century's great poets—lies precisely in Darger's total insulation from the eye of critics and/or general audience, and in the consequent maniacal, unedited sprawl of his vision.

(Indeed, it has not been possible to publish *In the Realms* in its entirety, as it consists of over 30,000 pages of manuscript, along with enormous watercolors painted on both sides of the paper; many claim it to be the the longest piece of imaginative prose ever written. But the Folk Art exhibit, along with the oversized, 720-page study with text by Darger expert John MacGregor, can give you a pretty good idea of the thing.)

Girls on the Run most certainly plays with the erotic aspects of Darger's work ("Like a lilac I am coming on your shoe," Ashbery writes; elsewhere, "Sometimes they were in sordid sexual situations;/at others, a smidgen of fun would intrude on our day/which exists to be intruded upon, anyway" [41, 13]). It also shares in Darger's insistent combination of pubescent innocence and impending violence—its opening lines read, "A great plane flew across the sun,/and the girls ran across the ground. (. . .) Let's get out of here, Judy said./They're getting closer, I can't stand it." But for the most part, Ashbery sidesteps the more troubling and gruesome aspects of Darger's epic, the violence of which apparently merits a warning sign at the entrance to the exhibit, though the most brutal paintings are not even on display.²⁶ Yet the nature of Ashbery's identification with Darger remains provocative, as clearly a similar kind of imagination fascinates both: namely, that of childhood ("This, only children can know/and some adults who have turned the steep corner into childhood," Ashbery writes, implying that he is one of those adults who has taken the plunge), but, even more specifically, that of girlhood. In talking about the inspiration for *Girls on the Run*, Ashbery has said:

I'm in correspondence with Mary, a girl I had a crush on all through childhood and adolescence. We had a mythical kingdom in the woods; various of our friends had castles in trees, and I was always just trying to get plays that we could produce spontaneously. Then my younger brother died just around the beginning of World War II. The group dispersed for various reasons, and things were never as happy or romantic as they'd been, and my brother was no longer there. I think

I've always been trying to get back to this mystical kingdom that Mary and I inhabited. (D'Agata)

Though nowhere near as extreme as Darger's fixation on adolescent fantasy, Ashbery's anecdote echoes Darger's version of childhood as a mystical place invariably connected to loss—Darger was obsessed with a sister he never knew, who was given up for adoption at birth, and whom his mother died giving birth to. And notable among these losses is the freedom to toy with gender. (Note, too, the above slippage between the loss of Ashbery's brother and the kingdom of Mary.) *In the Realms* is in fact loaded with episodes of cross-dressing. "What a pretty girl he sure would make," says Vivian Girl Jennie Turner of a little boy dressed like a girl; in this same scene, Jennie herself is "adapting to her slender and pretty little form a little boy's attire," and cutting her hair into a boyish bob. As MacGregor puts it, "It seems to be a matter of great importance to Henry that at least some children have the ability to change gender, or to slip in and out of disguises which fool everyone" (528).²⁷ Ashbery inherits and enjoys this theme, as the name of his character "Uncle Margaret" suggests. Further, in *Girls*, Ashbery's customary play with indefinite pronouns takes on a more explicitly transsexual flavor, as his "we's" and "I's" keep him slipping in and out of the forms of a Vivian Girl, a Darger-like friend and narrator, or one of the many other little boys and/or androgynous creatures (such as "Tidbit" or "Shuffle") that populate the long poem. But it's important to note that in both *In the Realms* and *Girls*, the pleasure in this play remains rooted in an "embattled, watchful, homophobic atmosphere" (as Shoptaw has described the mood of Ashbery's earlier girlie collage, "Europe" [62])—an atmosphere in which the specter of punishment for transgressive deeds looms large.

In addition to (but not unrelated to) this gender trouble lies the problem of parasitical detail—surely another facet of Ashbery’s attraction to Darger’s work. As MacGregor writes of Darger, “He seemed to have possessed no clear awareness that descriptive detail was expected to serve a precise literary goal. His overly concrete and materialistic mind delighted in an endless build-up of material fact for its own sake” (109). Ashbery’s mind is not as literal as Darger’s, but Ashbery’s use of abundant detail throughout *Girls* (and, of course, throughout his other poetry) also jams any movement toward a “precise literary goal.” Instead, the primary goal is seemingly to provide an overabundance of verbal pleasure, strung along by a syntax that cannot be tamed, and whose clauses take the reader far afield: “In the lane the parson’s/ ambulance pestered gold pigtails, who were in for a shock/when the fox returned smiling, fanning his great tail in the comet/of the lighthouses the sausages were so concerned about” (14).

Whereas Ashbery is ostensibly concerned with the “realms of the unreal,” and Barthes is interested in the opposite—the realist novel—Ashbery clearly contributes to the revalorization of useless detail that Barthes theorizes in his essay “The Reality Effect.” Schor describes Barthes’ theorization as scandalous, insofar as it delegitimizes “the organic model of literary interpretation, according to which all details—no matter how aberrant their initial appearance—can, indeed must be integrated into the whole, since the work of art is itself organically constituted.” Schor goes on to argue that “to privilege the insignificant detail is to practice a sort of decadent criticism, to promote a poor management of linguistic capital” (*Detail*, 85). Though I don’t imagine the New York School of poets was on her mind, Schor’s description of writing as “poorly-managed linguistic capital” could certainly serve as an apt description of the nature of much of its literary production.

This tendency toward excess has bothered a lot of people. Speaking of O'Hara, Vendler writes: "The longest poems end up simply messy, endless secretions, with a nugget of poetry here and there" (179-80); here I quote here from Ward's introduction to his study:

With the exception of James Schuyler, the writers with whose work this study deals have tended toward prolificity, in Ashbery's case prodigiously so. Not only do the New Yorkers write with facility, they parade that quality openly in the often invertebrate forms of their poems. So many of the long works, from Koch's "Sleeping with Women," to Ashbery's "Litany," could easily have been shorter, or for that matter thirty pages longer. (The former was, at one point.) The structureless structures of the endless list, the pseudo-narrative, the neo-Surrealist collage, can be read as offering procedural analogues for the faintly nauseating terms in which John Bernard Myers describes the New York art-world of the fifties; "a situation which was open, yeasty, limitlessly permissive." (. . .) The blame for some of this can be laid at the door of Walt Whitman, rather than the painters. Whitman's severance of American from English poetic tradition inaugurated an aesthetics of monstrous absorbency, total inclusion. Perhaps this has gone even wider than Whitman's bequest, and become a common factor in American aesthetics. (. . .) The most effective poems of the New York group are those whose capacity for tireless exploration and absorption comes up against, if not Steve McQueen's ice-wagon, then some equally cold shower that has consequences for the formless forms of the poetry. (9).

Certainly poetry that flirts with both chaos and order remains more interesting than poetry solely devoted to the former. But perhaps as an American, or at least as someone not faintly-nauseated by the "yeasty" nor the "limitlessly permissive," and as someone positively mortified by the idea of killing excitement with a cold shower, I can't quite understand why there need be any blame attached to an aesthetics of "monstrous absorbency" or "endless secretions."²⁸ Not only do such terms ooze gender—Mary Shelley's famous description of her novel *Frankenstein* as a "monstrous dilation" immediately comes to mind—but such an assessment does nothing to illuminate many of the writers' greatest achievements, such as O'Hara's surreal and deeply logorrheic "Second Avenue," or the endless secretion of *Flow Chart*. The drive toward excess in the

poetry is real and uncontrollable, as epitomized by Schuyler's memory of pissing all over himself at the end of "The Morning of the Poem": "I/inched down my zipper and put my right hand into/The opening: hideous trauma, there was just no way I could/transfer my swollen tool from hand to hand without a great/ Gushing forth (inside my pants), like when Moses hit the rock: so/ I did it: there was piss all over Paris, not/To mention my shirt and pants, light sun tans" (302). Schuyler's "piss all over Paris" is, perhaps, the New York School equivalent of Plath's aphorism: "The blood jet is poetry,/ There is no stopping it." To worry about whether or not the blood-jet always produces "good poems" is to miss the point; as O'Hara pithily suggested, the bad ones will slip into oblivion by themselves.

In fact, a crucial part of the legacy of New York School poetry has been its encouragement to give up the battle to protect the "well-wrought urn" from this "monstrous absorbency." In lamenting the experimental pieces in Ashbery's second book, *The Tennis Court Oath* (1962), Ward writes: "what we actually get in the experimental pieces is . . . a casual Surreal pile-up of deconstructed bits and pieces that is partly responsible for the New York poetry-by-the-yard turned out by magazines like *The World* or *Adventures in Poetry* during the Sixties and early Seventies" (111). Ward's distaste for this "poetry-by-the-yard" is palpable, and, I think, unfortunate. Not only does it bar the obvious and important connection between Ashbery's "poetry-by-the-yard" and Warhol's "painting-by-the-yard"—a connection that many critics have opted to ignore or deny²⁹—but it also demotes the New York scene precisely at the moment that a rush of speech by women and people of color began to take center stage via the "mimeograph revolution," and the birth of punk, rap, open mikes, and a whole host of other explosive forms of speech. As Allen Ginsberg described the spirit of the time in his foreword to

Out of This World: The Poetry Project at St. Mark's Church in-the-Bowery, An Anthology 1966-1991:

Liberation of the word. Liberation of minority groups, questions of race. The famous “sexual revolution.” The celebrated women’s liberation—women writing and reading brilliantly, led by poets Anne Waldman and Diane diPrima, Alice Notley, Maureen Owen, Denise Levertov, Joanne Kyger, also Diane Wakoski and Rochelle Owens and Carol Bergé, others. At least in my circle these were among the stars who gave expression to new independence. There were angry denunciations, manifestos, gay liberation performance pieces; there was romantic love poetry, there were prose poetry journals like Taylor Mead’s excellent *Diary of a New York Youth* (Kerouac liked Mead’s free style and frankness). (xxvii-xxviii)

“Faintly nauseating” as it may strike some, it was precisely this “yeasty and limitlessly permissive” aspect of the New York art world that drew an unprecedented diversity of people to the city in the 60s and 70s to partake in the literary scene, including the three women who are the subject of the second half of this study.³⁰

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In contending with this “monstrous” aspect of New York School writing, it has proved difficult for many critics to resist the urge to normalize it, in an attempt to meld it into traditional narratives of literary value. For example, when Lehman asserts that the details in O’Hara’s “The Day Lady Died” will eventually reveal an entire extinct species of dinosaur, he speaks to a deeply-ingrained hope that detail not be superfluous—that works of art, and, perhaps by extension, our lives—will add up to something, preferably something with meaning and value. Ashbery addresses this hope in his poem, “The System”:

the few who want order in their lives and a sense of growing and progression toward a fixed end suffer terribly. Sometimes they try to dope their consciousness of the shifting but the ineluctable grid of time that has been arbitrarily imposed on them with alcohol or drugs, but these lead merely to

mornings after whose waking is ten times more painful than before, bringing with it a new and more terrible realization of the impossibility of reconciling their own ends with the those of the cosmos. (*Mooring*, 131)

Depending on your temperament, this picture may strike you as grim—indeed it might strike me that way, were it not accompanied by a poetry that elaborates a different path: a path that partakes in “the undercurrency of American literature that assures us that the moment of being is central and true,” as Myles has put it in reference to Stein.³¹ The poetry of O’Hara and Schuyler repeatedly awakens to this “moment of being” via an intense attention to the details of both the physical body and its surroundings. Thus it seems only fitting that the poem that contains the phrase that has come to serve as shorthand for O’Hara’s poetics (“I do this, I do that”) is the chronicle of an awakening. The poem is called “Getting Up Ahead of Someone (Sun),” and begins: “I cough a lot (sinus?) so I/ get up and have some tea with cognac/it is dawn/the light flows evenly along the lawn” (341). From its opening cough onward (through lines such as, “it is cold I shiver a little/in white shorts”) the poem charts the transient states and desires of O’Hara’s body, and ends with the location of his body within the contingencies of space and time: “I make/myself a bourbon and commence/to write one of my ‘I do this I do that’/ poems in a sketch pad/it is tomorrow/though only six hours have gone by/each day’s light has more significance these days.” This last line is particularly eerie. Its exact meaning is elusive, but it exemplifies the unique combination of acceptance, subtle wistfulness and foreboding with which O’Hara often noted the passing of time. Though O’Hara wrote this poem in 1959—seven years before his death—it’s admittedly hard, in retrospect, to read it without feeling as though time was already rushing him along toward his untimely death.

Schuyler's "The Morning of the Poem" sustains a related attentiveness to his body along with a meditation on the passing of time, but he distends the procedure into a 50-page poem. Notably, the poem also begins with an awakening: "July 8 or 9, the eighth certainly/1976 that I know/Awakening in western New York" (259). He then quickly moves from the confusion of sleep to the awareness of inhabiting a particular (and sexualized) body: "I being whoever I am get out of bed holding/my cock and go to piss/Then to the kitchen to make coffee and toast/with jam and see out/The window two blue jays ripping something white/while from my mother's/Room the radio purls: it plays all night she leaves it on to hear/The midnight news and then sleeps and dozes/until day which now it is." Throughout "The Morning of the Poem," Schuyler moves in and out of the past and the future, but, like O'Hara, he always punctuates his journey by calling our attention back to his body in the present: "ouch: cologne in a shaving cut." Schuyler's last long poem, "A Few Days," elaborates further on this procedure: its sense of time is even more cyclical—"I / can't nail the days down," he admits—the play with the presence of his writing body even more explicit: "Guess I'm ready for lunch: ready as I'll/ever be, that is./Lunch was good: now to move my bowels. That was good, too" (359). As the lacuna in this account of lunch and its expulsion demonstrates, both Schuyler and O'Hara (and Ashbery, if we recall his "Excuse me while I fart" moment in *Flow Chart*) like to play with the gaps that invariably occur when one attempts to get one's body into the body of one's writing. This combination of details and gaps is partly what makes the writing feel sexy. As Schor puts it in regard to the "aesthetics of Eros" developed by Barthes, "Eros resides in the detail, because the detail is always at least partially sited in a real body" (*Detail*, 96). The poetry teases insofar as it offers up the details of a real body, while also acknowledging that this body is inevitably

shrouded from the reader via the page, the passage of time, and, eventually, the death of both writer and reader.

Likewise, though O'Hara may be famous for writing poems that describe the pleasures of walking down a city street—as in his “cock of the walk” poems, such as “F. (Missive & Walk) I. #53,” in which he writes: “I’m getting tired of not wearing underwear/ and then again I like it/strolling along/feeling the wind blow softly on my genitals/though I also like them encased in something/firm, almost tight, like a projectile” (420)—the writing still courts an illusion. The poem is, after all, a remembered walk, not a poem written while actually walking. Indeed, later in the same poem, O'Hara acknowledges this rift with a wink, and plays with the reader's expectations: “I'm/ not going to the Colisseum I'm going to/the Russian Tea Room fooled you didn't I.” Likewise, in “Getting Up Ahead of Someone (Sun),” one doesn't know whether the “I do this, I do that” poem O'Hara mentions writing is the one we're now reading, or some other existent, or virtual, poem. This play in the poems of O'Hara and Schuyler constitutes a great deal of their charm. It also represents a way of coping with what can otherwise seem an inexorably cruel fact of life: “Of nothing but the fleeting instant can [we] have absolutely immediate consciousness, or feeling, whether much or little; and this instant is no sooner present than it is gone. In it we can be conscious of no change; because we do that by making a little rehearsal of the process or imitation of it, and that occupies time,” as Charles S. Peirce has put it. A past moment, as Peirce frankly reminds us, “though it be past by but the hundredth of a second,” is “totally and absolutely gone” (259). In response to this situation, Schuyler offers the simple ethos: “A few days/are all we have. So count them as they pass.”

I call this ethos a way of coping, but that doesn't mean that I see it as a deception or a defense. And here I differ from Ward, who suggests that many of O'Hara's poems "operate in basic continuity with the Western lyrical tradition, lamenting the passage of time and erecting metaphysical conceits to clog that passage"—conceits that essentially function as "lies against time," in the Bloomian lingo (64). The poems are by no means simple-minded in their attitude toward temporality and mortality, as the haunting of O'Hara's line, "each day's light has more significance these days," or the mournfulness of Schuyler's inventory, "A few days/are all we have. So count them as they pass," suggests. But Ward's notion of "clogged passages" cannot account for the play of acceptance and evacuation in the poetry—a phenomenon that Myles has described (in relation to O'Hara) as follows: "O'Hara's voice just shifts and shifts and shifts and keeps taking in everything and letting it out" (Richard, 25). This quality of the writing—evident in Schuyler's short, enjambed lines that run with a strong current down the page; in the unpunctuated rush of O'Hara's language ("you never come when you say you'll come but on the other hand you do come"); and in Ashbery's commitment to a Steinian ethos of amnesia, in which "[y]our only business . . . is the sentence before your eye. Not the sentence you've just finished, or the sentence you're about to begin. Just the sentence unfolding right now"³²—presents an alternative to the unhappy dyad of choices—lament or fight—that Ward lays out. In his study *Destructive Poetics: Heidegger and Modern American Poetry*, Paul Bové makes a similar point:

I want to offer for consideration the idea that certain strong poets exist in the mediate without experiencing the trauma [Bloom] describes. Or, rather, their response to the "trauma" is not a defensive lie against time, a mastering of anxiety by an act of deceitful will, but an open and projective poetry. . . . They do not unwillingly extend the decayed and decaying death of the revisionist to the death of poetry itself. (31)

Though Bové is more concerned with Black Mountain poets such as Olson and Creeley (hence the reference to “projective poetry”), his remarks ask us to consider the ways in which occasional poems can be a way of opening the eyes of both writer and reader to the essentially passive and Zen-like revelation that “[t]o allow the world to change, and to learn change from it, to permit it strangers, accepting its own strangeness, are conditions of knowing it now,” as the philosopher Stanley Cavell has put it in *Senses of Walden* (119).

Cavell is talking about Thoreau’s *Walden*, but oddly enough his words also provide an excellent description of the kind of openness to change and strangers that city life—particularly New York life—demands of its inhabitants. In his poem “An Urban Convalescence,” James Merrill laments that “in New York, everything is torn down/Before you have had time to care for it.” Later in the poem, Merrill attributes such a process to “the sickness of our time.” O’Hara and Schuyler also spend their energies charting the shifting landscape and juxtapositions of the city, but they don’t moralize about it. O’Hara usually takes geographical confusion and transformation in stride, as in “A Step Away from Them”: “And one has eaten and one walks, past the magazines with nudes/ and the posters for BULLFIGHT and/which they’ll soon tear down. I/used to think they had the Armory/Show there” (257). As these lines suggest, O’Hara’s New York is made up of a conglomeration of shifting conditions: the needs and activities of one’s own body (i.e. eating and walking); ongoing or serial simulacra (as in the nudie magazines); the appearance and disappearance of events and their signs (the posters for BULLFIGHT and their impending disappearance); and a network of personal misunderstandings and fantasies about the essentially unknowable dimensions of urban space (“I/ used to think they had the Armory/Show there”). In his great poem

“Dining Out with Doug and Frank,” Schuyler also muses on the juxtaposition of the old and the new that characterizes the New York City landscape:

When they tore down
the Singer building,
and when I saw the Bogardus building
rusty and coming unstitched in
a battlefield of rubble I deliberately
withdrew my emotional investments
in loving old New York. Except you
can't. I really like
dining out and last night was
especially fine. (250)

Schuyler here performs the inevitable emotional vacillations that accompany living in a city with both more architectural history and, perhaps, more commitment to rapid change than many other cities in the United States. Yet he doesn't dwell on the issue too long—instead he moves quickly into the affirmation: “I really like/dining out and last night was/especially fine.” (“Like” is also an important Stein word, as in the concluding lines of *Everybody's Autobiography*: “And I like being in London and I like having a ballet in London and I like everything they did to the ballet in London and I like the way they liked the ballet in London . . . anyway I like what I have and now it is today.”) The next few lines of Schuyler's poem return to the poignant problem of withdrawing and/or continuing one's emotional investments, but this time in people: “A full moon/ when we parted hung over/Frank and me. Why is this poem/so long? And full of death?/Frank and Doug are young and/beautiful and have nothing/to do with that.” But Frank and Doug are mortal, and thus as the poem ages, they will eventually have something to do with that. Schuyler himself died in 1991—a decade before September 11th—but the subtle connection he makes here between investing emotionally in buildings and in people

takes on a particularly moving resonance in the context of the loss of the Twin Towers, and so many of the people in them.

Taken together, O'Hara's sentiment, "I am foolish enough always to find [joy] in wind," and Schuyler's appreciation of "[t]his beauty (. . .) just able still to swiftly flow/it goes, it goes," speak to Emerson's observations: "Gladly we would anchor, but the anchorage is quicksand . . . Our love of the real draws us to permanence, but health of the body consists in circulation, and sanity of mind in variety or facility of association. We need change of objects. Dedication to one thought is quickly odious" (272). Some think this commitment to rapid juxtaposition gets tiresome in New York School poetry; some see such restlessness as the *sine qua non* of modernity and/or late capitalism. Then there are those who, in Ward's estimation, counter such charges with a glaze of keywords such as "openness, hybridity, decenteredness, or what have you." "This might be more bearable," Ward writes, "if the keywords that accompany the current debate . . . ever catalysed real changes for the better" (193). Clearly keywords of any kind can become empty and annoying, but I wonder why Ward forecloses the possibility that these terms might sometimes signify "real changes for the better." I'm not prepared to argue for the absolute value of hybridity, but I agree with Homi Bhaba that it beats the fantasy of "a pure, 'ethnically-cleansed' national identity" which "can only be achieved through the death, literal and figurative, of the complex interweavings of history" (1334). Speaking more locally, in a city like New York, a certain openness to strangers, accident, and heterogeneity is something of a prerequisite to the dance of daily life. As Jane Jacobs argues in her landmark book on urban planning, *The Death and Life of Great American Cities* (1961), the vitality and safety of modern cities often depend precisely on the keywords that Ward challenges above. "The ubiquitous principle [of this book]," Jacobs writes, "is

the need of cities for a most intricate and close-grained diversity of uses that give each other constant mutual support, both economically and socially” (14).³³

Post September 11th, it has become difficult to talk about these aspects of New York City for a variety of reasons. Many have grown understandably weary of the claim that New York is “the greatest city in the world in the greatest country in the world.” This claim sounds especially arrogant in the aftermath of an enormously controversial war in Iraq and swelling anti-American sentiment all over the world. And yet it also seems wrong to abandon the discussion as inherently self-absorbed and jingoistic—especially as such an abandonment ends up taking the very specificity of New York City for granted. Writing recently from Paris, where she has lived for the past several years, Notley remembers the character of her life in New York as follows:

The fact is that to live in New York is to be involved with the outer or communal life of the city in all its detail, to be in the face of everyone else looking at you (but giving you license to be eccentric), particular people doing particular things, amid detail of objects, architecture, weather. Everyone is interested in everything; stoop society (in which we participated wholeheartedly at 101 St. Mark’s) is a structure of observation, criticism, and solidarity. The ephemeral, the insouciant, the occasional, the contingent—all of that is outside in New York as well as inside. When I first went to New York to go to Barnard College, I was entranced by this aspect of the city and felt instantly at home. I know no other city like it—it is such a force as itself. It is always bigger than one, which is why one has to say I there. And it is a city of humor, sympathy, and very personalized encounters including aggressive ones. This all seems to me to be part of the School. (Email interview, 2/4/02).

Indeed, I know of no better way to describe O’Hara’s poetry than as “a structure of observation, criticism, and solidarity,” as is evident in the muted curiosity (and not-so-muted desire) in “A Step Away from Them”: “First, down the sidewalk/where laborers feed their dirty/glistening torsos sandwiches/and Coca-Cola, with yellow helmets/on. They protect them from falling/ bricks, I guess” (257). And Schuyler’s poetry certainly

speaks to Notley's observation that "the ephemeral, the insouciant, the occasional, the contingent—all of that is outside in New York as well as inside." Schuyler—who was sometimes not physically or psychologically able to wander the streets, and wrote often from his room at the Chelsea Hotel—customarily marries the interior with the exterior, as in his poem "Moon": "Still, I'm sorry/now I didn't go out/to see it (the lunar/eclipse) last night,/when I lay abed instead/and watched *The Jeffersons*, a very/funny show, I think. /And now the sun shines/down in silent brightness,/on me and my possessions,/which I have named,/New York" (321). Schuyler here names his possessions "New York," but a broader reading would include the "me" in there too. It's an intriguing move, as it figures Schuyler's body (which we've just had the pleasure of picturing lying in bed, watching *The Jeffersons*) at one with the city itself, not as metaphor for it.³⁴

Another reason why one might want to pay attention to the specific aspects of New York City life that Notley describes above is that they are subject to change—and not always for the better. Nowhere was this issue more acute than in Greenwich Village at mid-century. For at the same time that the first-generation New York School poets were hanging out in the Village, an enormous drama was playing out between highway-obsessed urban planners—Robert Moses, namely—and Village residents, who were engaged in a bitter struggle to protect their streets from "the attrition of automobiles," as Jacobs, their principal advocate, termed it. Indeed, if Jacobs and her fellow activists had not prevailed, an enormous freeway would run through the heart of the West Village today. Though Jacobs wrote *The Death and Life of Great American Cities* as "an attack on current city planning and rebuilding . . . [and] an attempt to introduce new principles of city planning and rebuilding" (3), when read in the present context, many passages sound

like prose manifestos for much New York School poetry. At times Jacobs herself makes explicit the potential link between city dynamics and aesthetic design:

[The city] is a complex order. Its essence is intricacy of sidewalk use, bringing a constant succession of eyes. This order is all composed of movements and change, and although it is life, not art, we may fancifully call it the art form of the city and liken it to dance—not to a simple-minded precision dance with everyone kicking up at the same time, twirling in unison and bowing off en masse, but to an intricate ballet in which the individual dancers and ensembles all have distinctive parts which miraculously reinforce each other and compose an orderly whole. The ballet of the good city sidewalk never repeats itself from place to place, and in any one place is always replete with new improvisations. (50)

As this passage suggests, Jacobs admired and fought for precisely the same attributes of New York City life that Notley names above as “part of the School”: the importance of the human encounter, of the casual surveillance and solidarity of “stoop culture,” and of the tangled, improvisatory mesh of “particular people doing particular things.”³⁵ Though Jacobs’ main focus lies in the workings of public space and social interactions, she also theorizes on the nature of privacy in city life. She articulates the peculiar way in which most city-dwellers maintain a certain privacy in public, thus forming a kind of “web of public respect and trust” that notably “*implies no private commitments*” (56). “Nobody can keep open house in a great city,” she writes. “Nobody wants to . . . Cities are full of people with whom, from your viewpoint, or mine, or any other individual’s, a certain degree of contact is useful or enjoyable; but you do not want them in your hair. And they do not want you in theirs, either” (56). This dynamic may also aid in understanding the differences between “Personism” and a more confessional idiom. As Vendler once observed about O’Hara’s poetry, it presents “a version of public poetry which does not abolish the private” (191).³⁶ Further, the notion of an urban trust that entails no “private commitments” also plays into the New York School vacillation between “caring” and “not caring.” At a 1988 panel on the New York School at the Poetry Project, John Yau

made precisely this point—he pointed out that the chaos of the city itself makes it impossible to “care” about what’s going on everywhere at all times, and that New York School poetry necessarily reflects the competing demands on one’s attention (and perhaps, on one’s conscience).³⁷

I suspect that this unique phenomenon—manifest in the play with the writing body, the body of the city, and the complications of personal address—is partly what has held the interest of Language writers such as Charles Bernstein in New York aesthetics. In his essay “Stray Straws and Straw Men,” Bernstein considers the terms of O’Hara’s “Personism”: “Note that O’Hara’s word ‘personism’ is not ‘personalism’: it acknowledges the work to be a *fronting* of another person—another mind, if you will. O’Hara’s work proposes a domain of the personal, & not simply assuming it, fully works it out” (42). I agree that O’Hara’s first-person voice (or Schuyler’s, for that matter) is not “natural and direct” in a simplistic way, and I don’t wish to undo the important work that Perloff and others have done on O’Hara—work that has struggled for the past thirty years or so to get us to understand that “those ‘streamers of crepe paper fluttering before an electric fan,’ as [Marius] Bewley called [O’Hara’s poems], are actually the most intricate of language games” (Perloff, *FOH*, xxviii). But as I don’t share Bernstein’s anxiety about what he calls “personalism”—presumably, the deeply-personal lyric voice that makes an urgent and intimate demand on the reader’s attention—and as I see no conflict between an intensely-personal poetry and intricate language games—I admit I’m tempted to push in the opposite direction.³⁸

For many advocates of New York School writing champion the fact that it tends to be “autobiographical” while avoiding the “confessional,” as if the latter should be

avoided like the plague, or as if the borders between the two were ever clear-cut. There are important and interesting distinctions to be made here, but I think it a mistake to police their borders too vigorously. I have sympathy for the Marxist critique of bourgeois individualism associated with the confessional scenario, and I understand Bernstein's distaste for "the cant of 'make it personal' poetry" that has at least one root in New York School writing. But insofar as these tenets evidence the same allergy to the personal that has plagued literary criticism from (at least) Eliot's famed doctrine of impersonality to the intense, sexualized backlash against Plath and Sexton, for example, I find that I must regard them, too, with a certain degree of skepticism. For in art as in life, the concept of the "personal" has been simultaneously gendered as female and used as a pejorative. It takes a certain amount of guts to reclaim this scenario, as Myles does when she says in *Narrativity*: "Let's face it, [the first-generation New York School writers] were just as New Critical as everyone else in the fifties. They would all assert that the poetry was not about them . . . My dirty secret has always been that it's of course all about me."

Perhaps the point is simply that there are infinite number of moods and uses of the personal in poetry, just as there exist a multitude of kinds of "privacy," as Nelson's study of Cold War poetry takes pains to illustrate. Further, while psychologists have traditionally treated "male identity as forged in relation the world and female identity as awakened in a relationship of intimacy with another person," as Carol Gilligan has summarized it (*In a Different Voice*, 13), O'Hara's "Personism" charts a different course—one in which intimacy precedes identity. In "Personism," intimate relation with another person becomes the condition of possibility for a statement of relationship between poet and culture. Consequently, this statement of relationship is not the same thing as a "fronting," especially as the latter implies "meeting in opposition," or "serving as a front

[i.e., a facade] for” (*AHD*, 536)—terms which resurrect both a spirit of confrontation and/or the ghost of a New Critical interest in masks.

For the statement of relationship between poet and culture that O’Hara’s poetry proposes is, I think, as personal as it gets. Of course, it all depends on what one means by “personal”—and here I’m using it to signify exactly the opposite of what Hejinian means when she says, “[p]oetics is not personal. A poetics gets formed in and as a relationship to the world.” In an essay that discusses Plath, Creeley, and O’Hara, Charles Altieri has argued that what conjoins the poetics of these three distinct writers is the fact that “their poems are not the development of symbols interpreting life, but the actual enactment of imaginative energies devoted to fleshing out particular life situations” (*Scene*, 362). I see this dedication to “particular life situations” as quite personal, and part and parcel of the sort of radical contingency that leads O’Hara to worry in “A Letter to Bunny”: “When anyone reads this but you it begins/to be lost,” or that sustains the humorous tension Creeley has described as the “Was that a real poem or did you just make it up yourself?” problem.³⁹ It is also central to the role that “coterie” has played in New York School writing, and its habit of naming particular people, places, and occasions. Such a habit can be understood in many ways—as constitutive of a queer family; as a reaction to poetry that prefers the royal “we” to the more local “I” or “you”; as a full-fledged crush on contingency; as campy self-absorption; and on. It can also be understood as a performance of “anxious care” about the present moment—perhaps a staging of caring for “life” over “art.”

In a statement for the Paterson society, O’Hara once wrote, “it’s a pretty depressing day, you must admit, when you feel you relate more to poetry than to life” (*CP*, 511). (A line from a Schuyler villanelle—“Art is brief; life and friendship, long”—

contains a related sentiment.) In considering this statement by O'Hara, Vendler writes: "O'Hara refused to take his poems, I would guess, as seriously as he took life. . . . The greatest poets would have found that antithesis unthinkable, and it works to the harm of O'Hara's poetry that he thinks poetry is *not* life" (184). But I think it possible that Vendler is taking O'Hara too literally. For O'Hara's stance can also be seen as an example of how one might remain dedicated to poetry without fetishizing linguistic inquiry at the expense of other ways of knowing—an occupational hazard for poets and literary theorists alike, or so it would seem. This stance is another crucial legacy of the New York School. For example, though Notley takes the "spiritual task" of poetry extremely seriously, as we shall see, and though her methods of composition could in some ways not be more different from O'Hara's "playing the typewriter," the influence of O'Hara's above attitude remains audible in her comment: "Writing poems gets done in a strangely isolated nontemporal space as all poets know, but I'm not really trying to claim anything 'special' for the poet. I think anything we do could be like this; but poetry is especially meditative" (Foster, 87).

Further, if we return O'Hara's statement to its original context, its complexity becomes clearer. Here is his complete thought: "(it's a pretty depressing day, you must admit, when you feel you relate more to poetry than to life), and as such may perhaps have more general application to my poetry since I have been more often depressed than happy, as far as I can tally it up" (511). This tally not only might come as a surprise to those who think of O'Hara as the bard of happiness; it may also suggest that he spent more days relating to "poetry" than to "life"—testimony that complicates Vendler's criticism. "Life" has become a politicized and confused term as of-late, as epitomized, perhaps, by the neologism "pro-life." (Something very strange is afoot when a

politician's statement that he [and sometimes she] stands for "the sanctity of all life" is immediately understood as a position on the fate of stem cells, fetuses, and women's reproductive rights.) Then there's the age-old opposition of "real life" to "art," "imagination," or "academia"—the "life of the mind" vs. the "realer," more prole life of the body. The New York School poets certainly contributed to this fetishization of "real life," with their famed anti-academic stance (hence the joke of the "School" in their moniker) and with poem-titles such as Schuyler's "Hymn to Life."⁴⁰ It's worth remembering, however, that "life" and "art" are just words, and that one's sense of their independence or interdependence is essentially mutable—both over a lifetime and from moment to moment. This mutability is, in fact, the main point of O'Hara's statement for the Paterson society: he posits that an artist's statement or manifesto is nothing but "a diary of a particular day" (511).⁴¹ O'Hara's tone is casual, but his insistence that mood trumps dogma is profound. "Our moods do not believe in each other," Emerson wrote in "Circles," and O'Hara seems to second that emotion.

The pose of caring more for "life" than "art" can also be seen as a means of replacing a Kantian aesthetic of disinterestedness with an ethos of strong libidinal investments. In reference to the painter Larry Rivers, O'Hara once wrote: "What his work has always had to say to me, I guess, is to be more keenly interested while I'm still alive. And perhaps this is the most important thing that art can say" (*CP*, 515). For O'Hara, this "keen interest" carries a strong erotic charge. We might then wonder, along with O'Hara, what is the relationship between this "keen interest" and happiness? At what point does a jubilant or defiant "not caring" slip into indifference or depression? "[I]t used to be that I could only write when I was miserable; now I can only write when I'm happy. Where will it end?" O'Hara says in his Paterson statement. O'Hara returns to

the question in a letter to Mike Goldberg, in which he reports that he isn't happy, but then adds: "that is not a complaint, since I have long given up the idea of being happy for the idea of being active, or engagé, or whatever it is the French tell us we ought to be and Walt Whitman seems to back up" (LeSueur, 291). Here "keen interest" trumps disinterest and happiness alike. Yet the poems of O'Hara, Schuyler, and Ashbery consistently remind us how a commitment to being "engagé" brings with it many shadows—shadows of indolence, indifference, impossibility, futility, impotence, and in Schuyler's case, convalescence. "In placing this particular thought/I am taking up the cudgel against indifference," O'Hara writes in "Fond Sonore" (384), lightly cluing the reader into the struggle at hand. Whereas O'Hara often dramatizes this struggle, Schuyler and Ashbery customarily let their poems slip into "not caring" with less of a fight—Schuyler with a languid sigh ("Give my love to, oh, anybody [256]), Ashbery with mischievous flourish ("I have forgotten the sense of it or what the small/role of the central poem made me want to feel. No matter [FC, 3]). Whether engagé or exhausted, the poetry replaces the drama of "caring" about Poetry and/or literary accomplishment with the drama of "caring" or "not caring" for the moment at hand—a shift that grants the poetry much of its euphoria, melancholy, and freedom.

In my introduction, I note the allure that this vacillation has had for women writing in its wake, while also pointing out that the stakes of caring/not caring about literary stature differ significantly for women as compared to gay and straight men. The word "care" is itself rich with feminized associations: caring for others, especially as a mother or nurse; investing too much in what other people think; fretting over one's career instead of resting confidently in one's genius; attending obsessively to details; exercising caution; suffering from anxiety, depression, or excessive worrying; having

ensnaring desires or attachments; and so on (*AHD*, 240). The psychologist Carol Gilligan has even set forth an entire system of ethics based on granting primacy and value to a feminized notion of “caring.” Women traditionally struggle with a much greater psychological (and sometimes physical) burden to care for others—be they infants or otherwise—often at the expense of their own pursuits. Their struggle to place “art” before “life” can be intense and even bitter—as Andrea Dworkin recently described it in a piece entitled “Writing”: “In learning to write, I had to develop a sense that writing was more important than anything else—no person or conflict or tragedy except dying and death could get in the way. I had to break in myself all the habits associated with taking care of or feeling responsible for others” (35). (Compare this conviction, for example, to the gendered exchange between Elizabeth Bishop and Robert Lowell that transpired over the publication of Lowell’s collection *The Dolphin*, which included anguished letters written by Elizabeth Hardwick at the time of her and Lowell’s divorce. “*Art isn’t worth that much*,” Bishop famously wrote to Lowell, in a stinging rebuke to care more for the art than the person.) Nor are women culturally encouraged or rewarded for exhibiting the kind of confidence—much less arrogance—that brazenly assumes that their work really *matters* in the scheme of things, that it can or will transform or even factor into the ongoing narratives of art or literary history. When women exhibit this confidence or arrogance—as did Stein, in spades—the spectacle often courts a certain perversity. It is, as Myles will later say, a sort of fool’s journey.

Elsewhere Myles explains that she never had “the same desire to gain approval from men,” because as a working-class lesbian, “[she] knew [she] wasn’t going to get in anyhow.” “I could only be a tourist,” she says (Foster, 59). Class is important here, along with gender and sexuality. Myles has often been called “the last of the New York School

of poets,” but there’s a certain irony in the fact that this “last of the School” grew up as a “townie” in Cambridge just a few years after O’Hara, Ashbery, Koch, Creeley, and others graduated from Harvard. (Earlier in the interview, in discussing the influence of the men of the New York School, Myles makes a telling comparison: “New York School mimed is worse than academic, it’s like my dad being a mailman coming home with the Ivy League clothes from the Harvard dorms where he had his route.”) Though neither Ashbery, Schuyler, nor O’Hara came from a particularly illustrious or wealthy background, an undeniably large part of their particular camp aesthetic has to do with a certain kind of class fluency—with understanding upper-crust taste well enough to be able to combine it with concerns of the more ordinary consumer. (The humor of *A Nest of Ninnies*, for example, is predicated on the above mixture: “ ‘ Work doesn’t get done, a new voice said, ‘one abandons it.’ This version of Valéry’s dictum was spoken by Fabia, who had just entered the office arm in arm with Alice. ‘Why, we were just talking about you,’ Betty gasped. ‘Yes,’ Marshall said, closing the catalogue after a lingering look at a suit of thermal underwear” [134].)⁴² The poet Paul Blackburn called the first-generation of the New York School poets the “MOMA/Edge of Big Money school”; Ted Berrigan once described them (without rancor) as “sophisticated sons-of-bitches, all these Harvard-educated poets who knew very well very talented painters” (Kane, 41, 159). Seen in the light of these apparent contradictions—Harvard grads railing against the academy; bohemian poets with a taste for bourgeois pleasures; art world insiders who presumably represent an avant-garde; outsider poets who eventually win Pulitzer Prizes; a group of openly gay men in the middle of a straight man’s world, not to mention an incredibly macho painting movement; and so on—the tension between caring and not caring in their work begins to emerge as a natural and inextricable part of the “School.”

Recently I asked Notley what it was like to live in New York as a young poet in the shadow of the men discussed in this chapter—not to mention as the wife of their chief acolyte, Ted Berrigan—at the same time that anthologies such as *An Anthology of New York Poets* had already begun establishing a patrilineal (and much straighter) image of the New York School. She replied: “I was just coming of age when the Padgett-Shapiro anthology came out: I had barely written anything at that moment (I had to develop quickly). What I thought was something like: there’s all this space to be filled. Then a little bit later, when I was suddenly a mother writing, I thought: why isn’t there anything there to help me? And further: there’s all this space to be filled” (Email interview, 2/4/02). One can almost hear in the rhythm of her comment (there’s all this space—why isn’t there anything here to help me?—there’s all this space) an echo of Beckett’s “I can’t go on I will go on” mantra, but with a feminist twist. Her image of “space to be filled” is also intriguing—it evokes Joan Mitchell and her enormous canvasses, and/or Stein’s drive toward epic literary ventures, in yet another torsion of the age-old fantasy of the page or canvas as a white, virgin space to be marked or penetrated by the phallic pen or brush. Unlike Olson’s “field composition”—with “field” connoting a finite domain or battlefield—“space” sounds, well, *spacier*—more capacious, more disorienting, more blatantly alien or “other.” Indeed, empty space can grant both tremendous permission and tremendous alienation.⁴³ Notley recently described this predicament as follows:

If you are a woman, no one cares about you, who you are or what you think. You are a perfect observer, you are almost a voyeur. Unfortunately you are finally a part of it all, and at a certain age you are struck quite forcibly by what you have been denied: a voice in politics, for example; or a voice in the dominant literary conversation of your lifetime. Then you don’t want to be anonymous anymore; you are older and you have done all this work, you want it published, you want your voice to be as important as a man’s. (Email interview, 2/4/02)

In her epistolary book *The Desires of Mothers to Please Others in Letters*, Mayer proposes that “women can still wind up writing some unheard of things don’t you think, I mean things that have never been written yet” (19). But note how the boldness of her thought is characteristically qualified by the relational, slightly insecure tag “don’t you think” sandwiched in between her propositions. Indeed, how does one proceed—or can one—without the subterranean, cocky assurance that Perloff locates in O’Hara, that perhaps “he knew, all along, that we would indeed be looking”? The remainder of this study keeps this question in mind as it considers the distinct, ambitious, and provocative poetic experiments undertaken by Mayer, Notley, and Myles over the past three decades.

¹ See Joe LeSueur, *Digressions on Some Poems by Frank O'Hara* (NY: Farrar, Straus, and Giroux, 2003). I don't mean to suggest here that the studies done by Shoptaw and Gooch are unimpeachable, just that their focus sends up a certain red flag for some. Certainly the reasons for discontent with both works are quite varied—for example, LeSueur himself calls Gooch's biography a "cold, deadly account of Frank's life" (291); anyone hostile to dense, theoretical criticism probably won't like Shoptaw's study, etc.

² Giorno, like other artists who made a point of being "in-your-face-gay" during the period, remains "appalled" by Ashbery's closetedness: "he's always been a fag, in your face. It only goes to show how professional he was about his career. It only goes to show how things were at ArtForum and all those publications, because if you ever mentioned anyone was gay, you'd risk being excommunicated." See Giorno's interview with Daniel Nester in *Nerve*.

As if in testament to the fact that literary history is as subjective as any other narrative, however, LeSueur offers a very different take on the scene: "Frank did hang out with some pretty big names: de Kooning, Kline, and Guston come to mind. All of them fairly macho, I suppose, but they accepted Frank as one of them, even invited him to become a member of The Club. So far as I know, only Jackson Pollock, probably the least secure and most conflicted of all the downtown painters, expressed hostility toward gays: 'a couple of faggots' he was said to have grouched when Frank and Larry Rivers, at the height of their affair in 1954, turned up at the Cedar together—which, come to think of it, was about the time John Myers carried on about their appearance together one night on the staircase of City Center, at a New York City Ballet performance. 'There they were,' he simpered, in his usual excessive fashion, 'like Rimbaud and Verlaine, covered with blood and semen!'" (166)

³ Quoted in Lehman, p. 12. Schuyler is here referring to submissions to the magazine *Locus Solus*.

⁴ There may exist some biographical reasons for this dynamic, for in contrast to the New York School writers, many of the queer or bisexual Beat poets—including Bowles, Burroughs, Kerouac, and Neal Cassady—married and/or fathered children at some point. Given the competing impulses behind these marriages and/or families—some of which had to do with sexual preference, others of which had to do with the difficulties of balancing bohemian restlessness with the responsibilities of domestic life—many of these situations were quite tortured, especially for the women who were often left behind with children. For more on this issue, see the "Muses" section of *Women of the Beat Generation: The Writers, Artists and Muses at the Heart of a Revolution*, ed. by Brenda Knight. In this context, Corso's heckling of O'Hara—that O'Hara had it easy because he was queer, and would make a better father than Corso would—may take on a tad more pathos. For the gay New York School writers generally avoided these dilemmas—as LeSueur explains, "Like so many gays, we were young for our age, thus slightly giddy and sometimes heedless; we had no responsibilities beyond making enough money to pay the

rent, buy food and booze, and go to the movies and the ballet as much as possible.” (68-69)

⁵ See Rose’s discussion of such in *The Haunting of Sylvia Plath*, p. 150-164. Rose here discusses all three of these thinkers and their effect on the Plath/Hughes saga.

⁶ There are crabbier ways to describe this dynamic—you could say the women were beards, or that the friendships were simply prototypes of the fag hag/queen dyad. John Simon, for example, explains the entourage that surrounded Bunny Lang as follows: “Bunny Lang was a fag hag. She was an exaggerated, overdone parody of femininity who cultivated around her a retinue of homosexual men who liked her for her outrageousness and outspokenness” (Gooch, 148). There may be some truth in Simon’s account, but I don’t share his distaste for Lang’s “parody of femininity.” We might also recall that at the time, it was not uncommon for straight women with many gay male friends to be psychoanalyzed for the problem, as was the case with Mitchell; Grace Hartigan was allegedly encouraged by her therapist to give up her friendships with O’Hara and others for this very reason, which, in fact, she did. It requires a certain resistance to mainstream literary and art history narratives to remember that women (like Lang, Guest, Mitchell, etc.) were integral parts of the scene because they were working writers and/or artists, not simply parodies, accessories or attractions. As for the latter characterization, LeSueur himself takes credit for coining the term “art tart” to describe the “abject, sycophantic females who hung out at the Cedar” (161). I don’t want to take his term too seriously, as LeSueur enjoyably mocks people of all stripes in his memoir—but “abject” is a pretty intense adjective. And though he is being dismissive, my interest is sparked: Who were these art tarts, anyway?

⁷ Feminist readers will recognize this as a classic patriarchal move—asserting dominance over the mother and/or the maternal function (as in worship of God the Father and the fantasy of Immaculate Conception), but then expressing a generalized sorrow, confusion, mourning, or amorphous existential despair over the vanquishing. As far as the particular sagas of identification and disavowal performed by Wordsworth, Breton, and Hulme, I’m thinking of Wordsworth’s envious yet distancing admiration for the “simplicity” of his wife, Mary, who [by his estimation], “welcomed what was given, and craved no more;/Whate’er the scene presented to her view,/That was the best”; André Bretón’s glorification of the figure of Nadja, whose blurring of art and life he first exalts as “the extreme limit of the surrealist aspiration,” but later rejects as madness—a madness which disgusts him because it lacks “that minimal common sense which permits my friends and myself, for instance, to *stand up* when a flag goes past”; and Imagist doctrine as laid out by T. E. Hulme, who went to great lengths to promote a poetics dedicated to “fancy” and sublunar detail that was simultaneously “all dry and hard,” i.e. purged of Romantic slither—slither that he, Pound, and Eliot all connected [implicitly, and, at times, explicitly] with the polluting influence of both Jews and women. (See Hulme’s 1911-1912 essay “Romanticism and Classicism” for an elaboration of this last rhetoric—especially in its opening paragraphs, in which he aligns his literary vision with the political actions of the anti-Semitic group L’Action Francaise. For the others, see Wordsworth, *The*

Prelude, XII. 154-64 and Breton's *Nadja*, trans Richard Howard, NY: Grove, 1960, p. 74, 143.)

⁸ Johnson's essay goes on to examine this legacy in Keats and Mallarmé, and ends with a discussion of the film *The Piano* by Jane Campion. She concludes with the following important insight: "It is in this male two-step—the axe wielder plus the manipulative sufferer—*both* of whom see themselves as powerless, that patriarchal power lies . . . If feminism is so hotly resisted, it is perhaps less because it substitutes women's speech for women's silence than because, in doing so, it interferes with the official structures of self-pity that keep patriarchal power in place, and, in the process, tells the truth behind the beauty of muteness envy" (153).

⁹ See Butler's essay, "Gender is Burning," in *Bodies that Matter*, p. 127. Here Butler is discussing bell hooks' review of the movie *Paris is Burning*, in which hooks criticizes some gay male drag as misogynist.

¹⁰ For the debate, see, for example, Butler's "Gender is Burning" in *Bodies*, and also Eve Sedgwick's chapter "How To Bring Your Kids Up Gay" in *Tendencies*, in which Sedgwick persuasively argues for the interruption of "a long tradition of viewing gender and sexuality as continuous and collapsible categories—a tradition of assuming that anyone, male or female, who desires a man must by definition be feminine; and that anyone, male or female, who desires a woman must be by the same token masculine" (157).

¹¹ It could be argued that O'Hara's queerness is precisely what makes the difference (after all, Riding and Graves, like Hughes and Plath, were a married couple), but even if that's the case, there is much to learn from his example—certainly gay men and straight women are not the only ones capable of reconfiguring the relationship between male artist and female muse that DuPlessis deplors. For there are other notable gay male poets, such as James Merrill, who often participate in the kind of ideology DuPlessis is talking about, as is evident in Merrill's oft-anthologized poem, "An Urban Convalescence," whose opening lines figure a mechanized crane as filthy and female: "watching a huge crane/Fumble luxuriously in the filth of years./Her jaws dribble rubble. An old man/Laughs and curses in her brain,/Bringing to mind the close of *The White Goddess*." Very seldom in New York School writing does one come across such rote gendering of the urban—or pastoral, for that matter—landscape.

¹² John Ashbery, quoted in the *New York Times*, here reproduced from a review by John D'Agata of *Girls on the Run* in the *Boston Review*, February/March 2000, online at bostonreview.mit.edu/BR24.6/dagata.html.

¹³ See Perloff's article "Normalizing John Ashbery," at the Electronic Poetry Center website out of University of Buffalo—<http://wings.buffalo.edu/epc/authors/perloff/ashbery.html>. In this essay, Perloff considers the "revisioning" of Ashbery in more conservative circles—for example, she notes that Vernon Shetley, in his book *After the Death of Poetry*, mistakenly, and "with some satisfaction," announces that Ashbery did

not even appear in Donald Allen's "antiformalist" anthology, *The New American Poetry*. Perloff points out that Ashbery in fact gets 10 pages of the anthology.

¹⁴ See Schuyler's *Diary*, p. 279. "In the Buffalo Public Library they had [Moore's] Selected Poems, with the introduction by T.S. Eliot, and I used to sit there in my overcoat and read it right through."

¹⁵ The role of their actual mothers in the poetry is a distinct, though fascinating topic, but not one I'm prepared to tackle here: Schuyler's last epic, "A Few Days," meditates on his mother's death throughout, and ends: "Margaret Daisy Connor Schuyler Ridenour,/rest well,/the weary journey done." And though Ashbery insists that *Flow Chart* is not really "about" his mother, the original idea behind it was to write a 100-page book about his late mother over the course of a year, to be started and finished on his birthday. (Shoptaw, 302). O'Hara's relationship with his mother—as is evident in poems such as "To My Mother," which ends, "Have you escaped yet? if you/haven't I hope you've killed someone,/or suicide's grown curious of someone,/or someone's accidentally died"—was more tortured; in a 1963 letter to Larry Rivers he describes her as "bitchy selfish stupid hysterical self-pitying ungrateful ignorant etc." (Gooch, 404).

¹⁶ Schuyler is the only poet of the three to whom it doesn't seem a stretch to apply the adjective "feminist"—partly because he outlived O'Hara, who died before the women's movement (though I imagine O'Hara might have been a natural feminist, as he loved and respected his female friends, and wrote poems with lines such as, "I live above a dyke bar and I'm happy") and partly because Ashbery is so famously shy of anything smacking of politics. In comparison with the disgust with female genitalia as expressed by Spicer and Ginsberg, for example—"The female genital organ is hideous," Spicer writes in "For Joe"; "the hang of pearplum/fat tissue/I had abhorred" is how Ginsberg imagines pussy in "This Form of Life Needs Sex," Schuyler's attitude was quite different, as when he writes in his *Diaries*: "When I woke up I thought I was going to hop out of bed and write an ode to bisexuality, which was quite clear to me, but all that remains is the ending: 'and remember that/cunt is where it's at' " (*Diaries*, 142). Not that one needs to be bisexual or like pussy to be a feminist, but it may help to be able to affirm, at least rhetorically, that "cunt is where it's at."

¹⁷ Lurie's memoir is an indispensable source of information about Lang's short life, and Lurie should be applauded for whatever role she played in getting Lang's work into the public eye. Nonetheless, it seems something of a disservice to preface Lang's work with an opinionated memoir about her life, as it inevitably colors the work that follows. Lurie's piece is nowhere near as stifling as *Familiar Spirits*, her 2001 memoir of James Merrill and David Jackson, but at least that book was published on its own.

¹⁸ See Schor's discussion of Hegel and sublimation in *Detail*, p. 80.

¹⁹ Herring's essay "Frank O'Hara's Open Closet" takes on a similar topic. Herring argues that "personism creates an intimate artistic space through which impersonal identification can occur," a dynamic he relates to that of an "open closet" by which one

manages to be “*open* but not violated,” as the painter Grace Hartigan once said of O’Hara’s poetry (Herring, 416-7).

²⁰ Although Nelson is right that Lowell places himself as a “particular person in a particular place and time,” there still exist potent differences—namely, Lowell often uses this particularity in an attempt to use his biography or body as a microcosm or metaphor for the body politic at large—a gesture also prevalent in Beat writers such as Allen Ginsberg, who famously tells America that he is “putting his queer shoulder to the wheel.” The New York School poets’ use of specificity, on the other hand, seems to be more for the sake of specificity itself. Drawing attention to the importance of speech and/or the speaking body in New York School poetry, Charles Molesworth puts it this way: “Unlike Whitman, O’Hara never sings *of* his self; rather, his self is the instrument *on* which the poet sings.” (See Molesworth’s “‘The Clear Architecture of the Nerves’: The Poetry of Frank O’Hara, in *Frank O’Hara: To Be True to a City*, p. 210.)

²¹ For more on O’Hara and race, see Benjamin Friedlander’s essay, “Strange Fruit: O’Hara, Race, and the Color of Time,” in *The Scene of My Selves*, p. 123-141.

²² Quotation re: Strauss from Timothy Jackson, article at the website for the American Symphony Orchestra, “Dialogues and Extensions,” http://www.americansymphony.org/dialogues_extensions/97/5th_concert/strauss.cfm. The panel I’m referring to was entitled “Poets and Painters,” featuring John Ashbery, Larry Rivers, and Diane Kelder, moderated by Roberta Smith, which took place at the Graduate Center at CUNY, April 22, 2002.

²³ As is evident from my first chapter, Ashbery is not alone in this desire to confuse the divide between idealism and realism. Forget the edifying philosophers—you can find ample elaboration of this conflation in Thoreau, who consistently treats ideas as things capable of taking up physical space: “You want room for your thoughts to get into sailing trim and run a course or two before they make their port. The bullet of your thought must have overcome its lateral and ricochet motion and fallen into its last and steady course before it reaches the ear of the hearer, else it may plough out again through the side of his head.” (See *Walden*, 1708.) William James’s vivid pictures of the mind-in-thought from *Principles of Psychology* are also relevant here: “Annihilate a mind at any instant . . . you will find not the bald word itself in process of utterance, but that word suffused with whole idea.”

Treating ideas as things that can literally suffuse a brain—or more specifically, as actual physical sensations—can be seen as something of an American preoccupation, with both a religious and pragmatist past, with roots in the work of everyone from Jonathan Edwards to John Dewey. Yet although the idea that art should conjoin thought and sensation recurs strongly throughout American aesthetics, I don’t mean to suggest that it is exclusively American in nature. As Hegel theorized, “Art’s peculiar feature, however, consists in its ability to represent in sensuous form even the highest ideas, bringing them thus nearer to the character of natural phenomena, to the senses, and to feeling.” (See “Introduction to the Philosophy of Art,” in *The Critical Tradition*, p. 362). And many poets—Keats immediately comes to mind—have also dedicated themselves

to the “sensuous apprehension of thought”; Keats’ lovely term for such was “ideas on the pulses.”

²⁴ Lisk puts it this way: “Indeed, out of evasions and obscurities Ashbery has ironically created a unique and recognizable voice for himself.” See *Scene*, p. 49.

²⁵ See the copyright page of *Henry Darger: In the Realms of the Unreal*, by John MacGregor (NY: Delano Greenidge Editions, LLC, 2002).

²⁶ As imaginative and “outsiderish” as Darger’s vision may have been, it is also true that the dismemberment, torture, murder, and bodily decay of little girls falls fairly centrally on our psychic and cultural radar screens. Indeed, the nightly News, that most mainstream of forums, is constantly fixated on a dead or missing girl, be it JonBenet Ramsay, Martha Moxley, or, as I write tonight, Elizabeth Smart. Much like the Surrealist excursions into the collective unconscious in the first part of the 20th century, Darger’s vivid fantasies about the bloody slaughter of naked girls (usually via disembowelment or strangulation) make no new discovery, but rather amplify a particular strand of the sexual violence already present in our everyday lives.

²⁷ Interestingly, in his later life, when he became very religious, Darger was particularly bothered by cross-dressing in the church, and wrote a letter to the priests at St. Vincent de Paul about the issue. A priest wrote Darger back to explain that as long as cross-dressing did not lead to the “unnatural sin of sodomy,” it was OK by the Holy Scriptures. (See MacGregor’s account of this exchange on p. 528.) MacGregor also usefully relates this vacillation about cross-dressing to Henry’s childhood experience at the Asylum, where boys were made to dress up like little girls as a form of punishment.

²⁸ Much has been written on the potential relationship between this far-reaching “absorbency” and the American obsession with “manifest destiny” and cultural and/or military imperialism. This debate raged in the 50s in regard to Abstract Expressionist painting, as painters such as Motherwell were becoming famous for the huge scale of their paintings—Motherwell used canvasses so large he needed to attach his brush to a long stick—just as the U.S. was solidifying its rise to Cold War ascendancy. (See Leja’s *Reframing Abstract Expressionism*, for more on the topic.) Interesting as this connection may be—and it hasn’t become dated, for as I write, debate about the voraciousness and violence of U.S. interests has never been more fierce—I am also wary of mapping political policy too crudely onto aesthetic impulses. In regard to New York School poetry, for example, I don’t think that its “aesthetics of monstrous absorbency” is necessarily complicit in any imperialist design. As my study of Mayer makes clear, there are many kinds of prolificacy—like that of female speech and/or bodily functions—many of which can be potentially be quite threatening the so-called “powers that be.”

²⁹ See Lehman: “The association of Ashbery as an aesthetic force with Andy Warhol is to my mind as tendentious an interpretation of Ashbery’s poetry as that which alleges he is secretly a political poet,” (354) and Ward: “To read O’Hara, Ashbery and Schuyler as they deserve, is to open their work to, and see refracted in it, the full retrospect of the

American Renaissance, and of the changing structures of European poetry from Romanticism to the present. To lower one's sights, and in particular to pander to the notion that poetry should be modest and casual, is to block out knowledge of the challenges to which these three poets have at least risen. O'Hara's work takes on more than either the ephemeral 60s 'happenings' or the boxed-in ironies of the Movement with which it is contemporary." (4)

³⁰ I'm talking primarily about the downtown scene around the Poetry Project—clearly there were many other scenes, such as the one around the Black Arts Repertory Theater in Harlem, founded in 1967 by Amiri Baraka. And despite the “all poets welcome” credo of the Poetry Project, certainly the Project has had its dissenters, many of whom argue that it has epitomized and perpetuated precisely the cliquey-ness that characterizes much New York School poetry itself. Charles Bernstein, for example, writes that its “preference for the local (the neighborhood) and the stylistically familiar (tried) has sometimes clouded a larger view of what is happening in the art” (see his endnote in *Out of this World*, p. 621). Others have rightly noted that the Project has never really shed its original image as a haven for educated, white, middle-class, bohemians. “There are still persistent problems [at the Poetry Project], such as the lack of non-white women editing and publishing through the Project . . . this goes for non-white men as well,” says Marcella Durand, who has worked at the Project in various capacities. See Kane, 205.

³¹ Myles, “The Lesbian Poet,” in *School of Fish*, p. 131. Here she's talking about a lineage that includes Stein, Emerson, and Thoreau.

³² See Koestenbaum, in reference to Stein's writing, in “Stein is Nice,” *Cleavage*, p. 314-5.

³³ The one keyword of Ward's that may not initially seem to apply here is “decenteredness,” as in the chapter called “The need for concentration” Jacobs argues that concentration is a key element of successful city planning. But, notably, Jacobs argues that there need to be many centers—just one won't do.

³⁴ Though some might argue that Schuyler is here using a synecdoche, one might also understand this move as essentially metonymic—see the discussion of the New York School and metonymy re: Myles in Chapter Five.

³⁵ Interestingly, Jacobs here prognosticates the very aesthetic of postmodern dance that will become dominant in the Judson Church and other experimental dance venues in downtown NY in the 60s, in the non-dancerly, pedestrian work of Yvonne Rainer, Steve Paxton, Simone Forti and Deborah Hay, for example.

³⁶ This “public poetry which does not abolish the private” is precisely the point of tension upon which Myles situates her poetic performance, as discussed in Chapter Five. It is also the primary subject of Herring's piece on O'Hara, in which he argues that personism is a queer retailoring of “a postwar poetics of impersonality” rather than a rejection of it (426).

³⁷ From “The New York School,” a panel at St. Mark’s Church in 1988, with Charles North, John Yau, Dore Ashton, Tony Towle, and Jane Freilicher, moderated by Anne Waldman (videotape).

³⁸ Incidentally, LeSueur says that O’Hara’s “Personism” was in fact originally called “Personalism,” and that O’Hara changed it after LeSueur told him that a hippie cult in California went by that name.

³⁹ See Creeley, *Tales Out of School*, p. viii. He’s referring to a (priceless) question that someone in an audience once asked John Frederick Nims after a reading.

⁴⁰ Though first-generation New York School poetry is rarely associated with Marxist philosophy—more often it is seen as a symptom or celebration of bourgeois consumerism—one might also note that their poetic production coincided with a tremendous amount of (primarily Continental) theorization about “everyday life” from a Marxist standpoint, a discourse which links everything from Marx and Lenin to the Surrealists to the Frankfurt School to the Situationists to the events in France in May-June 1968.

The French historian and sociologist Henri Lefebvre eloquently summarizes the scope of this discourse in his book *Critique of Everyday Life* (1947, 1958), using terms that echo the New York School fetish for the surface of daily life: “Our search for the human takes us too far, too ‘deep’, we seek it in the clouds or the mysteries, whereas it is waiting for us, besieging us on all sides. We will not find it in myths—although human facts carry with them a long and magnificent procession of legends, tales and songs, poems and dances. All we need to do is simply to open our eyes, to leave the dark world of metaphysics behind and the false depths of the ‘inner life’ behind, and we will discover the immense human wealth that the humblest facts of everyday life contain. ‘The familiar is not necessarily the known,’ said Hegel. Let us go farther and say that it is in the most familiar things that the unknown—not the mysterious—is at its richest, and this rich content of life is still beyond our empty, darkling consciousness, inhabited as it is by imposters, and gorged with the forms of Pure Reason, and myths and their illusory poetry.” (132)

⁴¹ Nietzsche’s comment from *Beyond Good and Evil* that “every great philosophy” has been a “confession on the part of its author and a kind of voluntary or involuntary memoir” is also relevant here.

⁴² *Nest of Ninnies*, p. 134. Schuyler stands a bit apart from his peers in that he didn’t go to Harvard; while O’Hara worked as a curator at the Museum of Modern Art, and Ashbery and Koch ended up with jobs in the academy (Bard and Columbia, respectively), due to a host of physical and mental problems, Schuyler may very well have become someone you stepped over on the sidewalk had it not been for the patronage that installed him in the Chelsea Hotel in his later years (as Myles, who worked as an assistant to Schuyler at the Chelsea, recently put it). Nonetheless, Schuyler’s poetry still concerns itself with the pinnacle of what he calls “East Fifties queen taste,” and his early travels in Europe, where he met and worked for W. H. Auden, most certainly familiarized him with a

brotherhood at the heart of the poetry world (though he later rejected Auden's poetry, explaining, "I would type something of Wynstan's and think, 'Well, if this is poetry, I'm certainly never going to write any myself'" (Lehman, 259).

⁴³ Notley continues to work on the theme of the freedom and/or isolation of empty space, and has recently tethered it to a more explicitly political attitude. In her 2001 interview with Jennifer Dick, she explains: "I am writing something now in which there's a concept called 'negative space,' and there are a lot of dead women in the book—this book is about dead women, actually, though they're not all dead, the dead women, because I'm one of them. But since we have no role in [political] events, particularly now, we withdraw into negative space and take no part in it."

PART TWO

CHAPTER THREE

“What Life Isn’t Daily?”: The Gratuitous Art of Bernadette Mayer

Perhaps more than any of her “second-generation” peers, Bernadette Mayer’s work embodies the legacy of the “open, yeasty, limitlessly permissive” atmosphere of the New York art world at mid-century, along with the Whitman-esque “aesthetics of monstrous absorbency, total inclusion” that Ward worries over in *Statutes of Liberty*. In 1964, Ted Berrigan put forth *The Sonnets*, a lengthy sonnet cycle propelled (as the story goes) by speed, and woven together via collage and repetition; in 1970, Joe Brainard’s *I Remember* appeared—a litany of memories each beginning with the line, “I remember,” which was soon followed in 1972 by *More I Remember*, and then *More I Remember* in 1973, bringing the total number of entries over the 1,000 mark. But Mayer’s self-conscious cultivation of what the *Dictionary of Literary Biography* has called “a startling inclusivity”—an inclusivity that attempts, in a number of different works, “to re-create the innumerable objects, events, memories, and dreams that range into the field of an alert consciousness” (Baker)—may represent the most unapologetic (and, perhaps, the most unmanageable) example of “poetry-by-the-yard” from the period. As Mayer’s friend and fellow poet Clark Coolidge once noted about the work that he and Mayer produced in the 1970s, “We wanted endless works, that would zoom on & on and include everything ultimately, we’d talk about the ‘Everything work’ which would use every possible bit flashing through our minds.”¹ This chapter explores Mayer’s desire for and elaboration of the “Everything work”—most definitely another instance of Sedgwick’s “fat art,” to be placed alongside that of Stein and Mitchell—by focusing on two of Mayer’s time-

structured projects: *Midwinter Day* (written as a piece on December 22, 1978) and *The Desires of Mothers to Please Others in Letters* (written in 1979-80, over the course of a nine-month term—i.e. the time-span of her pregnancy with her third child, Max).

Part of this exploration involves placing these works in their various, interrelated contexts. Yet before doing so, I want to note that Mayer's passion for charting consciousness' excesses has not faltered nor become dated over the years. In a 1997 interview with Lisa Jarnot, for example, Mayer reiterated this interest (adding a technological twist): "I'd like computers to be able to record everything you think and see. To be like the brain, and to write that out . . . And somebody said to me, 'who would read it?' But I'm thinking that I would love to read it. Like if you had all these documents of everybody's experience. It would be amazing" (Jarnot, 9). A recent piece entitled "Dream Tape Transcribed—Hypnagogic Images" (published in the Poetry Project's magazine, *The World*, in 2000) testifies to Mayer's ongoing commitment to transcribing the minutiae of liminal consciousness. In this case, Mayer attempts to detail the many shifting colors in her field of vision—one of the effects of a brain hemorrhage Mayer survived in 1994: "i'll watch these some more, i'm waiting for the really thrilling spots of red & blue that sometimes come, i'll just observe the colors for a while and ript [sic] out the commenting on them & then see what happens" (9).

Despite the debilitating effects of Mayer's hemorrhage—including an extended period of time in which she could neither read nor write—she has continued to treat what most would consider an unthinkable tragedy as yet another opportunity to investigate the workings of the mind. As she told Jarnot:

I've always been interested in the brain and consciousness. I mean it's amazing that I had a cerebral hemorrhage and now I see all these neurologists and am concerned with all these things in a different way. I think it's great actually. I

shouldn't say that. I learned in the hospital that you're not supposed to think a cerebral hemorrhage is interesting in any way. Otherwise you get accused of having a sense of unreality. One nurse actually said to me, "You don't realize what happened to you." (8)

Indeed, an abiding feature of Mayer's work is its relentless ability to remain interested where others' attention drops off, and a refusal to be sated by the demarcations of "reality" as defined by others. Though Mayer's sensibility is not really Pop—her penchant for scientized scrutiny of feeling differs from a Warholian focus on emotional vacancy, and one of her primary topics is love—one of the many aesthetic inclinations she shares with Warhol is an aversion to any humanist pabulum that mandates that one "feel the way others feel," as opposed to exploring less culturally-endorsed realms of perception and sensation. Furthermore, though in general I would caution against proposing any unproblematic relationship between a writer's work and bodily health, here it seems almost unavoidable, and potentially appropriate, to follow Mayer's lead in finding her cerebral hemorrhage quite interesting—especially as *hemorrhage* means a "copious discharge of blood from the blood vessels," i.e. the very actualization of Plath's mantra of disruptive (female) excess: "The blood jet is poetry,/ There is no stopping it." (Rosset's earlier line on Mitchell may also come to mind here: "There was no stopping it . . . In a society that didn't allow abstract painting she would have gone to jail.")

Plath's mantra takes on a whole different meaning when placed in the context of the so-called mimeograph revolution of the 1960s and 70s—a revolution spurred along by the developing technology of photomechanical reproduction, which suddenly allowed for the cheap dissemination of poetry publications of all kinds, including magazines such as *Floating Bear*, *Kulchur*, *C*, *Yugen*, *Fuck You: A Magazine of the Arts*, *Angel Hair*, *Adventures in Poetry*, *Telephone*, and many others. As Gooch notes in his O'Hara biography, "No

phenomenon separated the sixties more distinctly from the fifties among poets than the appearance seemingly overnight of this paper river of magazines, broadsides, mimeos, and poetry chapbooks” (138). In his study, Kane points out that this “paper river”—which coincided with other new technologies, such as the tape recorder—had much to do with the idealization of speed, immediacy, and improvisation that one finds in so much “alternative” poetry of the period (Kane, 168-172). In the downtown scene swirling around the Poetry Project at St. Marks’ Church, Mayer’s work as a poet, editor, performer, and teacher was pivotal to the development of this aesthetic. Kane also notes that the reading lists for Mayer’s classes—which often included Wittgenstein, Whitehead, and Barthes alongside the *Curious George* books and prepubescent classics such as Paula Danzinger’s *The Cat Ate My Gymsuit*—introduced a more theoretical, more ambitious element into a scene known for its distaste for anything too serious or academic, while also continuing the project of fusing high and low culture (188). Further, Mayer’s experiments with collaborative, performative writing—often enacted in her workshops, and then recorded in the anonymously-authored magazine *Unnatural Acts*—explicitly set out to unnerve the idea of monolithic author or text. Mayer also became known for her “Experiments” list—an evolving, Oulipo-esque catalogue of potential writing adventures, including directives such as “experiment with theft and plagiarism,” “write a soothing novel in twelve short paragraphs,” “write the longest most beautiful sentence you can imagine,” and “attempt as a write to win the Nobel Peace Prize in Science by finding out how thought becomes language, or does not.” “Experiments” continues to be an influential document—indeed, the Poetry Project maintains a current version on its website—not to mention a useful tool for many writers, students, and teachers.²

As one might gather from the above tactics, critics have often aligned Mayer's work with Language writing rather than with the New York School *per se*. (Vickery's inclusion of Mayer in *Leaving Lines of Gender: A Feminist Genealogy of Language Writing*, along with the title of Kane's chapter, "Bernadette Mayer and 'Language' at the Poetry Project," suggest something of the same.) But as both Kane and Vickery have noted, Mayer's career agitates against delimitations. Not only has she experimented in a wide array of genres, including sonnet sequences, translations of Catullus, epigrams, collaborations, experimental narratives, blueprints for a utopia, and guides to science writing, but throughout all these projects she maintains "a rather tough balancing act" that Kane describes as follows: "fascinated by the possibilities for linguistic innovation, [Mayer] nevertheless maintained a connection to writing as expressivist, microsocial, and personal" (193).³ This particular balancing act is precisely what interests me most about her work. It links Mayer's experiments to the "abstract practices" of Mitchell, Guest, and Stein as discussed in Chapter One, all of which search out "the fact of feeling," as well as with the more romantic strain of the New York School. Yet this chapter is not concerned with "claiming" Mayer as a New York School poet as opposed to a Language poet. For reasons explored earlier, the writers at issue here complicate such divisions. As Myles recently said: "There was a time when the poetry I felt most immediately affected by split, and labels were affixed that said 'you're New York School,' and 'you're Language,' as though these were really different things, when in fact Language came out of the New York School, and New York School came out of French Surrealism and Russian Futurism and John Cage and Lana Turner. It is one flow" (Richard, 26-27). In keeping with this sentiment, this chapter considers *Midwinter Day* and *The Desires of Mothers to Please Others in Letters* in a variety of contexts: as "monstrous" expansions of the

New York School interest in contingency and dailiness; as part and parcel of other, non-literary artistic trends of the period, including performance art, conceptual art, and Warhol's pioneering experiments with recording verbal and visual excess; as part of the tradition of the American long poem, especially the kind that collapses the boundary between poetry and prose; and finally, as feminist documents—documents that act out the productive pleasure to be found in the blurring of public and private spheres. My focus on these two particular texts admittedly slights other aspects of Mayer's career, but thankfully there are many others who have written or are currently addressing its other aspects.⁴

When considering Mayer's career, it's important to note that she didn't begin as a fledgling wordsmith, but rather as a performance artist dedicated from the get-go to the art of interminable catalogue. When she was 27, she exhibited her first major work, *Memory* (1972), at the 98 Greene Street Gallery in SoHo. She describes this work as follows: "1200 color snapshots . . . processed by Kodak plus 7 hours of taped narration. I had shot one roll of 35-mm color film every day for the month of July, 1971. The pictures were mounted side-by-side in row after row along a long wall, each line to be read from left to right, 36 feet by 4 feet. All the images made each day were included, in sequence, along with a 31-part tape, which took the pictures as points of focus, one by one & as taking up points for digression, filling in the spaces between" (Baker). As Mayer explained in a 1989 lecture given at the Naropa Institute, "It was an eight hour show. If you wanted to hear the whole show, you could follow the whole month by walking along with the pictures and spend eight hours in the gallery" (*Disembodied Poetics*, 98). Such a project has obvious roots in Warhol's multi-hour cinematic extravaganzas

such as *Sleep* (1963) which starred Giorno—a poet and friend of Mayer’s, incidentally—as its sleeping star, and which catapulted boredom and endurance into new aesthetic territory. (“I’ve been quoted a lot as saying, ‘I like boring things.’ Well, I said it and I meant it. But that doesn’t mean I’m not bored by them,” Warhol explains in *POPism* [50].)

Memory also belongs to the history of conceptual art—a movement which Lucy Lippard helpfully defines in her book *Six Years: The dematerialization of the art object from 1966 to 1972* as “work in which the idea is paramount and the material form is secondary, lightweight, ephemeral, cheap, unpretentious, and/or dematerialized” (vii). Despite its close ties to Pop, much conceptual art of the 60s and 70s aimed to batter precisely the kind of marriage of art and commerce that Warhol had come to represent. Many thought that by “dematerializing” the aesthetic art object, and promoting art-as-idea, art-as-action, or even art-as-language in its place, one might profoundly disrupt the circulation of art-as-commodity. Lippard explains how in the late 60s, with the utopian spirit running high, the battle-plan assumed that “no one, not even a public greedy for novelty, would actually pay money, or much of it, for a xerox sheet referring to an event past or never directly perceived, a group of photographs documenting an ephemeral situation or condition, a project for work never to be completed, words spoken but not recorded; it seemed that these artists would therefore be forcibly freed from the tyranny of a commodity status and market orientation” (263). *Memory* was in fact quite cheap for Mayer to produce—in her 1989 Naropa talk, she explains: “I had a patron at the time, Holly Solomon. She paid for the film and the developing. I shot slides and she made them into prints” (98).

Of course, as Lippard readily admits, she and her comrades underestimated the canniness of the market; Lippard's Postscript to *Six Years* laments the fact that just a few years later, "the major conceptualists are selling work for substantial sums here and in Europe; they are represented by (and still more unexpected—showing in) the world's most prestigious galleries" (263). Mayer's *Memory*, however, did not share this fate—neither the photographs nor the text has ever been published in entirety, despite some talk of it. (In 1975, North Atlantic published a partial collection of the photographs and text, together with an introduction by Mayer's Freudian analyst, Dr. David Rubinfine, who confirmed its status as "an emotional science project.") Mayer's next big project, *Studying Hunger*, was even more unmanageable. It too attempts to track states of consciousness over the time-span of a month ("A month gives you enough time to feel free to skip a day, but not so much time that you wind up fucking off completely," she explains [Baker]), and clocks in at about five-hundred pages of single-spaced text—text which also includes "a lot of pictures . . . a lot of colored pens" (*Disembodied Poetics*, 99). Only 1/5 of *Studying Hunger* has been published (in 1975); Mayer later admitted, "I knew this was not a publishable work. It's almost masochistic in and of itself to do something like that" (*DP*, 99).

Lippard, herself a feminist critic, notes that "the inexpensive, ephemeral, unintimidating character of the Conceptual mediums" held a special interest for women. She argues that mediums such as "video, performance, photography, narrative, text, and actions . . . encouraged women to participate, to move through this crack in the art world's walls" (xi). Mayer's work from this period is not as explicitly feminist in intent or content as some of the more well-known feminist pieces from the period, such as Mary Kelley's *Post-Partum Document* (1973-1979)—an exhaustive, psychoanalytically-oriented

visual and textual record of Kelley's own post-partum experience—or Carolee Schneeman's *Interior Scroll* (1975)—a performance piece in which Schneeman pulled a paper scroll from her vagina and read a treatise on “Vulvic Space.” But Mayer's work is contemporaneous with these, and rife with shared impulses. Indeed, in 1973, Mayer's work traveled with an international women's Conceptual show that started in Los Angeles and ended in London, and included the work of Laurie Anderson, Eleanor Antin, Alice Aycock, Jennifer Bartlett, N. E. Thing Co., and Adrian Piper, among others. Mayer was also active throughout the 70s as an editor—she co-edited the magazine *0-9* with the performance artist/video artist/ sculptor/poet Vito Acconci. (In addition to being Mayer's brother-in-law at the time, Acconci is known for pieces such as 1969's *Following Piece*, which involved 23 days of following strangers; 1971's *Zone*, in which he attempted to keep a cat from leaving a ten-foot square area, marked off with masking tape, for thirty minutes; and, perhaps most notoriously, 1972's *Seedbed*, in which Acconci lay under the ramp of a gallery jerking off and voicing sexual fantasies while gallery-goers walked above.) *0-9* published many important pieces of the period, including the journals of Jasper Johns, writings by Robert Smithson, Hannah Weiner, Sol LeWitt, and Dan Graham, as well as books by Adrian Piper and the painter Rosemary Mayer, Bernadette's sister.⁵ In her interview with Jarrot, Mayer addresses this time:

LJ: What was the idea behind *0 to 9*?

Mayer: It was pretty much the same idea that there is behind any magazine—to create an environment for our own work and to publish all the things we both loved to see published. So we started publishing the works of Robert Smithson, and the journals of Jasper Johns. You know, these really interesting things, but I don't think too many people were publishing them at the moment, or at least we never read them.

LJ: How much were you influenced by New York School writing?

Mayer: Well, you know, I had this incredible resistance to New York writing. I really didn't want to be influenced by it. So I wasn't. We had such a strong resistance that I was going out with Ted Berrigan for awhile and Ted and Ron would do these collaborations and send them to *0 to 9* and we would never publish them. We published one called "Furtive Days." But we would never publish them and I guess it was because of their style or something. I really couldn't figure out why it was. I used to go to a lot of those avant-garde concert performance events with John Cage and Yoko Ono. They were pretty amazing. I always liked them, I think they influenced me much more than any of the writing. (6)

Although we're free to disavow Mayer's own disavowal of the influence of the New York School poets that I've discussed thus far, her remarks here underscore the importance of placing her work in a conceptual and performative context as well as a literary one. In this light, the kinship that pieces such as *Midwinter Day* or *Desires* share with Cage pieces becomes quite clear. Think, for example, of Cage's famous piece *4'33*," in which one simply waits to hear what sound occurs within the fixed period of time, and also his essays such as "Where are we eating? And what are we eating?," in which he jauntily describes what he and the Merce Cunningham dancers ate on tour for pages upon pages.

The general aversion to literary preciousness in Mayer's long works reflects her affinity for writing by people like Cage, or, to take a fresh example, the designer, inventor, and mathematician R. Buckminster Fuller (whose great aunt was Margaret Fuller)—figures who did not think of themselves primarily as poets, but who sometimes chose poetry as a medium, often with the goal of conveying information rather than inducing lyric epiphany. R. B. Fuller—who is perhaps best known for designing the geodesic dome—wrote many books of "poetry" (the quotation marks remain for the more skeptical reader) that attempt to communicate mathematical issues, chronologies of American history, design explications, etc., on the principle that readers might be able to

remain more attentive to such discussions if he employed line-breaks. In one sense, this interest in information can be traced to the “Objectivist” strain of twentieth-century poetry, i.e. the inclusion of historical record and geological fact in Williams’ *Paterson*, rants about usury and antiquity in Pound’s *Cantos*, the documentary-poetic projects of Charles Reznikoff or Muriel Rukeyser, etc. (Louis Zukofsky’s introduction to the 1931 “Objectivist” issue of *Poetry* clearly indicates that he places “information” alongside “sincerity” and “objectification” as one of poetry’s goals: “when sincerity in writing is present the insincere may be cut out at will and information, not ignorance, remains” [283].) The difference in the 70s was that figures from *outside* the realm of “literary poetry”—Cage, Ono, Fuller, Piper, etc.—began producing poetic texts that contended with similar issues. Further, within poetic circles, the “not caring” attitude I’ve been discussing throughout was reaching an extreme. As Lewis Warsh, Mayer’s husband at the time, testifies: “A lot of my own poems were pretty dumb, but I published them anyway. Type the stencil, run it off, staple it together, and then it’s out there. A lot of the anti-intellectual epithets aimed at the Poetry Project had to do with the surface mindlessness of these collaborations. The idea of writing poems that didn’t have to be good was one thing—but actually publishing them in a magazine where a lot of other poets wanted to publish—was really nervy, and pissed people off. Who cared?” (Kane, 163). Meanwhile, groups such as “Art and Language” began calling their writing about art “art,” and so on. Such experiments provoked a whole slew of questions, some of which Lippard has articulated as follows: “If written (visual) art is a viable (visual) Art Form, how do you distinguish it from literature? Is the only difference that one is made by an Artist and one by an Author? If an Artist makes up a story and tells it in book form is it Art? If an Author paints a pretty picture is it Literature?” (188). I probably would not be writing

about Mayer's work if I didn't consider it "literature," but I want to point out that the literary achievements of *Midwinter Day* and *Desires* are better understood when placed against the backdrop of such issues.

For despite the intrigue of multimedia works like *Memory* and *Studying Hunger*, or the excitements of her *Sonnets*, *Midwinter Day* and *Desires* hold the most interest for me because they self-consciously position themselves right on the cusp of literature-as-product and literature-as-process. *Midwinter Day* is more of a performance than *Desires*—as we shall see, Mayer even "rehearsed" for its writing—but as *Midwinter* is shorter and more formally-constrained, it has the aura of a more "teachable" experimental text (like Lyn Hejinian's *My Life*, for example, in which the difficulty of Hejinian's language is [somewhat] counterbalanced by the autobiographical, numerical structure). Unlike the work of Cage, Fuller, and many other artists and/or conceptualists who experimented with art-as-language or language-as-art—many of whom aimed to strip poetry of its traditional foundation in emotional impulse ("My feelings belong, as it were, to me, and I should not impose them on others," Cage explains [*Conversing with Cage*, 213])—both *Midwinter Day* and *Desires* are rich with rage, melancholy, longing, likes and dislikes, sorrow, aggravation, fear, and love. Further, *Midwinter Day*, which vacillates between poetry and prose (and invents some new forms in-between) has many traditional lyric moments, and often makes heavy use of rhyme and other standard poetic structures. (The book ends, for example, with the decidedly antiquated, *abba* lines: "Welcome sun, at last with thy softer light/That takes the bite from winter weather/And weaves the random cloth of life together/And drives away the long black night!" [119].) And despite her affinity with conceptual art, at times Mayer's *Desires* echoes the vehemence of the artist Carl André, who once said in a radio forum: "I have a great anger against so-called

conceptual art . . . I don't really know what conceptions are. I don't have any ideas about art and poetry. I have *desires*" (Lippard, 156-7). Though some might write off Mayer's stream-of-consciousness, "poetry-by-the-yard" as being too easy, Mayer, like André, consistently reminds us that its production is hard work. As she says in *Desires*, "someone once said to me I wanted to write without writing anything so it was just an idea, it was someone who can't stand to sit still for it, as if it were all some medical operation, the violence of an abortion" (32). Given the "plot" of *Desires*—it chronicles the strenuous work of being pregnant—Mayer's irritation with her imaginary interlocuter, who "can't stand to sit still" for the act of writing, as if it were an abortion, seems especially intense. At this point in the text, she isn't entirely sure she is pregnant, but her early comparison of writing that is "just an idea"—i.e. not materialized on the page—to "the violence of an abortion" clearly indicates her displeasure at the thought of jettisoning the intense physical labor of writing. Indeed, as Mayer is well aware, the word "labor" itself links the work of writing to the work of bearing children.

In this sense, *Midwinter Day* and *Desires* occupy a privileged place in the history of American feminist poetics. Written during the advent of the women's movement of the 70s, together they represent one of the first sustained attempts to fold the "women's work" of bearing children into the fabric of an experimental lyricism stretched to book-length proportions. (In fact, I can't think of too many others, though Carole Maso's pregnancy journal, *A Room Lit with Roses* [2000], and Claudia Rankine's poetry collection *Plot* [2001] are intriguing contributions to the field.) At a tribute to Plath at the New York Public Library in 1997, the poet Jorie Graham told the story of the crisis she experienced upon becoming pregnant with her first child—the crisis of not knowing whether or not becoming a mother could be compatible with being a poet. When

Graham thought about the female poets she admired most (Dickinson, Bishop, and Plath), she was distressed to realize that they were (respectively) a lifelong recluse, a lesbian without children, and a mother who committed suicide while her two small children slept nearby. The prognosis, Graham joked, did not look good. Graham resolved her crisis with a pilgrimage to Dickinson's home in Massachusetts, where, as luck would have it, Dickinson's writing desk was on-loan to an exhibit, and had been replaced with a cradle to fill the space; other writers might resolve such a crisis by turning to the texts of *Midwinter Day* and *Desires*. Throughout both, Mayer agonizes over the burden of her dual occupation, but in the end, the burden isn't the point. "Could it be this whole thing is about children?" she wonders in the middle of *Midwinter Day*, calling attention to a crucial revelation of her experiment: how much there is to be gained from meditating on children—on their language, their logic, their demands, their desires and their pleasures—and from refusing to police the border between this meditation and "real" (i.e. "adult") life and/or writing. For those who perpetuate the false choice between poetry and motherhood that undergirded Graham's crisis, Mayer expresses only impatience and annoyance: "Remember that woman I told you about who came to take a picture of Lewis and me and he said I was a poet too, and she looked at me and Sophia and Marie carefully crawling on me and she said, oh really and when do you get to write? There's no use ever saying you're a poet, it's a disservice to yourself except for the wonder you can sustain among the moths, but you'd better say it anyway" (*Desires*, 59).

Indeed, the idea behind *Midwinter Day*—to write a book-length chronicle of one day's thoughts and events *as they happened*, not in retrospect—lays waste to the photographer's question, "and when do you get to write?," by offering the unexpected

answer: *All day long*. As Fanny Howe once observed about the book, “[Mayer] does, in fact, seem to be writing at the same time as she is living.” Of course, the distinction between “writing” and “living” is semantic, or nonsensical, in that writing always gets written by living people. “Living” here functions as a euphemism for “not in a room of one’s own,” i.e. not isolated in the ivory tower of “the life of the mind,” but rather enmeshed in relations, busy with and/or distracted by tasks other than writing, engaged with matter over (or at least in addition to) mind. When gendered as male, “living” often takes on an exciting, macho flavor—that of the “hard-living,” Papa Hemingway type, photographed more often with large game and guns than with pencil in hand; when queer Rimbaud left poetry for “life,” he too got involved with guns. But even the more fey images of an exhausted yet dapper O’Hara becoming consumed by his job as an influential curator at the Museum of Modern Art, or of Duchamp famously (if somewhat spuriously) abdicating art-making and dedicating his genius to chess, are capable of sustaining a certain heroic aura. (In Thoreau’s *Walden*, to take an earlier example, the very impact of the writing depends upon the artifice of a male speaker who seems to “live” more than he “writes.” As Cavell once noted about *Walden*’s narrator, “we seem to be shown this hero doing everything under the sun but, except very infrequently, writing” [5]). When feminized, however, the triumph of “living” over “writing” has traditionally suggested a different stereotype: the victory of mind-numbing domestic duty over the possibility of artistic inspiration and/or production. Children often play into this picture, but not always: imagine the faint, cramped handwriting of Emily Brontë, writing furtively in a corner of a room full of people—it’s not a stretch to imagine her giving up, *not* writing, and roaming listlessly over the moors. The form and content of *Midwinter Day*

directly challenge these stereotypes, as Mayer's description of the book in her Naropa lecture suggests:

Nobody ever believes me when I tell them it was written in one day, but it almost was. I did rehearsals for the first section, which is dreams. I practiced for about 2 weeks before the December 22 date and tried to sort of fine-tune my dreaming so that when I had dreams on the 22nd I would be good at remembering them and they would be vivid and worth recording. Or worth sharing with people; or I would get better at writing them down. So that was an extension over that day. I also took photographs, and wrote about them later.

I divided the book into six parts. It was the six parts of the day, as I perceived the day to be. The last part was the time at night when I would go to my desk and write. For the sixth part of the book, that's what I did. I was mostly taking care of babies, entertaining friends. I also made sure to keep copies of the newspapers for that day and whatever other written or visual material happened to pop up by accident. I'd keep track of it so that when I was putting the poem together, I might want to intersperse some of the material. But the only real notes I have are those about the photos. Actually I have extensive notes about dreaming but it would be pointless to begin on that. (100-101)

Apparently *Midwinter Day* has as much (if not more) explicitly in common with Strauss's *Symphonia Domestica* than any of Ashbery's works. Both the symphony and *Midwinter* are arranged into six movements—movements which cover similar territory, including the recounting of dreams, contending with recalcitrant children, a scene at one's desk, meditations on love and sex, and so on. But while Strauss explicitly set out to create “a metaphysical hymn to domestic love,” as one commentator put it,⁶ *Midwinter Day* is more of a testament to the anxiety that such a project can entail for both creator and audience. Hejinian, for example, once expressed concern (in a letter to Susan Howe) that Mayer was “trying to make domestic life into a ‘romance’ ” (Vickery, 159); throughout *Midwinter Day*, Mayer worries about this tendency as well, even as she approximates such a goal. Indeed, one of the principal thematic questions underlying the book is how one might live with and/or write about the vicissitudes of a heterosexual marriage with children

without replaying the smugness, or oppressiveness, which can at times seem inherent to the so-called nuclear family.

At moments, Mayer's preoccupation with this question leads her into dubious territory, as when she pleads near the end of the book, "So just because we're married/Don't dismiss us, don't forget to include us/In all the gay anthologies as a family/We are still crazy" (*MD*, 108). It's not hard to understand how this appeal might annoy some people—being "crazy" (or bohemian or poor or whatever) is clearly not the same as being gay, and Mayer's comfort with the slippage between them in a book so devoted to taking stock of a hetero family ("today our combined ages add up to 71 years/And all together we weigh 350 pounds" [*MD*, 54]) can be a little unsettling. Later works of Mayer's—specifically, 1989's *Sonnets*, delve more fully into the pleasures and difficulties of unclassifiable sexuality—Juliana Spahr has written well on this topic in her essay " 'Love Scattered, Not Concentrated Love,'" in which Spahr thoughtfully considers Mayer's sonnets in relation to queer theory's "resistance to regimes of the normal" (110). One might also note that in the two decades or more since the composition of *Midwinter Day*, Mayer has moved further away from the subjects of marriage and children—in the Jarrot interview, she asserts: "I think [monogamy] sucks. Yeah, I'm against monogamy . . . I'm against marriage. The only reason I'll get married now is if someone needs a green card and will pay me a lot of money" (8). The point here isn't Mayer's personal belief system nor her biography, but rather that her negotiation of domestic relations grows in scope when we recognize that these early books do not necessarily dead-end into a Molly Bloom-esque "yes I said yes I will Yes" embrace of married life, with all its flaws and disappointments. Rather, they represent the beginnings of a long journey into ambivalent, often uncharted waters.

Just as *Midwinter Day* echoes but transfigures the concerns of Strauss's symphony, it also reflects yet tampers with the modernist obsession with charting the path of human consciousness over the time-span of a single day—an obsession epitomized, perhaps, by the Bloomsday of Joyce's *Ulysses*. Joyce chose June 16th for Bloomsday; Mayer chooses December 22nd as her parameter—the shortest day of the year, and nearly the polar opposite of Joyce's date on the Zodiac. *Midwinter* then begins with the line, "Stately you came to town in my opening dream," while *Ulysses* starts off: "Stately, plump Buck Mulligan came from the stairhead . . ." There are many such moments of homage and/or intertextual reference, and *Midwinter* ends up staging quite a struggle with its (mostly male) literary forerunners, as is evident in the following, ambivalent lines from the beginning: "Freud Pound & Joyce/Are fine-feathered youth's fair-weather friends/I take that back, better not to mention them" (19). Later, in *Desires*, as Mayer prepares to teach a course on American writers such as Whitman, Hawthorne, Stein, and Kerouac, this ambivalence veers into angry dismissal (though she retains her characteristic ambivalence): "I like these guys [i.e., the Americans] better than those half-English dolts Joyce and Pound who made such a tight-assed mystery of their love and the horrible head-heart problem, I shouldn't say that, my love is unsettling. I hope I'm like Whitman, exempt" (153). "Tight-assed" is a telling phrase, especially when contrasted with Whitman (the sodomite)—"tight-assed" signifying a distaste for leaking boundaries (a distaste which, as will become apparent, Mayer decidedly does not share).

The first section of *Midwinter*—like Schuyler's "The Morning of the Poem," or O'Hara's "Getting Up Ahead of Someone (Sun)"—chronicles an awakening. It is essentially a celebration of liminal consciousness—of the bardo between sleep and

waking: “Eyes open, eyes closed, half-open, one eye open” (7). Unlike Schuyler and Ashbery, however, Mayer is preoccupied with dreams: there is no trace of the aversion to the unconscious or dreaming mind sometimes associated with New York School writing, with its stake in “skimming the surface of self,” or in graphing the rhythms of the conscious mind in speech. (Despite her close affinity with Stein, Mayer also differs from her in this respect, as Stein remained unconvinced that the unconscious exists.) As we shall see, Mayer shares this commitment to working from dreams with Notley, whose poetry poses a variety of questions about the relation of dreams both to life (“I do think life is a dream. I think we construct reality in a dreamlike way; that we agree to be in the same dream”) and to gender (“Did dreams begin when women were first/excluded from public life?,” Notley wonders in *Disobedience*, perhaps echoing Irigaray’s comment, “before seeking to give woman *another* unconscious, it would be necessary to know whether woman *has* an unconscious, and which one?”⁷). The complex network of dreams Mayer recounts in the first section of *Midwinter* evokes a related set of questions about gender, interpretation, narrative, and authority. By rehearsing for this section—“I tried to sort of fine-tune my dreaming so that when I had dreams on the 22cd I would be good at remembering them and they would be vivid and worth recording. Or worth sharing with people; or I would get better at writing them down” (*DP*, 100)—Mayer exhibits the performance anxiety expected of an analysand grappling with the “imperative to confess” as articulated by Michel Foucault: “not only will you confess to acts contravening the law, but you will seek to transform your desire, your every desire, into discourse” (63). In fact, Mayer’s opening promise—“And for no man or woman I’ve ever met,/I’ll swear to that,/Have there been such dreams as I had today,/The 22cd day of December,/Which, as I can now remember,/I’ll tell you all about, if I can” (1-

2)—seems to answer to this imperative directly. The section goes on to take all the time and space it wants to translate the meandering particulars of dream logic into poetic line (“I was watching a woman/And something was being done to her tentatively/Then recovered we sat down to eat together/A large flat dull cake like awful life/I broke it into pieces in my adolescent plate” [9]). Throughout, it also dramatizes the difficulty of taking this freedom by repeatedly asking questions (of herself? of the reader? a beloved? an analyst?) such as: “Can I say what I saw?” “Can I say that here?” “Must I go on?” or simply, “Do you see what I mean?” Though at times the telling becomes laborious—“I can’t go on/Is there an end/To such love and the duty of dreaming,” Mayer asks on page six (with twenty more pages of the section to go)—in general the long, unpunctuated lines keep the flow moving. And instead of trickling out, by the section’s finish the lines have begun to balloon into prose paragraphs.

Upon first glance, this overflow of detail—punctuated by all the questions and anxieties that mark the psyche’s inevitable resistances to the confessional imperative—seems to fit nicely with the form of the classic analytic scene. But in the end, Mayer’s recitation has little to do with the standard goals of analysis, be they catharsis, diagnosis, desublimation, interpretation, and so forth. As discussed earlier vis à vis Ashbery’s love of parasitical detail, the surplus of specificity Mayer relates in this section—“Then we climb/A mountain to the Metcalf’s house, Nancy’s fixing us/The eighteen intricate courses of a Japanese dinner/We sit at a counter curving around the kitchen/Like what they call a kidney-shaped pool/Eating hearts of wet green and red lettuce . . . Then I dreamed/ I was ordering pompoms/Not those ornamental tufts on hats and not chrysanthemums/But a kind of rapid-firing machine gun,” and so on (3-4)—eventually defies Freud’s edict (articulated in the Wolf-Man case) that “an explanation must be

found for every detail” (Freud, 414). Instead, Mayer (no stranger to Freudian analysis) postpones interpretation, perhaps forever, in an attempt to chip away at both her and her reader’s compulsion to know where the writing is going. At times she attempts to interpret her dreams—“I was involved in creating a soup with pickles in it, it was the perfect soup, there’s no end to these dreams, if only I could remember to solve problems, what does hot pickles connote” (22)—but her efforts usually lead nowhere. Indeed, who knows what “hot pickles” connotes? The fact that the phrase quickly invites a hackneyed phallic interpretation doesn’t help, but rather furthers the sense of futility. The point of her reverie becomes the pleasure she finds in the dreaming mind’s capacity to produce details, and the undeniable pleasure of offering them up to discourse. Near the end of this section, Mayer admits, “I’m refusing to understand what I mean,” perhaps tacitly inviting us to do the same. To take up this invitation is to take leave of the writer-as-analysand/reader-as-analyst metaphor that has come to structure so much of the twentieth-century reading experience, and to make room for other relations. And one of these relations entails challenging the emphasis that both psychoanalysis and literary criticism have laid on desire as opposed to pleasure; as Barthes reminds us in *The Pleasure of the Text*, “we are always being told about Desire, never about Pleasure; Desire has an epistemic dignity, Pleasure does not” (57).

Of course, this aversion to the relation of interpretation also has everything to do with gender, and the first section of *Midwinter* can also be read as a struggle to find a place for Mayer’s role as a (sexual, intellectual) mother to two daughters within a Freudian schema which has notoriously treated the female subject (and, more specifically, the mother/ daughter relationship) as aporia or afterthought. “In my dream my daughters Sophia and Marie/Are always with me,” Mayer writes early on, announcing

the inextricability of this relationship from her dreaming mind. She then rehearses the terms of Freud's "Electra complex" (the underbaked equivalent to the male child's Oedipal complex)—"First girls/As infants love their mother who are women, then girls/Learn how to love men unless they become homosexuals (. . .)/The mothers of men and women/Are always loved more later by sons/Than by daughters who seem to love fathers better/Because that's the way it is/They say." Right after this passage, however, she adds the simple rebuttal: "There's more to it than that" (10). There is more indeed, and in subsequent sections of *Midwinter Mayer* devotes much of her time to carefully watching, listening, and transcribing the desires and speech of her daughters, noting how and where their behavior overlaps with and/or chafes against psychoanalytic cliché.

To take an obvious example, "penis envy" recurs as a motif—"I think [Marie] thinks about her diaper as a penis and so she doesn't want to lose it" (23); "Marie says she has both a penis and a vagina. She puts a ruler between her legs"(86)—but Mayer presents it as only one of the many imaginative scenarios that her daughters invent, not as an über-narrative. In fact, the line "Marie says she has both a penis and a vagina. She puts a ruler between her legs," illustrates Mayer's (or Marie's) subtle aversion to Freudian and/or Lacanian schema. Here Marie's so-called penis envy doesn't serve to cover up the "nothing" that Marie has. Rather, Marie knows she has a vagina—she names it, and plays with the pleasure of adding another presence to its presence. Just as Mayer's dream sequence emphasizes the pleasure of production over the production of desire, Marie's pleasure has less to do lack and more to do with abundance: she imagines she has *both*. Marie's play with the ruler becomes part of a flow of affects which, as the psychologist Silvan Tomkins has suggested, can be attached to any object (see Tomkins, 49-61).

Mayer charts this flow throughout the book, staying remarkably faithful (or so one imagines) to the specificity of the language her children use: “Marie says children have candy my name is Betsy you’ll get sticky. She calls Sophia baby brother, it’s from a book. She says here’s a mountain I made I cut it sharp and thick. Sophia plays with the butter, Marie says Jessica said nar for star and I’m afraid of the light” (84).

Mayer’s interest in the language of her daughters persists throughout *Midwinter*, eventually serving as a sort of tacit contrario to the assertion made by Wittgenstein that Mayer cites in Part Four: “Marie’s spilled her milk again, no use crying over spilled milk. Wittgenstein says there is no such thing as a private language. I think it would be worth trying to make one” (68). And *Midwinter* is, among other things, an account of the private language that one family shares: “Lewis says I’m not a pillow, then Marie does. They read *The Little Lamb*. He says to her there’s a worm in your shirt I’ll get it out. She says now say a snail” (85). This theme recurs in *Desires*, when Mayer relates more of the “secret language” between her daughters: “when one of them says a certain word, like ‘tedemone,’ then the other one has to say ‘Don’t say tedemone! Say Dakey-doe!’ and that’s how the game goes” (167). In this way, Mayer actually fulfills a different Wittgensteinian edict: “Don’t, *for heaven’s sake*, be afraid of talking nonsense! But you must pay attention to your nonsense,” he writes in *Culture and Value* (56e).

Earlier, in Part Two of *Midwinter*, Mayer’s recitation of her account at the local library serves as yet another example of the kind of melding of adult-language and child-language that shapes her linguistic universe: “*Three Little Kittens/ And There’s a Wocket in My Pocket* are overdue (. . .) We borrow/*Pepys’ Diaries* and Drinkwater’s book on *Pepys,/ Bit Between My Teeth* by Edmund Wilson, *Alone,/ The Little Lamb* and *Curious George*” (43-44). As is apparent from this list—and from other moments in the text, such

as when Mayer notes, “There’s jelly on *Borrowed Feathers*”—proper names are the source of an inordinate amount of pleasure for Mayer. (*Proper Name and Other Stories* is in fact the title of a 1996 Mayer book from New Directions.) The principal progenitor of this pleasure is, of course, Stein. As Koestenbaum has put it: “In Stein the central amusement or beauty is often the name, the proper noun, that arrives, unexplained, uncontextualized” (*Cleavage*, 313). Stein revealed the pleasure of proper names as an essentially infantile one; then, without apology, she claimed it as viable ground for literature. (“Infantile” both is and isn’t the right word—it is in the sense that “Stein’s paradigm of the writer was the baby: the author as infant,” as Koestenbaum notes; it isn’t insofar as “infant” derives from the Latin *infāns*, meaning “unable to speak.” Speaking—or, rather, generating language—was not a problem for Stein nor for Mayer; on the contrary, both could be said to have a predilection toward logorrhea.) Stein’s relationship to the infantile differs from Mayer’s, however—after all, Stein cast *herself* as “Baby Woojums,” not as the mother or observer of actual infants.⁸ Mayer, on the other hand, directly links her stylistic tics (such as iteration) to the manner in which she has to speak to her children: “we repeat alot because of the children . . . they don’t know logic at all” (23). This point of divergence from Stein becomes explicit in *Desires* when Mayer muses: “I’m not as smart as Gertrude Stein was, she simply lived and died, she seemed to enjoy the feeling of herself, she drove her Ford. . . . She learned everything, she delivered babies but she didn’t have one. Was she horrified by them?” (180). Though both *Midwinter* and *Desires* take on notable males (“Wife and mother are general relations hideous Hegel said, individualized desire renders her ethic impure. I only said that so I could throw away the paper it was written on,” she declares in *Desires* [135]), her relation to Stein and other female precursors is perhaps more intriguing, and both books spend

quite a bit of time contemplating undertheorized questions about female literary influence and ancestry.⁹

Not surprisingly, one part of this meditation involves the simple act of naming. Instead of suffering under the weight of great males of the past, Mayer often opts for the by-now familiar trope of naming women in an attempt to constitute a literary heritage. “Who are the great American women novelists?” she asks in *Desires* (echoing Myles’s “Where’s the mothers” query from “The Lesbian Poet”). Just as Myles then goes on to list the names of dozens of her contemporaries, at the end of *Midwinter* Mayer includes a partial list of her female precursors and contemporaries, a list which includes Bradstreet, Tsai Wen Gi, Barret-Browning, Notley, Rich, Plath, Sexton, Elinor Wylie, Louise Bogan, Denise Levertov, Guest, H.D., Harriet Beecher Stowe, Owen, Nikki Giovanni, Diane diPrima, Murasaki Shikibu, the Howes, Muriel Rukeyser, Mina Loy, Lorine Niedecker, Gwendolyn Brooks, Marina Tsvetayena, Anna Ahkmatova, Rebecca Wright, and “all the saints” (111). Such lists are prototypical examples of Rich’s call for “re-vision,” but in the context of Mayer’s work, they also partake in a broader conversation. This conversation engages some basic yet irresolvable problems that gain in scope when considered in relation to the female subject: the yearning and/or anxiety produced when one compares one’s own life and/or writing with that of others (“I’d like to know/What kind of person I must be to be a poet/I seem to wish to be you” [26]); the difficulty of taking license to write whatever one wants when “each time I write a line/I know someone who won’t approve of it” (103); and the struggle to balance a sense of self-reliance (or what Notley will call “disobedience,” putting a more feminist spin on it) with an openness to having one’s mind changed by interaction with others.

Part Four of *Midwinter Day* revolves around these questions by way of prose paragraphs which combine descriptions of what Mayer is doing (watching her kids paint with tempera, chopping vegetables for a spaghetti sauce, putting Sophia down for a nap, drinking beer, reading aloud children's books such as *Beady Bear* or *The Tiny Tawny Kitten*) with a rambling meditation on the lives of an enormous number of figures—the short list includes Tolstoy, Wagner, Beethoven, Shackleton, Margaret Fuller Ossoli, Rudy Burckhardt, Margaret Mead, Rudolf Steiner, Buddha, St. Augustine, Verlaine, Poe, Hawthorne, Milton, Christ, O'Hara, Charles Olson, Henry Miller, Patti Smith, Godard, Ra, Picasso, and Neil Simon. The juxtapositions are sudden but seamless: “I chop onions for the sauce. St. Augustine hated the Greek language”; “I call nursery school to find out when they'll be closed for Christmas and talk to Barbara about Chanukah. Margaret Fuller married an Italian revolutionary named Count Ossoli and had a child when she was thirty-seven”; “Lewis goes into his room to work. Someone said Harriet Beecher Stowe became quite crazy towards the end of her life and pretended she was selling matches on the street.” The accumulation of these juxtapositions produces a peculiar effect: instead of measuring her life against the adventures of a Shackleton or a Verlaine, they simply place her “continuous present” alongside theirs. The domestic *qua* the domestic is thus neither elevated nor denigrated; it is simply included, gracefully but firmly. The section eventually becomes a hymn to the art of paying attention to the details of one's own life, as well as to those of others. In this sense, it dramatizes Thoreau's revelation (from his 1851 journal): “The question is not what you look at—but how you look & whether you see” (146). The kinship with Thoreau goes deeper still, as throughout his writings Thoreau repeatedly conjoins the time-span of a day with the injunction to pay attention: “The art of spending a day . . . it behoves us to be attentive.

If by watching all day & all night—I may detect some trace of the Ineffable—then will it not be worth the while to watch?” (206). In a 1988 lecture at the Poetry Project called “The Poetry of Everyday Life,” Mayer celebrates this sentiment further: “I love you and daily life, what life isn’t daily? . . . what poetry isn’t everyday” (3).

In his blurb on the back of *Midwinter Day*, Ashbery casts this attentiveness in a slightly different light: “The richness of life and time as they happen to us in tiny explosions all the time are grasped and held up for us to view in this magnificent work of prose and poetry that teaches us at the end why ‘no one knows why/ Nothing happens.’” By picking out the lines “no one knows why/Nothing happens,” Ashbery points toward one of the many paradoxes of Mayer’s work: the more minutiae of the “richness of life and time” that she recounts—and remember that the desire behind the “Everything” work is to contain as much minutiae as possible—the more we may feel as though “nothing happens.” Mayer or Ashbery might happily relate this sensation to the Zen saying popularized by Suzuki (here related by Cage) that “men are men & mountains are mountains before studying Zen/& men are men & mountains are mountains after studying Zen” (*Silence*, 161), but I doubt such a notion will placate any disgruntled readers. The paradox that “nothing happens” in an “Everything” work is intimately related to two other intriguing conundrums. The first has to do with the very nature of the imperative of a “confessing society.” Wittgenstein summarizes part of the problem in *Culture and Value*: “When you bump against the limits of your own honesty,” he writes, “it is as though your thoughts get into a whirlpool, an infinite regress: You can *say* what you like, it takes you no further” (8e). Given this whirlpool, wherever there’s the presumption that a writer is “telling all,” you’ll usually find a crabby critic arguing that the writer at-hand has nothing to tell. (Think of the criticism leveled at Sexton by the

critic Victor Howes, for example, who complained that “the confessional mode reveals that people with nothing to hide usually have little to confess” [17]). The second has to do with the specific character of logorrhea, an affliction by which more often means less, or at least means differently. As Koestenbaum once noted about Stein, “Stein’s writing makes the most sense if it is read aloud; and yet hers is the most silent voice I know—silent because, under the guise of including everything in the world, it includes remarkably little” (*Cleavage*, 332).

This latter problem leads us to *Desires*, a text which evidences a logorrhea only hinted at in *Midwinter*. Of course I’m not using the word scientifically, but rather in accordance with Koestenbaum’s essay, “Logorrhea” in *Cleavage*:

Logorrhea—addiction to talk—is inevitably a matter of solitary binge, or isolation. The malaise is never interpersonal, never dialogic (though Warhol placed a gab mate, a ‘B,’ at the other end of his patter, a “B” to receive his flow: “‘B’ is anybody who helps me kill time”). Logorrhea is not social speech. Logorrhea is the hallmark of contemporary discourse: to be contemporary it must be boundless, it must be fatiguing, it must be maniacally self-perpetuating. (286)

There could be no better way to describe *Desires*. Although the structure of the book is epistolary, the letters are never sent, thus together they form a kind of closed circuit. All the letters are titled, but only some indicate a specific addressee (as in “Dear Ed,” or “Dear Rosemary”). Sometimes there is an abstract addressee (as in “Dear Alive”), and some are addressed to the dead. More often the titles have nothing to do with a recipient, in which case they serve to distance the letters from an epistolary economy, and instead grant them autonomous aesthetic status (as in “Gardening in Containers,” “Under My Green Jacket,” or “Portrait of a Man Holding a Glove”). Further, though the text of the letters usually addresses a “you,” over the 346 pages, the many “you’s” tend

to blur together, especially as neither the tone nor the style significantly varies from letter to letter. None of this is to say that the speaker of the letters doesn't reach out, often with great anguish or affection, to an "other." But a sense of solitary binge persists throughout, especially as Mayer has left New York City and is writing in a sort of exile—the exile of living in one small town, then of moving to another, about which she writes, "no one writes to us, no one calls . . . we have nobody to talk to. I don't know any women here, the children have no friends. I can't drive the car, I'm scared of it, I can barely eat dinner, there are fights, the food makes me sick" (177).

Thus while *Desires* postulates an audience—indeed, while it may yearn for one—it also insulates itself against it. On the one hand, the letters want to please their readers, and they worry constantly over their capacity to do so: "Writing about moving seems to make for some dullness, I'm sorry," one letter begins; "Are you mad at me?" another ends. From this vantage point, Hejinian's blurb comment, "For 'mothers,' the desire to please is always a prolongation of the power to please," makes sense. On the other hand, the letters also evidence a flagrant disregard for whether they please at all (a disregard that may be the hallmark of a letter "never-sent," or of any writing written without publication or exchange in mind). Each letter is a block of dense, Beckett-like prose, composed primarily of run-on sentences, ranging from about one to ten pages. Although the stream-of-consciousness can be enthralling, it is also undeniably rough-going. It is not an easy book to ingest in one sitting, and I know many people who prefer to read in or around it instead of straight through. The fact that Mayer finished the book in 1980 but didn't find a publisher for it until 1994 may also reflect its ambivalence about finding readers—as Vickery has noted, "As with the trouble she had in publishing her journals, Mayer's letters failed to please others, perhaps primarily because they do not attempt to

please” (161). (Ashbery’s great line about Mitchell’s painting—that it evidences “a fierce will to communicate and an equally frantic refusal to make this task any easier for the sender and the receiver”—would also seem to apply here.)

For those who would prefer that a pregnancy journal testify to the *jouissance* of the pregnant body, Maso’s *A Room Lit By Roses* is more likely to please. Maso writes: “I have never even come close to this much happiness . . . So much freedom and bliss. I feel completely liberated” (28, 85).¹⁰ As if in testament to the fact that each pregnancy is as distinct as each pregnant person, Mayer writes: “A lot of women say they prefer being pregnant to afterwards, with the baby being outside, I do not feel that way. I find no relish or what it is in being physically so big and hampered like a covered bridge or gargling with marbles” (174). At the start of her second letter (aptly-titled “Public Lice”), Mayer announces: “Things have been going horribly, let me just begin by telling you we’ve been getting hate mail”—thus introducing the crabby mood of many of the letters that follow. What’s more, she makes it clear that these emotions have formal consequences. On several occasions, Mayer suggests that the overwhelming demands of taking care of two children while being pregnant with a third, moving cities and taking on a new teaching job, editing a magazine (*Adventures in Poetry*) and publishing books, sustaining a marriage (to the poet Lewis Warsh), making sure daily needs are met while subsisting at a near-poverty level, and keeping up with one’s own writing, have all contributed to pushing her out of poetry and into the more bloated, dirty, even boring realm of prose:

I’m so tired of poetry I don’t want to talk about it . . . I couldn’t write a poem now anyway my intentions are less than pure, don’t laugh at me, often my own writing seems to me to be having too many cheap ingredients like poor people’s food however at least I’ve never written a salmon mousse. I mean it’s like the meats at the delicatessen counter, those awful rolls of chicken and ugly

meatloafs, with pimientos in them or onion-flavored American cheese, luncheon meats, full of salt and pepper. (30-31)

This simultaneous disgust with and celebration of the “cheap ingredients” of life has inspired the observation, here made by Elizabeth Willis, that “here is where Mayer departs from the European polish of Stein: this work is a messier, more worldstained experiment. It’s full of dirty American content” (19). One might also note that it is where Mayer departs from the first generation of the New York School, whose class affiliations and/or aspirations don’t usually evoke “ugly meatloafs.”¹¹

At first the “impure” and “clogged with matter” earthworks of an artist such as Robert Smithson might come to mind here, as Smithson has described his aesthetics in terms that could easily describe a book like *Desires*: “I’m for a weighty, ponderous art. There is no escape from matter. There is no escape from the physical nor is there any escape from the mind. The two are on a constant collision course. You might say my work is like an artistic disaster. It’s a quiet catastrophe of mind and matter” (Lippard, 89). But as I have been suggesting, female matter is different from other matter—female dirt is different from other dirt. Whereas Smithson, Ashbery, and/or Rauschenberg have been celebrated for their shaping of dirt or their sifting through the garbage to develop a trash aesthetic (inaugurated, perhaps, by Duchamp’s ready-made urinal), such a trajectory has a specific set of complications for women, whose filth has been presumed—across cultures, across centuries—to come both from within and from without. In short, women leak: their filth knows no boundaries, and it is thus as dangerous as it is redundant. Further, the presumption of this danger has occasioned serious regulatory consequences: “In her natural state, then, woman demands the attention of culture to impose those boundaries, physical and metaphysical, that will guarantee her virtue against transgression and digression,” Carson explains in her essay “Dirt and Desire:

Essay on the Phenomenology of Female Pollution in Antiquity” (*Men*, 142), cogently summarizing in one sentence the obsession with controlling women’s bodies that has spanned millennia, from ancient religious taboos against menstrual blood to *Roe v. Wade*. As Mayer well knows, a pregnant woman is the very epitome, or exhibition, of this leakage. She is, as Plato might have it, a shape-shifting receptacle—her body says: *I house both the ‘me’ and the ‘not-me’ within me as one; or, more ominously: Not only have I taken in extraneous matter, but I also promise to expel it.*¹² (The double meaning of the word “litter” is relevant here, as it commonly connotes both refuse and offspring.) In *Desires*, Mayer doesn’t counter these stereotypes, but rather plows into them at full throttle. *Desires* begins with garbage—its very first line is the imperative, “Throw stuff away,” a command to the reader (and/or the speaker, if she’s talking to herself) to start creating refuse. From the very start, Mayer warns that what follows will be filthy and female—a kind of prole *Symphonia Domestica*, sometimes like “those awful rolls of chicken and ugly meatloafs, with pimientos in them,” and markedly devoid of designs on sublimation.

Lest I’m making *Desires* sound like an unpleasant read, I should be clearer about its many pleasures. I noted above that it is not an easy book to read straight through, but the flip-side of this dilemma is that it grants the reader a tremendous amount of freedom. Each letter stands on its own as a prose poem of sorts, thus one can read in and around the book at one’s leisure. If read front to back, however, the letters delineate a narrative, eventually adding up to the story of a pregnancy. Also, as Hejinian has noted, *Desires* is full of good advice. One example is the ritual of foretelling the story of Max’s birth that Mayer performs near the end of the book. Mayer explains, “people like to write and tell the stories of their babies’ births but I like to do mine beforehand” (316).

Mayer's description of what to expect in childbirth is both matter-of-fact and moving, as evident in the following excerpt:

The best thing is not to fear losing control, not to be forced to lie down if you don't want to. At this point it seems that giving birth to babies might be all that you will ever do in all the rest of your life, however that's not so, and aside from the famous forgetting, imagine all the years you are not involved in this. If you have three children, say, you are actually only giving birth to them about 3 days out of your entire life. OK then it gets more painful and there isn't much time in between contractions so you are one moment feeling like screaming and the next it is gone and you are you, and then everyone hopes this part won't last too long and if the baby's going to come out now, it will start to be coming but you have to push it out, some very hard and for what seems like a long time but actually it isn't, some easier. It's helpful at this time to have another woman around who's already had a baby because she can be loving and convinced. (314-315)

In passages of this kind, the speaker's struggle with self-reliance disappears, and a quiet, unpretentious wisdom and self-knowledge takes its place. (This self-knowledge is actually present from the very beginning: after an early trip to the doctor, who tells her she isn't "theoretically and scientifically provably pregnant," Mayer writes: "I had a series of the famous bee-sting dreams. I've had them every time I was pregnant and never when I was not & just fearing it, this time I got stung on the head!" [17]). And though Mayer definitely pushes for the re-valuation of this kind of "feminine intuition," as her pregnancy "genders" her more and more as female, she becomes more adamant about the fluidity of gender roles. As she defiantly puts it in one letter: "I am not just a woman, are you always a man" (58).

The pleasure of defiance is but one of the many "not-nice" pleasures that *Desires* contains. Mayer may envy the image of Stein as a woman essentially at-ease with herself in the world ("she seemed to enjoy the feeling of herself, she drove her Ford") but the pleasures of Mayer's "not-nice" writing may have more in common with Stein's temperament than she thinks. By many accounts, Stein was not always such a ball to be around—she was fussy, opinionated, and incredibly stubborn. (Likewise, Joan Mitchell

was famously unhappy and volatile—she smoke and drank to excess, and was known for vicious verbal lashings of her closest friends and lovers.) How pleasure—indeed ecstatic pleasure—gets transmitted alongside such grouchiness and rage may seem something of a mystery, but it is a mystery that most certainly shapes the work of Stein, Mitchell, and Mayer (and Notley, as we shall see later). Instead of communicating “pure bliss,” such a transmission may end up communicating a swarm of pleasures and dissatisfactions, a list of which Mayer compiles at the end of a letter in *Desires*:

how do you like to be high, to be exalted, to be free, to be without everything, to be alone, to be full of clarity, to be lost, to be retrieved, to be seen again, to see the light, to be resurrected like they say, to be devoted, to be all askew and at odds with everything, to be confused, to be dying, to be lost, to be useless, to be continued, to be continuing, to be reincarnated, to be too much, to be left to be alone, to be irredeemable, to be hopeless, to be inspired, to be someone, to be abandoned, to be surrounded, to be at a loss, to be reconciled, to be reunited, to be at one, not to be undone, to be made. (69)

In the end, the paramount pleasure of *Desires* is its affirmation of desires of all kinds: desire for human connection; desire for food; desire for money; desire for beer, cigarettes, and other addictive substances; desire for sex; desire for babies; onanistic desire; desire for the literature of others; and, above all, desire for words and for the act of writing itself. “Am I just this greed speaking outloud all the time,” Mayer wonders (*D*, 23), and the book can indeed be read as one long catalogue of idiosyncratic wants. She wants it to rain “hotdogs and Pampers” (25); she’d give anything to “be lyrical and have good teeth” (21); she wants to eat good cheese; and so on. While Maso’s pregnancy journal celebrates the more ascetic pleasure to be found in the way that her pregnancy puts an end to certain desires (the desire to drink alcohol, the desire to focus intensively on one’s writing career), Mayer’s book does the opposite: it elevates the cravings that can accompany a pregnancy to metaphysical proportions. In this way, the book takes part in

an “often overlooked tradition in which desire is productive,” as Spahr has put it (110)—a tradition which understands and demonstrates that “one speaks too much, writes too much, because the mere act of piling up words—apart from their meaning—brings relief or delight,” as Koestenbaum puts it in a paraphrase of Barthes (*Cleavage*, 287).

A more skeptical reader might here interject that while the piling-up of words may bring “relief or delight” to the piler, it doesn’t necessarily bring either to the reader.

That is precisely true. As Barthes eloquently explains in *The Pleasure of the Text*:

Does writing in pleasure guarantee—guarantee me, the writer—my reader’s pleasure? Not at all. I must seek out this reader (must “cruise” him) *without knowing where he is*. A site of bliss is then created. It is not the reader’s “person” that is necessary to me, it is this site: the possibility of a dialectics of desire, of an *unpredictability* of bliss: the bets are placed, there can still be a game. (4)

I imagine that some readers have loved *Desires*, and some have been exasperated by it (or would be if they ever forced themselves to read it in its entirety). Others (and I’d put myself in this category) may go back and forth between the two poles, but in the end deeply appreciate its game, its gamble—its willingness to write without knowing where its audience may be, its willingness to go too far, its willingness to believe that “women can still wind up writing some unheard of things don’t you think, I mean things that have never been written yet” (19). The anxiety about “going too far” with verbal profusion is by no means a new one; what’s notable about Mayer’s elaboration of it in *Desires* is how she links it to the various anxieties that cluster around female reproduction. Again, colloquial language often makes this connection clear, as in the phrase “to bring forth issue”—which is, incidentally, the last line of Mayer’s penultimate letter. The very last letter of the book, “A Few Days Later It’s with Pleasure I Write,” announces of the birth of her son.

When considered as a whole, the overriding obsession of *Desires* is economy: the economy of personal finance; the economy of time-measurement, especially the time it takes to write and the time it takes to gestate; and, overwhelmingly, the economy of language-production. At the start of the book, Mayer hopes she isn't pregnant because "if I were pregnant again everybody would feel impatient with me as if I had finally gone too far again" (15). She knows that the problem of having children without very much money to support them has both a metaphorical and a literal relation to the problem of producing writing that has no audience to support it. Mayer experiences both types of profusion as fairly natural, and takes pleasure in them both—her lament is that others do not: "People seem to wind up calling and they find out we're pregnant but it's not really any fun telling them except for Peggy because, like having friends who think your poetry is silly, nobody can really see any good or joy in it, just problems" (47). In a later letter, Mayer makes this connection even more explicit:

. . . there are so many people in the world now . . . just like and while some men and women are saying it's too long, I can't read it. I even read they said too much writing was being written, and Lady Montagu saying the tales told never intended to be published had the only truth in them. Well it's simple to see the simple truth in something but is someone doing us a service by not writing something, I can't see that. (124)

In 1999, Anne Carson published an intriguing book entitled *Economy of the Unlost*, which considers the "economies of language" of the ancient Greek poet Simonides alongside those of the twentieth-century Romanian poet Paul Celan. Carson opens her book with the following questions: "Humans value economy. Why? . . . What does it mean to save time, or trouble, or face, or breath, or shoe leather? Or words? . . . What exactly is lost to us when words are wasted?" (3) In the above passage from *Desires*, Lady Montagu speaks to this latter notion of economy: that the words that really matter are the ones saved;

that words gain in value when scrimped; that if the world is too full of language or literature or children, the responsible thing to do might be to stop producing altogether. Mayer's response to the idea that "someone is doing us a service" by withholding any of the above is simple: "I can't see that." Carson is right that humans value economy. And, traditionally speaking, poetry is (by definition) an art of measurement—of placing syllables into circulation and of withholding them, of accumulating and excising words. But Mayer's work reminds us that humans also take great pleasure in experiencing time, money, and/or words that feel somehow impermeable to measurement. There is deep pleasure in the apprehension, however dim, of a world in which words are neither spent nor saved; at its best, *Desires* intimates such a place. It may be true that *Desires* had to swerve out of poetry and into prose to do so, yet *Midwinter Day* imparts a similar feeling. This achievement may have something to do with the fact that *Midwinter* is a time-based experiment, and the great paradox of time-based experiments is that their temporal constraints often produce the dizzying and liberating sensation of unconstrained time.

Recently it has become something of a truism to note that contemporary poetry—or, more to the point, experimental poetry—is one of the few activities that does not, indeed cannot, participate in the market. Anyone even peripherally involved with poetry knows it doesn't sell. As Bernstein is fond of saying, a blank piece of paper is worth about 2 cents or so, but once you write a poem on it, it takes on a negative value. Some find this situation deplorable, an example of everything that's "wrong" with popular culture today; some, like O'Hara, have shrugged it off, accepting the fact that poetry probably has about as many serious adherents as bungee-jumping or bonsai, and it has probably always been so (despite what those inclined toward nostalgia might say); some, like Bernstein, argue that poetry's negative market value is precisely the source of

its power and freedom. The contribution that Mayer's work makes to this discussion is to insist that we consider these questions in relation to gender—that we understand how a phobia of “going too far”—of writing too much, of wanting too much, of transgressing the proprieties of an economic system we've infused with morality—are often inextricably tied up with a paranoia about the voracious desires and the vexing capacities of the female body. Even if it accomplished nothing else, *Desires* should be commended for bringing us into intimate contact with this correlation.

Some fans of Mayer's work have complained that it lacks adequate critical—or, rather, academic—attention (though, as indicated earlier, this situation has certainly begun to change). On the other hand, some academic critics (such as Libbie Rifkin) have rightly pointed out the many conflicts inherent in the drive to institutionalize or canonize the work of a writer who has positioned herself so insistently outside of academic settings, who has dedicated so much time and energy to the self-erasing tasks of collaborative and anonymous writing, and whose overriding statement of purpose might be her proclamation: “work yr ass off to change the language & dont ever get famous.”¹³ Further, the largess of Mayer's work so fiercely resists the ideal of the “well-wrought urn” that it can be difficult to publish, teach, anthologize or even excerpt from it. The slim, 147-page *Bernadette Mayer Reader* that New Directions issued in 1992 is frustrating for precisely this reason. To shrink the work to a palatable size won't do, for as Willis has smartly noted, “[w]hat makes this writing ‘work’ is (as it was for Stein) its larger gestures” (19). Whatever one's take on her work, it is indisputable that Mayer's legacy of experimentation has had a profound influence on both her peers and many younger writers. In her chapter on Mayer, Vickery goes so far as to say that “[s]uffering the equivalent of a stroke in 1994, [Mayer] defeated death and became, inadvertently, a literal

‘living legend’ ” (151). There’s certainly truth in this statement, but I worry a bit that the “hagiography” of Mayer which Vickery, among others, freely indulges may at times obscure the real exasperations of Mayer’s work—its capacity to produce “not-nice” pleasures—which I consider as important as its satisfactions and inspirations. Work that depends on its “larger gestures” nearly always includes its failures as well as its successes; for this reason, Mayer’s work will nearly always feel uneven. Sometimes this unevenness carries the charge of excitement; at other times it undeniably feels lazy, dull, or simply impossible. Mayer’s work vacillates between “caring” and “not caring” about its status as “good writing” perhaps more wildly than any other writer at issue in this study. Yet these specters of failure and carelessness are intrinsic to her project, and very often the source of its fascinations.

In closing, I must confess that any hesitation I may have about ending this chapter with an unequivocal call for more academic attention to Mayer’s work probably stems from a more personal source. Several years ago, I participated in one of Mayer’s famed “Experiments in Poetry” workshops at the Poetry Project. At the time, I was on the fence about whether or not I should go to graduate school; when I asked Mayer’s advice on the matter, she sent this written reply: “if i were you i would do a lot of reading on your own and find another way besides phd programs to earn a living. . . . better to be a carpenter or something, I feel.” Later in the letter, she makes herself clearer: “i don’t think you should ever write criticism.” Looking back on this letter now, I can see that the present study of her work is an act of both disobedience and homage. Many people—Mayer, perhaps, included—tend to think of the writing of criticism as an essentially gratuitous activity—far more gratuitous than the writing of poetry, for example, and perhaps even parasitical in nature. At times I am tempted to agree. But if

there's one thing Mayer's work has to impart, it is a promotion of the paradoxical value of the gratuitous itself. To allow for this paradox—to pay attention to it, to admire it—is to salute that which is unpaid, uncalled-for, unjustifiable, and, in a complex sense of the word, free.

¹ See Peter Baker's essay on Bernadette Mayer in the *Dictionary of Literary Biography, Volume 165: American Poets Since World War II*, Fourth Series. The Gale Group, 1996, pp. 165-172. Here quoted from the reproduction of this essay online, updated 2001, from the Literature Resource Center 3.1—Author Resource Pages, from Contemporary Authors Online, The Gale Group.

² For a fuller discussion of Mayer's workshops, collaborative projects, and performance stunts, see Kane, pp. 187-201. See also Vickery's chapter, "Desire Not a Saint: The Pathography of Bernadette Mayer," for more of a career study. Mayer's "Experiments" can be found online at www.poetryproject.com/features/mayer.html.

³ For examples of Mayer's work in these genres, see her books *Story* (0-9, 1968), *The Basketball Article*, written with Anne Waldman (Angel Hair, 1975), *Incidents Reports Sonnets* (Archipelago Books, 1984), *Utopia* (United Artists Books, 1984), *The Art of Science Writing*, by Mayer and Dale Worsley (Teachers and Writers, 1989), *Sonnets* (Tender Buttons, 1989), *The Formal Field of Kissing* (Catchword Papers, 1990), and *The 3:15 Experiment*, written with Jen Hofer, Lee Ann Brown and Danika Dinsmore (Woodacre, CA: The Owl Press, 2001).

⁴ Some of these poets and/or critics include Kane, Vickery, Juliana Spahr, Lee Ann Brown, Michael Gizzi, Peter Baker, Stephen Cope, Nada Gordon, and others. Also, a plethora of papers on Mayer were presented at the 1999 Barnard conference.

⁵ The activities of 0-9 are well-documented throughout Lippard's *Six years*. See also Kane's description of the magazine, p. 197-201.

⁶ See Jackson, at www.americansymphony.org/dialogues_extensions/97/5th_concert/strauss.cfm.

⁷ The Notley quote about dreams comes from an email interview with the author, 2/4/02. For the Irigaray, see *This Sex Which Is Not One*, p. 123.

⁸ Stein's personal attitudes toward childbearing were actually quite fascinating, as a recently-discovered Stein essay from the early 1900s, "Degeneration in American Women," suggests. In the essay, Stein argues (to the surprise, and perhaps horror, of many feminists) that "the only serious business of life in which [women] cannot be entirely outclassed by the male is that of child bearing." Her primary distaste lies with college-educated women who delay or ignore childbirth, though she admits that there are "a few women in every generation . . . who are exceptions to the rule." One imagines that Stein must have placed herself in this latter category. For more on this issue, see Brenda Wineapple's book *Sister/Brother: Gertrude and Leo Stein*. Wineapple discovered this unpublished, handwritten essay by Stein in a Princeton University archive while doing research for her book.

⁹ Mayer's conflict with Stein began as far back as *Memory*—about the project's conception, she has said, "Part of the reason I did it was to be nasty to Gertrude Stein who always said you can't write remembering, so I wanted to say that maybe you could . . . But in a spirit of fun, I was doing it *with* Gertrude Stein" (*Disembodied Poetics*, 98-99). *Midwinter Day* inherits something of this same relationship, a relationship I find interesting for its commitment to "being nasty" and "having fun" at the same time.

¹⁰ Not to be misleading, I should add that though Maso thoroughly enjoys her pregnancy, her accounts of birth and afterbirth veer into terrifying territory, as she recounts the deep pain of childbirth and the even deeper disorientation of a post-partum depression.

¹¹ Think, for example, of Schuyler's comment (in a 1971 letter to Gerard Malanga) about the Lower East Side, where Mayer and many other "second-generation" poets made their home in the 70s and 80s: "It's a remarkably dreary day out here and I think I'll be staying more at my New York pad, on East 35th—a nice blah sort of neighborhood, unostentatious middle class, my dish exactly. I admire my friends who [have] the courage to live on the lower East side; I certainly haven't." Quoted in Kane, p. 18.

¹² For more on Plato, see Carson, *Men*, p. 132.

¹³ See Rifkin's account in "My Little World Goes On St. Mark's Place: Anne Waldman, Bernadette Mayer and the Gender of an Avant-Garde Institution," in *Jacket* #7. Rifkin here discusses *Unnatural Acts*, the magazine devoted to collaborative writing procedures which stemmed from a 1972 Mayer workshop—a workshop which included an 8-hour collaborative writing session. Mayer's direction about "working yr ass off" appears in the version of Mayer's "Experiments" that Bernstein and Andrews include in *The Language Book*, p. 83.

CHAPTER FOUR

“Dear Dark Continent”: Alice Notley’s Disobediences

Of the three women at issue in this half of my study, Alice Notley is perhaps the most solidly associated with the New York School, as a line from her recurrent bio note suggests (albeit with some subtle qualifications): “For sixteen years, [Notley] was an important force in the eclectic second generation of the so-called New York School of poetry” (*Disobedience*). During these sixteen years—roughly, 1970-1986—Notley lived on the Lower East Side with her husband, the poet Ted Berrigan (who died in 1983); raised two children; ran workshops at the Poetry Project (Myles was one of her students); and published about thirteen volumes of poetry. In a 1988 interview, she describes this period as follows: “we came to New York and lived inside this tiny space, and sometimes Ted worked, and sometimes he didn’t, and I hung around and wrote poems, and we were always surrounded by the babies, who grew up” (Foster, 70). In her introduction to Berrigan’s *Selected Poems* (published posthumously in 1994), Notley elaborates on this description, using terms that echo Mayer’s penchant for the “Everything” work that would collapse the putative boundaries between “writing” and “living”: “My life with Ted Berrigan consisted of a continuous involvement with poetry: It was all we talked about; everything we did or said became part of it, as atmosphere or literally as phrase or fact in a poem” (vii). Ted Berrigan famously took the idea of the “New York School”—its supposed existence and his role in its lineage—both more and less seriously than anyone before or since. “Ted used to tell people that he was in charge of the New York School and that anyone could join it if they paid him five dollars—at some point ten for

inflation,” Notley explains, adding, “no one ever joined this way” (vii, x). Joke or no, the net effect was to designate the Notley-Berrigan household—or more to the point, the work that emerged out of it—as a critical node in the circuit of New York School poetics in the 1970s and early 80s.

At the same time, since the 1980s, Notley has also put the most distance between herself and the New York School, geographically (she moved from New York to Paris in the early 1990s), aesthetically, and one might even say politically. Very few people enjoy the constrictions of a label, and Notley—who has said she wants “to shriek at/any identity/this culture gives me” (*Mysteries*, 38)—is certainly no exception. Indeed, once saddled with a label, one’s options appear few: disavowal, reclamation, studious avoidance, and so on. “I don’t accept any labels or placements, even for the ‘early work,’ ” Notley insists; about the term “New York School,” she says simply: “I’ve never quite identified with it” (Foster, 84, 83). At times this distancing has been of a benign variety—“I guess I resist thinking of myself as a New York poet,” Notley has said, partly because “it’s really important to me that I come from the Southwest . . . I still articulate in a lot of the ways that Southwesterners do and make sentences the way Southwesterners do” (Foster, 64). (Notley is originally from Needles, a small town in the California desert.) But as the nostalgic interest in the New York School picks up speed, as we ourselves speed into a new century, Notley’s distancing has become more acute. As she recently told me, “I just go by what anyone else says about the New York School. Really. They can have it” (Email interview, 2/4/02). On the topic of how women might fit or fail to fit into literary movements, Notley gets even more caustic: “How many years does it take for a girl to get recognized as part of a movement? (This could be like a lightbulb joke: five years to certify her and five more to screw her in)” (Foster, 85).

As one might suspect from the above comments, Notley isn't as much of a cheerleader for "girls to get recognized as parts of movements" as she is a trenchant critic of movements *qua* movements. This stance can be traced in part to her feminist conviction that "the ways in which poetry gets published . . . not to mention the whole idea of a literary movement, the academy, the avant-garde, are all male forms" (Goldman, 8). Notley consistently troubles the impulse to drag women into the history of the any of the above by arguing that "[o]ur achievement [i.e. that of women writers] has probably been to become ourselves in spite of the movements" (Foster, 85). When thinking back on the New York School of the 1950s and the idiosyncratic achievements of Mitchell and Guest, this statement seems to hold some water. In keeping with these tensions, this chapter aims to consider Notley's singular aesthetic journey alongside the question of how her poetry expands and challenges certain aspects of New York School poetics (even, or especially, the assumption that there is such a thing as a "poetics" that can exist outside the act of making a poem), and further, what these expansions and challenges have to do with gender. For while the vast and ever-changing landscape of Notley's body of work certainly echoes the kind of prolific, dogged experimentation that characterizes the long careers of, say, Ashbery and Koch, Notley differs in that she has consistently tethered this experimentation to an explicitly feminist journey, and cast her rigorous poetic investigations into the possibilities and limitations of speech, personality, community, humor, and narrative as part and parcel of a search for feminist vision.

When one attempts an overview of Notley's career, it is initially tempting to mark a pronounced split between her earlier, more readily-identifiable "New York School" style, and her more recent eremitic experiments in feminist epic. Notley began to lay out the terms of this shift in the early 90s, in essays such as "Homer's Art" and in

talks such as “Epic and Women Poets” (in which she insists that “*Someone*, at this point, must take in hand the task of being everyone, & no one, as the first poets did . . . There must be a holy story” [Rasula, 28]). She then put them into action in three book-length poems, *The Descent of Alette* (1996), *Mysteries of Small Houses* (1998), and *Disobedience* (2001).¹ At first glance, these epics—especially the hallucinatory, shamanistic *Descent of Alette*, Notley’s most elaborate attempt to-date to tell “a holy story”—would seem to have little to do with the critical maxims about her work that one finds in, say, her online entry in *Contemporary Authors*: “Deeply influenced by the work of William Carlos Williams, Alice Notley is a poet whose verse focuses primarily on her life in New York with her first husband, the poet Ted Berrigan, and their two sons,” or even at the homepage to her online archives at the University of California at San Diego: “[Notley] believes that she is writing primarily to express her personal tone of voice. She feels that her speech is the voice of ‘the new wife, and the new mother’ in her own time, but her first aim is to make a poem, rather than present a platform of social reform.”² Notley’s work from the past fifteen years, along with her current disinterest in—indeed disgust with—the so-called daily, seems to stand in stark contrast to these characterizations. For example, when I told Notley that I had been startled by the phrase “the despised daily” on the back cover of *Disobedience*, she told me: “I myself wrote the phrase, despised daily, because . . . I do utterly despise dailiness as it stands. I can’t abide what the world has become, the frozen-ness of our product this evil thing that we kiss the ass of every hour. I want a dailiness that is free and beautiful” (Email interview, 2/4/02).

On some level, this stance can and should be read as a repudiation of the celebration of quotidian detail and the collage of communal city life that characterizes much New York School writing, including, perhaps, much of Notley’s earlier work.

Partly for this reason, some critics and readers have seemed a bit stymied by Notley's turn to epic, and disinclined to consider her lyric and epic impulses together. In his *Parnassus* review of Notley's *Selected Poems* (1993), Eric Selinger notes this problem, but eventually comes to pose a different rhetorical question: "If the poet judges the world, as Whitman attests, 'not as the judge judges, but as the sun falling around a helpless thing,' why shouldn't we read [Notley] in the same gracious way, not sifting collagist sheep from epic goat?" (Selinger, 324). Selinger admits he isn't the man for the job, but concludes that "Notley deserves a critic who will help her readers find the pleasures in [the epic poems] that I've learned to take in her earlier work" (322). Whether or not any writer deserves a critic is up for grabs, but I think Selinger is onto something in his reluctance to "sift collagist sheep from epic goat." For this sifting elides the fact that many, if not most, of the concerns, critiques, and tropes of Notley's recent epics have been alive and at play throughout her career. To cast her work from the 70s and 80s simply as New York School poetry with the added content of the "voice of the new wife and new mother" misses the depth of the ways in which Notley has, from the start, consistently recast and/or deepened the stakes of writing an urban, speech-oriented, personality-driven poetry that both inherits and critiques the poetics of her male predecessors, responds to those developed by her various contemporaries, and pitches ahead into the future.

The very first poem in her *Selected*, "Dear Dark Continent," announces these stakes. The epistolary address to an abstract concept—a relative of Mayer's form in *Desires*, and perhaps a precursor of Koch's apostrophe binge, *New Addresses* (2000)—introduces the dialogic mode that Notley will mine throughout the poetry that follows, whether in poems that record overheard conversations from the street, such as "Bus

Stop”; poems that record disjunctive conversations with her children, as in “January” (“Mommy what’s this fork doing?/What?/It’s being Donald Duck”); her nasty/funny postcard pieces (“Dear Fuckface,” one begins); her first attempts at channeling the voices of the dead, as in “Jack [Kerouac] Would Speak Through the Imperfect Medium of Alice,” or her more elaborate attempts at channeling, such as the book-length sequence *Closer to me & Closer . . . (The Language of Heaven)*, which talks with her dead father. “Dear Dark Continent” also introduces us to the particular combination of jaunty humor and dead seriousness Notley maintains throughout her poetry. (The seriousness arrives in the first two lines of the poem: “The quickening of/the palpable coffin.”) The phrase “dark continent” is Freud’s, of course, from “The Question of Lay Analysis”: “We know less about the sexual life of little girls than of boys. But we need not feel ashamed of this distinction; after all, the sexual life of adult women is a ‘dark continent’ for psychology.”³ To begin a *Selected Poems* with such an epistle is an audacious move, vaguely reminiscent of Sexton’s cocky positioning of herself as Oedipus (and the reader as Jocasta) in the epigram that begins her first book.⁴ Such beginnings announce that the poet (and by extension, her readers) are free to play with the *Doxa* of Western thought—free to mock its terms, to take them seriously, to refute them, to offer alternatives.

Bold as this announcement may be, it also notes a degree of alienation: what does it feel like, as an adult woman with a sexual life, to address a poem to “the sexual life of adult women,” even with a rich sense of irony? (And here I’m using “irony” not in the sense of postmodern high jinx, but rather in the sense elaborated by the poet Rae Armantrout in her excellent little essay, “Irony and Postmodern Poetry,” in which she declares, “irony is the stubborn mark of the divided psyche” [*Moving Borders*, 679]). The

text of “Dear Dark Continent” goes on to chart the contours of a divided psyche—or, rather, those of an *undifferentiated* psyche:

but I've ostensibly chosen
 my, a, *family*
 so early! so early! (as is done always
 as it would seem always) I'm a two
 now three irrevocably
 I'm wife I'm mother I'm
 myself and him and I'm myself and him and him

But isn't it only I in the real
 whole long universe?

But I and this he (and he) make ghosts of
 I and all the *hes* there would be, won't be

because by not I am he, we are I, I am we.

We're not the completion of myself.

Not the completion of myself but myself!
 through the whole long universe. (1)

Though Notley has said that she rejected the models of Plath, Rich, and/or Sexton quite early on—“when I was dealing with the problems of being a young mother and an aspiring poet . . . I decided the poems of Plath and Sexton were a genuinely negative influence” (Foster, 80)—the pronoun struggle at play here certainly echoes Rich's “I am she: I am he” moment from “Diving Into the Wreck,”⁵ and, even more strongly, Plath's endless struggle to pull herself out of a vortex of swirling (masculine) pronouns, as in the end of “Fever 103^o”: “Not you, nor him//Not him, nor him/(My selves dissolving, old whore petticoats).” As the progression of these three lines from “Fever 103^o” demonstrate, Plath's drama of undifferentiated (female) identity rarely finds a happy ending. Instead Plath relentlessly revisits a traumatic scene of origin: that of the birth of Eve out of Adam's side. Over and over again, Plath imagines this scene as the

simultaneous birth and death of the female subject: “It is Adam’s side,/This earth I rise from, and I in agony./I cannot undo myself, and the train is steaming,” she writes in “Getting There”; in “A Birthday Present”: “There would be a nobility then, there would be a birthday./And the knife not carve but enter//Pure and clean as the cry of a baby,/And the universe slide from my side.” Part of the dark generosity of Plath’s poetry (and probably part of the reason that Notley and so many others cite her as a bad influence) is that she dwells so persistently on the impossibility of finding a self that is “not you, nor him,” without simultaneously forecasting its immolation. In her book on Plath, the psychoanalytic literary critic Jacqueline Rose articulates this conundrum as follows: “We do not in fact have a term for identity free of the worst forms of social oppression which does not propel us beyond the bounds of identity in any recognisable form” (149).

Notley’s poetry—especially her later poetry—militates against this pronouncement. Instead of fixating on Eden, Notley aims to stage the action of her poetry “at the beginning of the world, before things were male & female in the way that they are now” (as she puts it in “Epic and Women Poets,” a talk given at Naropa [*Disembodied Poetics*, 108], and to use a mystical sort of poetic vision (“in the most unrestricted sense of that word,” she explains) to conceive of as-yet unrecognizable forms of identity. (*The Descent of Alette* is a veritable breeding ground for such forms, which include a fish-human hermaphrodite, a headless woman who speaks from her bloodied throat, a woman with the beak and eyes of an owl and a vagina of bone, and so on.) Like Plath, Notley explores the dangerous self-effacements of childbirth and the subsequent process of becoming “a slave, well mildly, to a baby” (*Selected Poems*, 7), but Notley does so in a wider tonal register.⁶ In “Dear Dark Continent,” for example, the

line “I’m/myself and him and I’m myself/and him and him” may feel a little claustrophobic, but there’s considerable pride and pleasure in the declaration a few lines later, “we are I, I am we.” Yet Notley always complicates this intersubjectivity with the question: “But isn’t it only I in the real/whole long universe? Alone to be/in the whole long universe?” This question has preoccupied Notley throughout her career, though her focus has shifted from the links between the living onto the links between the living and the dead. “I’m speaking of a dying person/embedded in certain ways self to self with me: how will we/extricate each other, to exist as separate essences?” she asks in “How We Spent the Last Year of His Life,” a poem in *Mysteries* about the death of Berrigan (70). Indeed, how *does* one experience oneself as a “separate essence”—i.e. how does one learn to think for oneself, and thus become, in Notley’s argot, truly “disobedient” (Emerson might say “self-reliant”)—while also coming to grips with how deeply shared consciousness can be, and how deeply embedded the living and the dead remain in each other? This is the dialectic that comes to shape the form and content of Notley’s poetic inquiries.

By the end of “Dear Dark Continent,” Notley seems to have momentarily talked herself away from the potentially devastating effects of post-partum disorientation via a Whitmanic celebration of self—a celebration which famously privileges communion over consolidation: “Not the completion of myself but myself! / through the whole long universe.” This invocation of Whitman also signals the depth of Notley’s early identifications with male predecessors, an identification which became most explicit in her book-length essay from 1980, *Dr. Williams’ Heiresses*. In her interview with Foster, she explains the drive behind that book and its title:

Well, *Dr. Williams' Heiresses* is about that. It's about my being able to relate to him and identify with him out of sexual reversal. I guess my theory was that it was easier—it was probably easier to be like Williams if you were a woman, because you couldn't be like him if you were a woman—and opposites can be same in spirit, and you could relate to a person like that in this whole oppositional way—in a battles of the sexes way. I don't know if this makes any sense to you . . . I don't do that anymore. (71)

I can understand why Notley's interest in this oppositional, "battle of the sexes," reverse-identification has evaporated. But her elaboration of it in the 70s and early 80s still marks an important alternative to both the patriarchal anxiety-of-influence model of literary relation and its inverse, the woman-centered call to matriarchal "re-vision" set forth by Rich in her influential 1971 essay, "When We Dead Awaken: Writing as Re-Vision." Instead, Notley privileges the play of gender performativity, along with a long-standing belief that cross-gender identification is a central aspect of being a poet: "I used to have this whole girl theory of poets, that all poets are essentially girls, and especially all the ones I related to, and that was what made all male poets different from other men . . . I think that men who are poets have to be in touch with their girl selves in order to be good poets, and I'm beginning to think it's my responsibility as a woman poet to be in touch with my male aspects in order to work properly" (Foster, 72). This idea isn't particularly novel, and one could easily hear in it an echo of Keats' negative capability, or of a humanism that celebrates Shakespeare, for example, as a truly "universal" artist—i.e. someone whose imaginative vision extends beyond all polarities, be they sexual or otherwise. But Notley's "girl theory" is a bit slyer, as its androgyny never trumps its feminism. For example, in the poem "World's Bliss," Notley conjures a vision of androgyny—"Why should a maiden lie on a moor/for seven nights and a day?/And he is a maiden, he is & she/on the grass the flower the spray/where they lie" (*SP*, 64)—but by the end of the poem, this fluidity only serves to render the last line of the poem more

forceful and surprising: “oh each poet’s a/beautiful human girl who must die.” Notley repeats this gesture—moving the “beautiful human girl” from poetic object to poetic source—throughout her lyric poetry, while her narrative projects address the slightly distinct but related questions: “Does a woman have a story? . . . What does a woman ‘do’?” (*DP*, 103).

It’s tempting to contrast Notley’s embrace of Williams, Whitman, O’Hara, and so on with her disinterest in the poetry of Sexton, Plath, and Rich, and to see the latter as a perplexing, and perhaps disappointing, rejection of her female contemporaries and/or recent predecessors. But such a reading skips over the fact that to many “bohemian” artists of the day, the work and reputations of those women appeared compromised by their more mainstream, “Boston Brahmin” milieu, which stood aesthetically and socially far afield from the more experimental, anti-academic poetry scene that Donald Allen aimed to showcase in *The New American Poetry*.⁷ In an autobiographical essay about her development as an artist during this period, the poet Kathleen Fraser offers a relevant summary of this distinction:

It was Olson’s declared move away from the narcissistically probing, psychological defining of self—so seductively explored by Sylvia Plath, Anne Sexton, and Robert Lowell in the early and mid-1960s, and by their avid followers for at least a generation after—that provided a major alternative ethic of writing for women poets. While seriously committed to gender consciousness, a number of us carried an increasing scepticism towards any fixed rhetoric of the poem, implied or intoned. (*Moving Borders*, 642)

Though Fraser is focused on Olson whereas Notley is not, Fraser’s account echoes comments Notley has made about her attraction to O’Hara at around the same time: “Much of mainstream poetry seems more narcissistic than O’Hara’s, say: he never says, Admire my emotion, or as Adrienne Rich often seems to, Admire my emotion which is Our emotion. He’s saying Together we will make a little fun of my emotion, which may

also be yours, while I try to demonstrate how emotion is the glue of our existence”
(Foster, 81).⁸

Given the importance of male homosexuality in the first-generation of the New York School, it isn't surprising that many of the second-generation writers—a much straighter bunch, for the most part—would inherit and transform (some might say co-opt) the queerness of their predecessors. “It's important not/to back out/of the mirror://You will be great, but/You will be queer//It's a complication,” reads a short but intriguing poem (“It's Important”) by Berrigan (*SP*, 51). Regardless of one's political feelings about the matter, it's undeniably fascinating to see how a poet like Berrigan pays homage to his first-generation heroes and also incorporates Notley's “girl theory” of poets in his work, as in his poem “For You (*for James Schuyler*).” The poem recounts a trip uptown with “Joe” to Klein's department store: “I go reeling/up First Avenue to Klein's. Christmas/is sexy there. We feel soft sweaters/and plump ruffled skirts we'd like to try” (4). The trip, along with the poem's dedication, bring us back to the scene in Schuyler's “The Morning of the Poem” in which Schuyler and Ashbery stand outside a department store window, contemplating those knitted ribbon dresses. Perhaps even more interesting, however, is to see how Notley handles the situation, as both an admirer of Whitman and O'Hara, and also as the lesser-known wife of an older, driven, opinionated poet who perhaps felt more at ease in donning their poetic mantle. (In a poem from *Mysteries* that converses with the dead Berrigan, Notley looks back on this situation and tries to explain it to him: “Men were a problem then—I see that better/in the future, but you, sometimes you were “men,”/usually not.’” To which Berrigan replies, “Then were men men?” [45]). Even though Notley says she sees it better “in the

protect me from all
real
harm.

Nov. 16, 1983 (16)

The poem is short and to-the-point, but like Berrigan's "It's Important," perhaps deceptively so, especially when one goes back to the original O'Hara poem. O'Hara's "Joe's Jacket" is a lovely, dense, and slightly ominous account of a trip to Southampton with Jasper Johns, Joe LeSueur, Kenneth Koch, and Vincent Warren (with whom O'Hara was just beginning an affair), in which Joe's jacket—a seersucker—eventually serves as a symbol of "all enormity and life." At the end of his weekend away from the city, O'Hara puts on the jacket to protect against any number of threats named in the poem: melancholy, insomnia, alcoholism, boredom, the risks of falling in love, "anxiety and self distrust," and so on.⁹ He borrows the talismanic seersucker from Joe; Notley then borrows it from O'Hara, thus setting up an intertextual wager about the power of poetry and poetic community. Her question, "Is it/my jacket, too?" is poignant in its hesitant desire to join the circuit created by O'Hara's poetry, and in its deep hope that poetry itself can be more than a symbolic shield from harm.

Notley's poem eventually decides that the jacket can, in fact, be hers too. But the poem also sustains a subtle and unresolved tension, in that O'Hara's poem quietly supplants Notley's—that is, she says she reads his poem instead of writing her own. (Actually, to be exact: she says she didn't write "Joe's Jacket," but she does write the poem at hand, so it's even trickier.) Either way, the attention placed on the problem of wearing a man's suit jacket brings to mind certain parallel developments in feminist criticism throughout the 70s and 80s—developments which Jane Gallop summarized in 1988 (in *Thinking Through the Body*) as follows:

In 1978, Elaine Showalter saw feminist critics as ‘Annie Hall,’ women in ‘men’s ill-fitting hand-me-downs.’ In 1983, she saw male feminists as ‘Tootsie,’ men in women’s clothing. But what about the post-structural feminist who is wearing the hand-me-downs of men-in-drag, writing a feminine which has become a male transvestite style? What is double-crossdressing? . . . What is the position of the woman who identifies with men who identify with women? (100)

Though perhaps a bit dated, Gallop’s questions are still pertinent here, especially as they draw attention to the ways in which “Joe’s jacket” might fail to fit or protect the female poet, even when she’s going for butch. Despite Notley’s deep affinity with O’Hara (specifically with his commitment to “fast talk,” which I’ll discuss later), Notley realized early on that her relationship to the quotidian differed dramatically from O’Hara’s. To put it bluntly, hers lacked serenity—and a serenity that has something to do with wearing a suit, even if one wears it perversely. “I wanted to write something like O’Hara’s *Lunch Poems*,” Notley explains, “[t]hey have a serenity to them which seems to emerge from the rather strict borders of his work at the museum: the hours, the suit and tie, the office, etc., as if the fact of being a rather anonymous worker like that was the condition that lit up the poem.” But by her early twenties, Notley realized that she “didn’t really have anything to put into the form of the I do this I do that, or any other form involving the details of going through the day.” (Email interview, 2/9/02). Or, rather, the details that she *did* have to put into the form couldn’t play off of the same mystique of the ordinary as O’Hara’s *Lunch Poems* had. The frustration with this situation becomes palpable in the long collage poem “January”:

I didn’t lose any weight today
 I had clean hair but I drove
 Ted nuts and spanked Anselm on
 the arm and wouldn’t converse
 with him about the letter “C.” And
 didn’t take Edmund out or change

found his own . . . /What a glistening golden/baby!” Such progression reflects the surrealism of, say, O’Hara’s “Second Avenue,” or the elliptical composition of an early Ashbery experiment like “Idaho,” but “January” intentionally shuns the flow of the former and contains far more personal pathos than the latter. The scattered lunacy of “January” pushes at the limits of what kinds of emotions and speech patterns a “daily” poem can contain. As discussed earlier, Mayer’s *Midwinter Day* contends with a similar problem, but whereas Mayer often chooses narcotic flow, Notley opts for syncopated agitation, as in the beginning of the poem “As You Like It”: “Hi. You going out today?/You tell Mommy buy you ice cream./You tell Mommy go fuck self./ Hi./Okay” (*Margaret and Dusty*, 21). And though Notley includes and celebrates the language of her children just as insistently as does Mayer, Notley’s exhaustion from their endless speech occasionally becomes acute, as in the end of “Waltzing Matilda”: “Mom/why don’t/people read in the dark? They can’t see the words in the/dark. I can. Please go to sleep now. Please, honey” (*SP*, 67). These concluding lines feel especially bittersweet coming from a poet so in love with the ongoing patter of human dialogue, and so enraptured by the mystical ideal of going into the darkness to find words.

Notley’s ambivalence about a poetry focused on the details of so-called “everyday life” may have deepened over the years, but the ambivalence can be found alive and kicking in her earliest poetry. The second poem in Notley’s *Selected* is a piece from the early 70s that addresses the issue quite literally:

Your Dailiness,

I guess I must address you
 begin and progress somewhat peculiarly, wanting
 not to be afraid to be anonymous, to love what’s at hand
 I put out a hand, it’s sewn & pasted hingewise &
 enclosed in a cover. I’m 27 and booked, and my
 grandfather

My grandfather, I begin with, played dominoes
 called them “bones”. Bones is a doctor on Star Trek.
 Black, intensive, rectangular solids starred
 with white dots, and laid from end to end. (2)

The task of addressing “dailiness” quickly reveals itself to be more of an imperative than an experiment, perhaps reflecting the fact that Notley was finding the quotidian “a little too fetishized by the time it was [her] turn to write it” (Email interview, 2/9/02). Thus her epistle begins with hesitancy and “peculiarity.” The fear of being anonymous is far more intense than in the poetry of her New York School predecessors, and the sensation of being “booked”—either in the sense of being overly busy or deeply involved with reading or writing—produces as much anxiety and suspicion as it does pleasure. As in her poem about “Joe’s Jacket,” one can also hear an understated drama about the process of coming-to-writing, in that “putting out a hand” here doesn’t necessarily mean picking up a pen and becoming an *auteur*, but may also involve getting trapped, “sewn and pasted hingewise &/enclosed in a cover.” Notley wants to “love what’s at hand,” but she doesn’t want to feel coerced to do so. Experiencing it as a pressure, she quickly wriggles into a different kind of poem. The first stanza break marks this move, after which she begins again, this time with her grandfather. The poem continues: “That night I dreamed of my grandfather, playing/ dominoes, and my mother my aunts—dreams are not/brightly lit—a brownish dream,” thus introducing the preoccupation with dead men and dreams that will structure so much of her work. Like *Disobedience*, which combines daily commentary with fantasy and dreams, “Your Dailiness” also glides between these modes, albeit on a smaller scale:

Several months before I met my husband
 I began to concentrate on ghosts, that they were there,

there here, and I, I might see one, if anyone why
 not as with anything, I? I waited every night. I
 went to bed and turned out the light, though no longer
 lovingly hugged the dark, to see if it would appear,
 the ghost. For three months. Nervously fell asleep.
 I told my friend Mary she said Why not just see it?
 I didn't want to be one who saw ghosts. I waited
 waited. Then I dreamed

a woman a poet spoke to me
 out of a drawing on my wall spoke what? Spoke.
 The ghost would appear, and in a shower of gold, he
 appeared and he was Rory Calhoun in his corniest
 grin and loudest plaidest with shoulders sportscoat.
 We embraced. (4)

The passage gives an account of Notley's coming-to-terms with being "one who sees ghosts" and then writes about the encounters—not a particularly common "New York School" trait or activity. The story also marks Notley as a "whacher," as described by Anne Carson—also a "whacher"—in her long poem, "The Glass Essay" from *Glass, Irony, and God*. Referring to Emily Brontë's habitual misspelling of the word "watcher," Carson explains that a whacher is one who whaches "God and humans and moor wind and open night . . . eyes, stars, inside, outside, actual weather . . . the bars of time . . . the poor core of the world/wide open" (4). Further, as Carson explains, "to be a whacher is not a choice." A whacher cannot turn away from her visions, for "[t]here is nowhere else to go,/no ledge to climb up to." (In Notley's lingo, this "whaching" might be described as "walking straight into the dark and staying there awhile," as she has elsewhere described her process [McCabe, 274]). In "The Glass Essay," Carson's psychotherapist repeatedly asks her, "Why keep watching?" ("Some people watch, that's all I can say," Carson answers). In "Your Dailiness," Notley's friend Mary takes the opposite tact: "Why not just see it?," she asks. The latter approach seems to work for Notley: when she stops worrying about becoming someone who sees dead people, the dead appear, and

often as unthreatening friends or celebrities. The arrival of the gaudily-dressed Rory Calhoun (a cowboy star of Wild West flicks) marks the first of many ghostly visitations that Notley will record in her poetry, many of which retain a similar sense of humor, even when they contend with agonizing losses. (See the beginning of *Closer to me & Closer*, for example, where Notley's father tries to describe life in heaven: "Being dead is like one fun . . . that's a Chinese joke" [9]).

Humor has always played an important role in Notley's poetry, as it has in most poetry associated with the New York School. ("Humor" "is closer" "to the/divine than" "you might think," she writes in *The Descent of Alette* [76].¹⁰) But Notley's use of humor has consistently chafed against any simplistic opposition of insouciance and seriousness, especially political seriousness. As she explains:

New York School in particular was against anguish and in favor of humor and the general light of day. This could be very liberating, but got to be a problem if one encountered anguish in one's life and wanted to write about it. You can see towards the end of *Phoebe Light* a little darkness seeping in, and a sense of woman's problems and feminist concerns. These felt a little forbidden, unless handled inside a certain tonal range. The message seemed to be Don't have those feelings and thoughts, because our poetics doesn't include them. But all poetics, all poetry schools do this—rule out something or other—so they're all suspect. Which doesn't mean they can't be useful at some point or other. But a poetics is a lot more transitory than a poem is. (Foster, 79)

Notley makes several important distinctions here. The first recognizes that while a poetic stance in favor of "humor and the general light of day" may have stood in useful opposition to the more world-weary, depressive attitude of much American poetry up through the 1950s ("It was a daring thing to insist on the happiness of the autonomous individual in the teeth of all that would militate against it," Lehman writes in *The Last Avant-Garde* [35]), stances of any kind—even those that advocate joy—can also become codified and confining. Notley reminds us that this codification often has more to do with the critical delineation of poetic schools than with the action of poems themselves:

to make distinctions between one type of writing and another is to court generalizations; in doing so, one immediately risks flattening the range of the poetry at hand. (To take an obvious example, O'Hara's reputation as the dashing "I do this, I do that" City Poet has often obscured the scope of his poetry, which can be as melancholy, terse, eerie, mathematical, elegaic, and/or contemplative as buoyant, spontaneous, or rakish. Luckily, a single afternoon spent with his *Collected Poems* can remedy this situation.) Notley here acknowledges that poetic stances have to change with the "bhav," to use a yogic term Myles is fond of, signifying "the quality of the room when people are there." "The poet has to address the *bhav*, not only in herself, but within the room of the culture," Myles explains. "O'Hara didn't have to watch his friends die around him [of AIDS]. It's a different *bhav*" (Richard, 25-26).

In considering Notley's *bhav*, it's not hard to imagine how a woman poet developing a feminist consciousness in the 70s could experience an insistence on a poetry of apolitical frivolity as a bit confining. The stereotype of a feminist as someone who lacks a sense of humor invariably comes to mind here. It's important, I think, to find a way to celebrate the humor of the New York School without recourse to this stereotype. This problem rears its head most starkly in critical discussions of Koch, whose poetic treatment of women can be disturbing and uncharacteristically tiresome. Many critics hastily rush to defend this aspect of Koch's work by invoking Koch's own commitment to humor. For example, after quoting the lines of Koch's poem "The Art of Love" which imagine jumping on a woman tied up to a bed until she's "all flattened/and splayed out," the critic David Spurr writes: " 'It's supposed to be funny,' Koch once remarked in conversation to an outraged female acquaintance" (*Scene of My Selves*, 352).¹¹ One repeatedly gets the sense that even to broach the subject is to invite

being tarred as a spoilsport (or “righteously indignant,” as Lehman has it [205]). Notley’s unwillingness to pit her sense of humor against her political convictions or her feminism—indeed, her insistence that they work in tandem—challenges this defensive line of thinking. Further, she reminds us to stay on the lookout for this subtle form of policing, which can occur in “avant-garde” or aestheticist circles as much as anywhere else.

In writing about the first-generation of the New York School, Lehman asserts that “[t]hey experimented not for experimentation’s sake but for the sake of writing great poems” (9). I’m not sure such a distinction bears up under scrutiny, but the statement is useful insofar as it points toward another aspect of Notley’s difference. Notley has repeatedly said that her poetic experiments do not pursue beauty, novelty, nor aesthetic greatness; rather, they search for truth. “Truth” hasn’t enjoyed much popularity as a concept in any field, poetic or otherwise, for quite some time, and Notley’s unembarrassed use of it differentiates her—sometimes vociferously—from a whole host of fellow poets and/or thinkers. This search goes hand-in-hand with Notley’s deep, unironic investment in poetry as an “honorable, exacting, necessary occupation,” which has nothing to do with “who’s the best poet” and everything to do with “continuing the tradition of poetry, making sure its ‘services’—spiritual, intellectual—remain available to people” (Goldman, 8). For this reason among others, Notley doesn’t think of herself as an experimental poet: “I write usually what it seems to me poetry needs next; I suppose that’s why all my works look different from each other and I suppose that’s what lands me in the experimental category” (Goldman, 28). And the last thing she apparently thinks poetry needs next is another well-wrought urn. “Now I have to improve this/poem by making it longer & a/mess,” she writes in the poem “Homage to Marianne

Moore" (*Margaret and Dusty*, 54), articulating the very un-Mooreian sentiment that could be taken as the *modus operandi* of her later, book-length poems. Whereas O'Hara, Koch, and Ashbery generally used Surrealist techniques to generate an atmosphere of limitless invention and/or instances of giddy beauty, Notley's surrealism generally eschews the literary in favor of the truly dark or bizarre. Like Mayer in the opening section of *Midwinter Day*, Notley makes little to no attempt to organize or prettify the details of her dreams. The emphasis remains on their prolificacy, and on their essentially feral nature. This method becomes particularly intense in *The Descent of Alette*, which takes its images from dreams Notley had at night, dreams she had during brief spells of sleep during the day, and visions from self-induced trances. Generally speaking, while writing *Alette*, her rule was to write down the first thing she saw, or whatever images kept coming back, while trying to eliminate what other people had already used. "Dreams are really bizarre," she explains, "but when people write something dreamlike they often don't include the bizarre, they don't trust it. And the tradition of the dream vision excludes the bizarre in favor of the beautiful" (Email interview, 10/29/02). Notley clearly meant *Alette* to counter this tradition.

The result is remarkable, and, paradoxically enough, quite beautiful. Though its opening line, "One day, I awoke" "& found myself on" "a subway, endlessly," is clearly reminiscent of the *Inferno's* "Nel mezzo del cammin di nostra vita," the universe of subways, caves, black lakes, snakes, display cases, and so on that *Alette* journeys through creates a cosmology all its own. One can start down the road of comparing *Alette* with other big epics, but the road quickly turns out to be a dead-end, as the poet/critic Fred Chappell discovers as he struggles to make sense of the poem in *The Georgia Review*.

It is unfair to hold a contemporary poet to the standard of Dante, but it is also impossible to keep the comparison at bay . . . Her story is nearly as nightmarish as Dante's . . . but its logic is not so inexorable—in fact, usually the logic is not even discoverable, seeming such a product of arbitrary fancy that it lacks the stern inevitability that chastens and convinces readers simultaneously. (151)

Following this logic, Chappell is forced to conclude, “I do not pretend to understand *The Descent of Alette*. In fact, I will even surmise that it is not meant to be understood in the way that *The Divine Comedy* can be understood. . . [it] must be read as mystification for its own sake” (153). Exactly so—though the phrase “for its own sake” again makes me wary, as the charges of narcissism, selfishness, or an irresponsible disregard for the welfare of the polis always seem to lurk nearby. But in terms of the arbitrariness of *Alette*, Chappell is right-on: instead of systematizing the book into an inevitable, symbolic universe, Notley’s dream logic combines her tireless investigation into her unconscious with a Cageian randomness.

The combination is a fruitful one: it disrupts the Freudian drive toward fixed interpretation that Deleuze and others have railed against (the drive that would reduce the six or seven wolves in the Wolf Man’s dream, for example, into one wolf: i.e., the father), and instead encourages a shifting—a shifting that returns us again to Tomkins’ conviction that any affect can be attached to any object. This principle is essentially a declaration of freedom, insofar as it re-focuses attention on the human subject’s capacity to “invest any and every aspect of existence” with any one of a whole range of positive to negative feelings, from “the magic of excitement and joy” to “the dread of fear or shame or distress” (Tomkins, 54), instead of the fixed effects that one would expect certain stimuli to occasion (the latter being a moralist’s universe, without a doubt). Though it distresses him, Chappell discerns this principle as well: “The images [in *Alette*] point toward meanings beyond themselves only during the time it takes an incident

concerning them to occur. Then the meanings shift. This is the obverse of Dante . . . [In *Alette*] the motivic images—snake, meadow, cavern, tree, mask, lapis, and so forth—recur constantly but there are no steady root meanings” (153). *Alette* maintains a tension between the fixity and flux of symbols, but it’s a productive one—and one we can read in a variety of ways: as feminist revision, as pomo slippage, as the contextual truth of an analytic scene, as pragmatic relativism, or even as an offshoot of transcendentalism, in which “no particular figurative insight has any finality because truth changes over time,” and yet each figure must be scrutinized as “fossil poetry.”¹² We can see this scrutiny at play, for example, in the scene in Book One in which Alette encounters a funny eyeball scurrying around the subway floor: ““This eyeball’s funny” “on the gray floor”/”among round stains” “& ashes” . . . “I guess it’s blue-eyed” “dark blue” “No eyebrows, of / course” “Doesn’t blink much” “Intent” “intent on looking”/ “What’s it looking for?” “I guess, whatever” ’ [Alette, 31]. Both Alette and the eyeball itself are intent on looking; Notley’s job is to “whack” them, then transcribe the scene in detail, *even if* the scrutiny ends in mystification or indifference: “I guess, whatever.”

At the beginning of *Alette*, Notley includes a note that explains her eccentric use of quotation marks throughout the long poem. In addition to measuring the poem’s poetic feet, she explains that “they should also remind the reader that each phrase is a thing said by a voice: this is not a thought, or a record of a thought-process; this is a story, told.” The point is an important one, and not just because it aids in our understanding of *Alette*. Notley is also pointing out the vital link between her “feminine epic” and her prior work: both are deeply invested in speech, and together they constitute a deepening wager about the power of personality that resides in vocalized words and rhythms. And here is where Notley’s mystical search for truth meets back up

with the New York School, as the New York School may eventually go down in poetic history as one long celebration of “fast talk.” As Myles puts it, “talk is the throughline in all this work . . . The talk narrated the New York pace of life, the talk walked you through the party, the hangover” (Lehman, 368).¹³ Notley echoes this idea when she says: “that’s what O’Hara’s all about. It’s all about talking fast to someone. That’s what we do. We talk fast to someone” (Foster, 71). Poetry in this tradition does more than present written approximations of “fast talk.” It also recognizes that voluptuous, rapid speech is a deep pleasure, and that this pleasure can be placed at the heart of a poetics. And though my study is not focused on the rich history of live poetry performances from the Beat era to the present, I would point out here that this “fast talk” on the page is but one element of a city and scene that was teeming with live talk, be it poetry-performance talk, telephone talk, bar talk, pillow talk, stoop talk, and so on.

Notley’s particular contribution to this tradition has to do with her unabashedly spiritual conviction that personality is primordial—that the sounds we generate or “channel” from others speak of something sacred, something boundless. “Poetry is about personality. It’s the writer or the poet giving her whole self, and a self is personality,” she says, explicitly countering Eliot’s famous edict that poetry is an escape from personality. Notley’s vision thus refuses the standard line that one must transcend the particular in order to reach the universal. Instead, she gets metaphysical by laboring to record the verbal rhythms of others, especially dead others. This task is logorrheic by nature, and it agitates against the notion often floated in poetic circles that the words that matter most are the ones that *don’t* get said. Also, given that most of the dead that she speaks with are men—“the dead in my life are men, and I need to talk to them,” she explains (Email interview, 2/04/02)—her poetic dialogues with them stand apart from

the macho, minimalist models of male speech represented by everything from the laconic prose of Hemingway or Raymond Carver (Carver even has a book of stories entitled *Will You Please Be Quiet, Please?*) to the lovely, if anguished, poetic condensations of George Oppen or Robert Creeley. Though there are seeds of this dialogic mode in her early work, the death of Berrigan seems to have brought an urgency to the process, as the following teeny poems from *At Night the States*, written shortly after Berrigan's death, suggest:

grace him my heart there grown pale
 joy to hear and see him kind
 but now I speak only to air
 yet how like my mind he is to me
 9/2/83 (4)

Aside: Voice

I love your voice.
 And when they die
 their voices will still
 live together.
 12/84 (65)

By all accounts, Berrigan was a loquacious man, and in these poems one can hear the deep pain of losing an intimate and captivating conversationalist. But the pain is mitigated, or at least accompanied, by the hope that there's something unfathomable or eternal about voice, that voice is in fact some kind of immortal essence. (And here I don't mean "voice" in its customary lit-crit sense, as in "point of view," creation of a character, or the approximation of a dialect. I mean the idiosyncratic way that personality collaborates with physiology and culture to create the rhythm and sound of an individual's speech. Galvanized by this feeling, Notley embarked on a number of pieces that attempt to bring dead men to speech, be they Berrigan, her brother, her father, or,

the Surrealist poet Robert Desnos (a poet also known for writing in trances and/or his sleep, and who perished tragically as a result of his internment in a Nazi concentration camp).

This channeling isn't always an easy task, however, and Notley often records its tribulations. Listen, for example, to the beginning of the poem, "I Must Have Called and So He Comes" (from *Mysteries*):

"You're accusing me of something in these poems."
 "No, Ted, I'm not accusing you—can't catch your voice though."
 "Through dead curtains," he says. Gives me the disgusted
 Berrigan moue, casts match aside lighting cigarette
 "So what are you doing?" he says. I say, "As the giant lasagne
 on Star Trek—remember, Spock mindmelds with her
 and screams, Pain." "So this is pain?" he says.
 "I suppose it is. Was. But not from you," I say.
 "We don't say pain we say fucked-up," he says, "Or
 Kill the motherraper. Inside yourself . . ." (he fades)
 "I can't catch your voice . . ." (I say)
 ". . . there's a place inside you," he says, "a poetry self, made by
 pain but not
 violated—oh I don't say violated,
 you're not getting my dialogue right, you can't remember
 my style."
 "Would you say touched, instead?" I say.
 "There's this place in us," he says, "the so-called pain can't
 get to
 like a shelter behind those spices—coffee and sugar, spices,
 matches, cockroach doodoo on the kitchen shelf." (45)

The passage manages to impart a sense of Berrigan's character and presence while also giving voice to a lonely speaker facing complications about grief, remembrance, and communication. Further, Notley's willingness to align her process with the "mindmelding" Spock does on Star Trek evidences the sense of humor that saves her channeling procedures from seeming unbearably self-serious. For anyone who is wondering how seriously she does take them—i.e., to what extent she believes that the

dead actually speak to her—her introduction to *Close to me* & *Closer* sheds some light on the subject:

I wrote *Close to me* . . . in '91 and '92, beginning around Christmas-time and concluding in February. I remember feeling very happy writing it, waking up mornings with my dead father's voice in my head. In order to write his speeches properly I had to have faith that that was his literal voice I heard . . . I hadn't heard my father speak in fifteen, sixteen years, but one never forgets a parent's voice, and he just took over. . . . I'm loathe to say he didn't really write his part of the poem; and I feel the daughter's parts of the dialogue are nowhere near as good as the father's. He bested me. He should have, he had the knowledge of the dead. (3)

The emphasis here is on faith, without which it's virtually impossible to pursue any ambitious artistic project—ghosts or no ghosts—to its completion. With this kind of project, the question of whether or not the finished product ends up an aesthetic masterpiece begins to fade, seeming less and less the point. Though Notley's register is mystical whereas Mayer's tends toward the scientific, the works of both writers can be admired similarly, for their willingness to ask poetry to take on tasks that it hasn't before. For Notley, these tasks often entail finding new ways to notate speech patterns. The result has been some pretty freaky-looking poetry—poetry almost guaranteed to alienate the more casual reader (though she insists that she has “*always* want[ed] to write poems anyone can understand” [Goldman, 6]).¹⁴ Her books have increasingly come with explanations and/or warnings about their unusual markings, as in the explanatory note about the quotation marks in *The Descent of Alette* or the preface to *Close to me*, in which Notley writes: “I warn the reader that the daughter's parts may be initially hard to catch prosodically. They are characterized by mid-line capital letters which signal, quickly (other punctuation's too slowing), the beginning of a new foot or sub-line. This device, as well as the use of underline and ellipsis in the father's parts (though they're in prose), are an attempt to make a more sonically nuanced line.” (So on the page, the father's lines

appear as follows: “The god/fetus/drawing, thing, knows. It knows about . . . what they call the uncreated . . . the big happy dark . . . And the very bad, world”; the daughter’s: “The wind is sober Blown through me/I have outlines And an eye” [21].)

Given the profundity of Notley’s investment in speech, personality, “pure self,” and soul, one can imagine the rift that began to develop between her poetics and those of the Language poets, many of whom labored throughout the late 70s and the 80s (along with structuralism and poststructuralism at large) to denaturalize and destabilize precisely these concepts. In one of Notley’s “Dear Advisor” poems (the one dated Dec. 5, 1980), you can hear the beginnings of this rift, though it begins in humor. She writes her Advisor: “I am having trouble with my writing because the words aren’t jostling each other glitteringly in a certain way & they all have referents I think if that is a trouble . . . you see it’s all about usage of words & to say what you intend to & [my husband] has always in the past been excessively careful with words, we both read L=A=N=G=U=A=G=E magazine.” (*SP*, 71). In a later response in the same series, the Advisor writes back: “Dear Anonymous . . . I see little difference between you and your husband—you’re both big and awkward sentimental truth-telling fuckups though you each have a different cover story” (82). Characterizing oneself as a “big and awkward sentimental truth-telling fuckup” marks a considerable distance from the more sober, theoretical poetic stances developing in Language quarters, exemplified by Bruce Andrews’ “author dies, writing begins” slogan (derived from Barthes and Foucault, among others); Ron Silliman’s neo-Marxist critique of the so-called “referential fetish”; or Charles Bernstein’s conviction that consciousness itself is essentially a “syntacticalization” (*The Language Book*, 54, 131, 43); and so on. This last idea is essentially a paraphrase of the French linguist Emile Benveniste, who asserted: “It is in and through

language that man constitutes himself as a *subject* . . . it is literally true that the basis of subjectivity is in the exercise of language” (Silverman, 1, 44). Here isn’t the place to sound the depths of the influence that this idea has had on semiotics, psychoanalysis, linguistics, literary theory, and feminism over the past century; suffice to say that Notley’s resistance to the idea reminds us that it is just that—an idea—not a “literal truth” to which everyone must eventually submit. “Like many writers I feel ambivalent about words, I know they don’t work, I know they aren’t it. I don’t in the least feel that everything is language,” Notley has said, laying bare at least one of the reasons why she has never written “language-based poetry as such” (Goldman, 6).

The divergence is real and significant. At the same time, it should not be understood as yet another conservative, reactionary response to poststructuralist theory and its “radical” ramifications. Notley’s social and political concerns overlap considerably with those of many Language writers; further, the ideological demarcations of “Language writing” itself are nowhere near as cut-and-dry as its critics often suppose. (This is especially true amongst the women, who have generally resisted the oppositional polemics that Bernstein and others have cultivated. See Rae Armantrout’s talk, “Cheshire Poetics,” for example [in *Fence Spring/Summer 2000*], which begins: “Most of you know [that I am associated with Language writing]—but when you know that, what do you know? This group is as varied, as diverse as any poetic school you can think of” [92].) Furthermore, Notley’s investigations into the sounds of the social self have made her work interesting to many writers associated with Language, including Leslie Scalapino, who discusses the collection *Margaret & Dusty* in a heady essay entitled, “Pattern—and the ‘Simulacral’ ” from the collection *Artifice and Indeterminacy*. This essay treats the poems of *Margaret & Dusty* as “an interwoven pattern of voices and characters,” and the

authorial voice as “a social surface, or a constructed personality” (137). Scalapino observes:

The creation of voices in *Margaret & Dusty* apes projections [of] what we think “life” is or what we think ourselves are. People are mimicked to be seen as social configurations and also as “talk,” the conversations in the book that are the abstraction the only existence of the person . . . the conversation of all those people in the writing becomes the only stuff there is. (138)

Scalapino rightly grasps that Notley’s speech/music collages construct and/or reflect the social configurations of subjectivity. But a reading that leaves off there, and that concludes that talk is “the only stuff there is,” seems to take what it wants from Notley’s vision while leaving the rest behind. Plenty of the poems in *Margaret & Dusty* give this impression, but there are many other moments in the book which voice a dissatisfaction with skimming the surface of social speech. For example, the book closes with the following lines from the poem “Sweetheart”:

I would like not to think, it
 makes me foreigner of myself I’d like

 this strange enrichment of the
 spirit I feel though bereft
 but I’d like this lovely inadequate
 apartment
 but I’d like my music
 my mental music not to
 suddenly render me rawly sad
 “You have empty honey” “Yes, I have”

 this person who sleeps in my bed
 she’s slept there forever and yet
 there was another
 when it was another
 bed looking so same so recently
 but that I would have to remember
 (strangely an involuntary measure)

 O Poem really addressed
 to me, it’s you are found indulgent
 fit of comfort, lustre, real light

I praise you, thank you
for being what I have tonight

1/18/84 (75)

Here Notley seems to be feeling out not just the contours of the social self, but also the possibilities of other selves—a split audible in the very first line: “I would like not to think, it/makes me foreigner of myself,” then repeated in the image of another self—a twin self, as it were—sleeping in her bed. The collection of poems generally celebrates the wide variety of her “mental music,” but in this poem one gets a sense of her fatigue with it. In another poem from the collection, “Congratulating Wedge,” Notley reiterates this sentiment: “I’m ashamed to keep on babbling/as if I’ve always been oneself,/diamond flow through” (65). Scalapino argues that the book is postmodern in that it recognizes social definitions “as not intrinsic to reality or oneself.” Notley nods in this direction, but she doesn’t accept a display of the consequent alienation as an adequate basis for her poetic inquiries.

After *Margaret & Dusty*, this sense of impatience or shame seemed to deepen, and Notley turned away from both the cacophany of social speech and the vicissitudes of one’s own “mental music.” She also moved from New York to Paris, which she found a much less open city. “[New York] has a life of its own that is itself as community, as everything out in the open, all the immigrants, the street people, the density of it,” she observes. “The French are a private, family-oriented people, though I am told this is less so in the south . . . Parisians go inside their apartments, shut the door and join their families” (Email interview, 2/9/02). In the introduction to *The Scarlet Cabinet* (1992), the compendium of books that includes *Closer to me* and *Désamère*, Notley asserts: “one is no longer entitled to write down every thought, rush it straight into print . . . The mannered

tracing of a mind which, by constantly denying its own existence as ‘someone,’ becomes of interest only to translators or difficult discourse, to critics.” This comment directly rejects the kind of reading Scalapino offers above. In her talk “Epic and Women Poets,” Notley’s irritation with available forms of speech-based poetry becomes palpable: “Think of the typical cadences of the various kinds of modern poetry—Language poetry, New York School, New Yorker-type poetry, etc. . . . The modern trend is to sound very much like a person speaking. Language poetry, on the other hand, often sounds like a mind or voice reading printed matter. But there is the possibility of pushing harder at cadence . . .” (DP, 107) For Notley, this “pushing harder at cadence” means finding “a new measure,” and then using it to tell a “holy story.” Seeing academic feminism as hopelessly invested in the kind of scientized post-structuralist theory that insists that there is no true self or soul outside of linguistic and/or social construction, Notley throws her bag in with an idiosyncratic feminist mysticism that privileges “vision” over “language”: “we don’t need new words, new languages, new syntax, we need a whole new flesh, new beings to look at, literally, a new universe. The key is not in language, but in vision” (DP, 108-9). Notley aims to challenge an obsolete but still functioning patriarchy by dreaming up new worlds and giving them voice—an essentially utopian project that has appealed to many feminist writers throughout time (from Christine de Pizan’s medieval feminist epic *The Book of the City of Ladies* (1405), to Margaret Cavendish’s comedic play *Convent of Pleasure* (1668) to Charlotte Perkin Gilman’s *Herland* (1915), to Monique Wittig’s lesbian-warrior epic *Les Guérillères* (1969), to a whole host of recent science-fiction), but that has fallen somewhat out of favor in second- and third-wave American feminism.¹⁵

Hence, *The Descent of Alette*—Notley’s first attempt to construct a narrative poetic epic with a female protagonist (i.e. Alette, whose name came to her in a dream).¹⁶ Notley had used a similar form—quotation marks marking poetic feet—to address epic themes (war, quest, death, rebirth, etc.) in an earlier six-page poem, “White Phosphorous,” in which a dead soldier talks to his sister (a dialogue presumably derived from conversations with her late brother, who had been a tormented Vietnam vet). But Notley grew impatient with the woman’s role as “essentially passive: sufferer, survivor.” After much meditating on the question of whether or not a woman has any kind of active story that could be the basis of an epic, Notley came up with the following answer: “Insomuch as woman dream, they participate in stories every night of their lives. Profound stories which may involve sex, death, violence, journeys, quests, all the stuff of epic & much of narrative” (*DP*, 103). Thus the importance of dreams in the creation of *Alette*, the writing of which consolidated Notley’s belief that “life is a dream; that we construct reality in a dreamlike way; that we agree to be in the same dream; and that the only way to change reality is to recognize its dreamlike qualities and act as if it is malleable” (Email interview, 2/4/02). It’s not a form of activism that would impress a policy wonk. But why should it? Notley is a poet, and the immensity of her poetic ambition, along with the aesthetic force of her imaginings, exemplify the kind of freakishness and moxie needed to energize feminist inquiry in any arena. “Liberation will not happen unless individual women agree to be outcasts, eccentrics, perverts and whatever else the powers-that-be choose to call them,” Germaine Greer wrote years ago in *The Female Eunuch* (348), and Notley’s unstinting dedication to a “disobedient poetics” incites her readers in this still necessary and underdeveloped direction.

Alette denies autobiographical resonance from the start—its introductory note insists that “Alice” is not “Alette.” Shortly after *Alette*, however, Notley reversed course, and published a chronological series of autobiographical poems, *Mysteries of Small Houses*. The two projects are intimately linked in that both address the same question—“does a woman have a story?”—albeit from opposite angles. The poems of *Mysteries* track Notley’s life from around age four to the present, moving through (as the back of the book has it), “the stages of her life and . . . the identities she has assumed—child, youth, lover, poet, wife, mother, friend, and widow.” In reaction to the distaste for the “I” that had come to characterize much literary theory and poetic practice, Notley intended *Mysteries* to “re-center the I.” As she explains:

Basic I is terrifying, of course. It really exists, but we seem to construct everything—our world, our social forms, our narratives, and our anti-narratives—in order to keep it hidden. I wanted to find ‘my self,’ as the only self I could investigate—in the context of my past in order to determine its constancy, or lack of it, across the years. I thus had to ‘re-see’ my life. I tried for a scary honesty; I wanted to be frightened by my own existence. Be as alive as I am and not be in other people’s ideas of life-shapes or other people’s theories about the non-existence of the self. (Goldman, 5)

Though the two books differ dramatically in tone and substance, Notley’s project may bring to mind Roland Barthes’ postmodern autobiography, *Roland Barthes by Roland Barthes*. Barthes remains far more enraptured by the principle “that *the subject is merely an effect of language*,” but the pleasure he takes in the slipperiness of this situation runs alongside a perverse unwillingness to grasp it. “Do I not know that, *in the field of the subject, there is no referent?*” he asks himself at one point (56), the interesting part of the sentence being the complexity of its self-reproach. Notley’s navigation between the constancy and inconstancy of “self” produces a similar effect, as the “I” she inhabits cannot be properly understood as a consolidated lyric speaker nor as a fragmented linguistic predicament.

For Barthes, the enigma that muddles up the neatness of poststructuralist platitude is the body—his body—and its “anarchic foam of tastes and distastes”; for Notley, it’s her belief in the concrete existence of “soul.” “I loathe the word ‘self,’ ” she says in a recent interview, explaining that she’s earned the right to use “soul” instead (Dick). Both “autobiographies” are shaped by a horror of the *Doxa*—“Public Opinion, the mind of the majority, petit bourgeois Consensus, the Voice of Nature, the Violence of Prejudice,” as Barthes defines it (47)—and an urgent desire to evade its sway at every turn. Barthes focuses on the pleasure of this evasion; Notley prefers impassioned dissent. For Notley is no hedonist—in fact she pursues her “scary honesty” with an almost puritanical fervor. For Notley, understanding one’s self as a “signifying practice” (or perhaps, by extension, one’s death as a “linguistic predicament,” as Paul de Man put it in his essay “Autobiography as Defacement” [930]) is not nearly scary nor rigorous enough.

The first poem in *Mysterics*, “Would Want to Be in My Wildlife” dramatizes the descent into this fear. Notley has said that it can be read as an introduction to the process of the book, and she went into a hypnotic trance to write it, as she did for most of the other poems. In it she tries “to find my four year old self and to re-enter the house where I lived when I was four, because it seemed that when I was that age I was both most natural and most good” (Goldman, 6). The opening lines of *Mysterics* place us, *media res*, in the drama of the body and mind coming to language:

hold pen improperly against 4th finger not 3rd like when I was six why won't I
 hold it right
 if I'm even younger four I walk more solemnly walking's relatively new but
 talking's even more natural and I can see you really while we talk
 if words are in a sense in motion the universe has always had it
 I'm not sounding young
 though holding the pen wrong
 I don't have to sound young but I couldn't say “oil well” right
 erase all that it's not right. You have to erase whatever it is and erase before

that and before that to be perfect
 no perfect's here from ever all along and if it doesn't say it right it's right
 and I
 am it (. . .) (1)

The variety of voices that appear throughout *Mysterries* are all at play here: the childlike self, with its rushing syntax; the adult voice of metaphysical wisdom (“if words are in a sense in motion the universe always has it”); the self-conscious voice that never loses sight of the vector of her project (“I’m not sounding young”); the rebellious voice committed to rejecting other people’s “life-shapes” (“if it doesn’t say it right it’s right and I/am it”); and so on. As she goes deeper into memory, she moves into fear, and comes out in a different place: “and get scared till I am I/scareder and scareder/then calm and enter where oil of I does flow (. . .)”

As *Mysterries* proceeds, Notley’s meditation on the “stripped-down” self becomes more and more harrowing, and comes to crisis in the poems that contend explicitly with the deaths of loved ones. One of the most agonizing of these may be “I—Toward a Definition.” When I first read this poem, I misunderstood the title. The “I” is a Roman numeral, as the poem after it is entitled “II—The Person You Were Will Be Replaced.” But I took it to be the first-person “I.” Whether or not the double meaning was intentional, the poem is pivotal to Notley’s movement toward “basic I.” As such, I want to reproduce it in full:

I—Toward a Definition

Grief isn’t empty it’s black and material I’ve seen it
 It’s a force, independent, and eats you while you’re sleeping
 The spring after Ted died I once saw it in pieces
 in the air of the apartment tatters
 whirled around me like burnt paper

I know I didn’t make it what made it
 Could hardly stand up some days that year because of it

No luxuriance in this process no dolorous
 sea of grief it's a battle
 Pieces of myself are hacked away my adulthood is
 art a lost story

What's left of me really is a young girl
 and to accept her after such a war, after the tears of
 myself as a general have hardened into semiprecious
 ivory or coral, is sad and
 defeating no victory
 Oh yes this is who I always am
 beginning child literal I
 I'm myself so, knowing a new thing, that
 the universe is ruled by love and countervalent sorrow
 Grief's not a social invention
 Grief is visible, substantial, I've literally seen it (77)

It is precisely here, face-to-face with the substantial and traumatic presence of grief, that the speaker comes to revelation: "Oh yes this is who I always am." Because of its power to strip us down to this state of "beginning child literal I," grief is also the one thing Notley flat-out deems "not a social invention." As Kim Lyons has written about this poem, "There's revelation here, a hope and belief that the poem on the page might be a soul-to-soul encounter" (24). The word "revelation" is key: it is at this moment that Notley's poetic narrative begins to become a "holy story." In the next poem, "II—The Person That You Were Will Be Replaced" she continues with this theme, noting that grief is "godlike/as in possession." The poem continues:

This was the night I was craziest: near my birthday,
 four months after Ted's death, walking
 on Second Avenue I thought "It's possible
 he didn't really die." I felt a maniacal joy
 and then became sickened and distressed
 I knew a depth of me had, up to then, believed he was alive.
 That depth was now emptied of him and filled with grief. (78)

"It's possible/he didn't really die": that kind of moment, that "kind of maniacal joy" which ends with a sickening return to reality, is the horrible face of shock. Writing about

it years later, she is able to move from this moment to a set of reflective lines that become the silent mantra of the latter half of the book:

If a self can
contain the deaths of others, it's very large;
it's certainly larger than my body
If the other who dies is partly me,
and that me dies and another grows, the medium it grows in
is grief.

Size matters here: Notley's principle charge against most narratives of the self is that they "make it too small and not precisely unique enough" (Goldman, 5). The deaths of others replace, expand, and reconstruct the selves of the living left behind; without this transformation, grief eats mercilessly, leaving the self "hacked away . . . a lost story." To understand how a particular self contains the deaths of particular others is to engage the most frightening and extreme aspects of the "delineation of identity by the way of alterity," as Miller has put it (4).

This delineation becomes clear in the title poem, "Mysteries of Small Houses," which is also the penultimate poem of the book. It begins:

Poverty much maligned but beautiful
has resulted in smaller houses replete with mysteries
How can something so finite
so petite and shallow have
the infinite center I sense there? (. . .)

'cause inside its center I'm, or is it we're
It's I'm that I won't ever know
completely unless I do when I die
How
do
we manage to base ourselves on dark ignorance so
house of pressed-down pushed-in
origin, is such poverty; or
apartments where people die, again the strange dense
center of the four tiny rooms on St. Mark's Place may be that
Ted died there and so left a mystery vortex inside that fragile

apartment on stilts – Doug, do you think so? (136)

Poverty has literally forced her to live in small spaces; it is the smallness of these places—the closeness—that renders extraordinary the discovery of “the infinite center” she senses. Once again, as in “Dear Dark Continent,” in this closeness the pronouns have trouble disentangling from each other: “I’m, or is it we’re/It’s I’m that I won’t ever know/completely unless I do when I die.” The slide into the apartment at St. Mark’s Place is critical, for these unanswerable questions about origin bring us back to a deathbed, the site of passing consciousness, the “mystery vortex.” All this musing brings her to the direct address, “Doug, do you think so?” (Doug presumably being her second husband, the British poet Douglas Oliver, who died of cancer in 2000). The musing brings her no answer, but rather into conversation, into inevitable relation with another.

In a meditation on autobiography, Miller proposes that “[r]ather than models, we would do better to imagine more perplexing figures whose intimate and violent dialogues with the living and dead others perform the bedrock of self-construction itself” (19). I can’t think of a better way to describe the self that emerges in *Mysteries*—and, perhaps, in Notley’s *oeuvre* taken as a whole. Yet it might interest the reader to know that Notley herself rejects this interpretation. When I asked her about the intense intersubjectivity imagined at the end of “Lady Poverty,” she responded: “Even if the self is very large, it shouldn’t have to contain the deaths of so many others, should it? Why should one have to grow new (social) selves in the medium of grief? I’m describing something I don’t necessarily think should be the case” (Email interview, 2/9/02). And so it goes: interpretation, meet authorial intent. But I wonder if this discrepancy actually highlights the most provocative tension in *Mysteries*: that while Notley sets out to discover the

possibility of a pure, untainted self, the book performs almost everything but. In saying that, I don't mean to conclude smugly that there's no such thing as "pure self"—not only does the term require a great deal more clarification, but I don't think I would want to live in a world that had decided the case. As the poem "Mysteries of Small Houses" puts it, "I won't ever know/ completely unless I do when I die." The meaning of the book's title begins to come clear, in its suggestion that our bodies, minds, and poems might all be seen as "small houses," mysterious to the core.

I'm also inclined to believe that Notley's disagreement with the above reading stems from her current absorption in an increasingly hermetic poetry practice—a practice she has described as "a poetics of disobedience," and which she has elaborated at length in her recent book by that name—the 284-page *Disobedience*. Writing *Disobedience*, Notley realized the extent to which she "couldn't go along with the government or governments, with radicals and certainly not with conservatives or centrists, with radical poetics and certainly not with other poetics, with other women's feminisms, with any fucking thing at all."¹⁷ It's her most extreme position to-date, especially in its argument that the only possible position for her, as a woman, is to "try to know everything from [herself]," as "all thinking from outside seems tainted by the male" (Email interview, 2/4/02). This conviction leaves little to no room for a "we." In its place, it promotes a fundamentally solitary religion of "meditating alone in one's closet." Notley has come to believe that "one can only by oneself have a religion that doesn't impose on others or do harm. The minute, actually, there is more than one person involved in any assertion, truth is lost and aggression becomes possible" (2/4/02). Notley had been developing this conviction long before September 11th, but

the severity of her proclamations against group-think and the dangers of organized religion have been felt and echoed by many in its wake. Whatever one thinks of her current position—clearly it’s not tenable for anyone devoted to community organizing, for example—the aesthetic question remains, what kind of poetry Notley has produced in its sway?

Disobedience is a nasty mess of a book—truly a loose, baggy monster offering great pleasures along with great exasperations. It maintains a “daily,” time-based structure of sorts—it consists of five sections of interconnected poems that map out a thirteen-month period from 1995 to 1996—but it also includes a plethora of dreams and fantasies that feel somehow outside time. Paramount among these is a long-standing dialogue with a male detective, Hardwood, who “resembles Robert Mitchum on a bad day.” The project of *Disobedience* was to combine the dreamscapes of *Alette* with the chronological, first-person investigations of *Mysteries*, in an attempt to break down “the barriers that separate waking consciousness and dream consciousness, the barriers that separate narratives of real life, fictional narratives, and dream accounts as genres,” as she explains in an interview with Brian Kim-Stefans (*Jacket #15*). Or, as Notley puts it in *Disobedience* itself: “I want real and dreamed to be fused into the real/rip off this shroud of division of my poem from my life” (24). The barriers do break down, but not seamlessly—not only is the poem more anxious and self-conscious about its method than previous works (“Hypnotize self into a fantasy world/a world of caves. [Yes I do this, I can],” Notley prods herself near the beginning), but the lines of the poem themselves are also separated by “shrouds of division” in the form of bars, as in:

These lacunae are most great, most restful.

Do I really want to fill them in with suppressions?

The Choros of the future howls quietly.

(23)

Whatever “dailiness” the poem contains has more to do with political events than the details of Notley’s personal life. Or, better put: the poems repeatedly act out the slippage between private and public realms. Political events mutate into psychic matter, and vice versa:

29 people were injured by Tuesday’s bomb,
four seriously,
who suffered amputations.

I dream that
a bomb might injure me
because some Muslims hate me. I mean
isn’t that real possibility a dream,
wouldn’t its happening be dreamlike?

. . . if hatred’s a vicious phantasm,
walking reality’s a dream. (70)

As the above lines suggest, *Disobedience* is, in some ways, a book about contemporary despair—despair about geopolitical conflicts; despair about endemic violence and injustice; despair about misogyny; despair about literature; despair about environmental destruction; and so on. But its despair is not of a lyrical or wistful variety. It’s angry and combative, often sounding very much like a fight for one’s life. It’s an abrasive reading experiences—a veritable hothouse of “not-nice” pleasures. This effect is intentional: as she explains, “my rule for this poem/is honesty, my other rule is Fuck You” (158). Fuck You the reader; fuck mainstream poetry and avant-garde poetry; fuck France; fuck

America; fuck daily life; fuck death; and so on. (“My middle finger’s sore from too much up-pointing,” she jokes at one point in the text.) You might say that *Disobedience* develops a poetics of pure grouchiness—an audacious and probably unprecedented endeavor. What’s more, it names names: whether it’s Bob Dole or Seamus Heaney or Buddha, no one is spared. “BUDDHA PRACTICES AUTOFELLATIO/ MOHAMMED IS A MUGGER” are but two of the sacrilegious messages Notley finds on the walls of one of her imagined caves. “I’m enjoying making mean remarks about everyone,” she asserts at one point, in a particularly self-righteous mood, “because I am the Soul, misunderstood/ I’m pure, wise, and bitchy: that’s not/contradictory. I intend to be grouchy throughout my eternity” (92).

Sometimes this grouchiness is fatiguing; often it is very funny. I particularly enjoy her rants about dolls. Early on in the book, she writes: “The bitterest part of being a doll/is how to tell you/I hate how you make me this doll/sitting propped up at dinner party or poetry panel// ‘You’re such a hostile doll.’ ” (62) “Hostile doll” is followed by Pocahontas Doll (“the little Whore”) and then “Slut Doll,” whom she imagines in “tarty short dress and blatant stocking tops/some bullshit in her hair, some glitterbit jewelry there—Her name is Ewe or OO” (105). Slut Doll comes to life in the following passage:

Slut Doll, besides being “Compassion,”
 a stiff clit and the question of who strokes it,
 is also Psychology, that wornout ancient game.
 I’ve dreamed of her before, in a red dress at the sock hop:
 “I’m unable to grieve for Burgess!” she said to me melodramatically
 I hovered between caring and not caring, then chose not caring. (107)

Once again, we find ourselves delivered into the caring/not caring conundrum discussed earlier in relation to O’Hara. Notley’s rendition is obviously much harsher, especially as

her “not caring” explicitly extends out to her readers. “I conceive of myself as disobeying my readership a lot. I began the new work denying [my readers’] existence,” Notley says in “The Poetics of Disobedience,” in reference to some less reader-friendly, post-*Disobedience* work. (To clarify: the tone of *Disobedience* is not reader-friendly, but neither its syntax, its form, nor its content is particularly inaccessible, as she feels the other work may be.) As her interest in mystical truth grows, her interest in “good writing” steadily decreases. As the lacuna of one section of *Disobedience* comically demonstrates, in a subtle slam on MFA programs everywhere:

Let’s have a page of good writing here.

(Lack of interest)

(82)

But the caring/not caring dichotomy is never simple. Hermetic as her writing practice may be, Notley still wants readers. Perloff’s point about O’Hara was that he “refused to *care* in the conventional sense . . . But perhaps he adopted this stance because he knew, all along, that we would indeed be looking.” Notley has never felt such assurances. For this reason among others, she has been thrilled to have her last three books published by Penguin, a large commercial publisher. There is indeed a form of irony here: the more “Fuck You” and explicitly insulting to mainstream poetry publishing and prize-culture her work becomes, the more it has been distributed, reviewed, and awarded prizes. (*Mysteries* was a finalist for the Pulitzer Prize and the winner of the *Los Angeles Times* Book Prize in 1998; *Disobedience* won the Griffin Prize in 2002; Notley has also recently been awarded the Shelley Award from the Poetry Society of America and a fellowship

from the Academy of American Poets; and so on.) Perhaps there exists some grumpy avant-garde purist out there who would lazily charge her with hypocrisy, but given the general lack of capital and/or audience in the contemporary poetry world—not to mention Notley’s substantial difference from most of the usual suspects in the field, and the undeniable ferocity of her recent work—it really doesn’t make any sense to argue that she’s “sold out.” I look forward to seeing how Notley wields this well-earned attention, which I hope only grows in scale.

Recently I asked Notley whether she had planned out the narrative arc of *The Descent of Alette* before she wrote it. She told me: “I never knew what was going to happen while I was writing the book. I was always surprised by what happened” (10/29/02). And so, too, her audience, who will undoubtedly be surprised by whatever comes next from such a restless and prolific career. One thing that has remained constant throughout is her “continuous involvement” with poetry—an ethos of saturation that still reflects a New York School commitment to daily accretion. A poem such as *Disobedience* leaves one with the distinct impression that writing a long poem is not just a literary adventure, but a way of living a life. Notley’s investment in this practice has grown steadily; as she says in *Disobedience*, “I don’t want out of this poem,/the way I often Want Out” (188). Such work doesn’t generate exactly the same feeling as imagining O’Hara playing the typewriter in a room full of people—indeed, Notley’s current method could be seen as its inverse. But in the end, the effect may not be so dissimilar. Both remind us that making a poem can be a means of “living a second life in the midst of this one,” as Notley has put it. Notley has pushed hard at the possibilities of this second life, and her body of work thus stands as a constant reminder that making poems can be “a large act, hugely real and involving,” while “[h]aving piddly conversations with

so-and-so about what poetry Ought to be doing, or what those guys over there think, is just, nothing" (Foster, 85).

¹ It's probably misleading to treat *Alette* as *the* pivot point in her career—Notley has always written long poetic sequences: before *Alette* she had already worked with the form in early pieces such as *Sorrento* (1984), or the two “fictive” books published together in *The Scarlet Cabinet* (with Douglas Oliver), *Close to me & Closer . . . (The Language of Heaven)* and *Désamère*.

² The archives can be found at the University of California at San Diego, Geisel Library, Mandeville Special Collections, Register of the Alice Notley Collection, 1969-1997, and online at <http://orpheus.ucsd.edu/speccoll/findaids/literary/notley>.

³ Sigmund Freud, from “The Question of Lay Analysis,” pt. 4, 1926, in *The Complete Works of Sigmund Freud*, vol. 20, eds. James Strachey and Anna Freud, 1959. The phrase “dark continent” appears in English, and is justly famous not only for its feminist ramifications, but also for its metaphorical coupling of female sexuality with a racialized Africa, and by extension, other countries with a “dark” populace.

⁴ Sexton's book is *To Bedlam and Part Way Back* (1960). Sexton takes her epigram from an 1815 letter from Schopenhauer to Goethe, and arguably uses it to position herself, as poet, as Oedipus, en route to discovering “the awful truth,” and the reader as a sort of Jocasta, “who begs Oedipus for God's sake not to enquire further.”

⁵ Selinger notes this connection with Rich's poem in his essay on Notley, and goes on to argue that “[w]riting in the Mainstream American Tradition set Notley apart from the two most obvious models for feminist poetry in the early 1970s: the fierce, resistant mythologizing handed down from Plath; and the feminist exploration of women's “essential connection” to each other, and to their children, sponsored by Rich. The earliest poems included in her *Selected*, which proceeds in chronological order, glance at both models for guidance.” See Selinger, p. 313.

⁶ Notley returns to the subject of post-partum depression in poems such as “A Baby Is Born Out of a White Owl's Forehead” (from *Mysteries*) in which Notley writes: “he is born and I am undone—feel as if I will/never be, was never born (. . .) for two years, there's no me here” (39).

⁷ Rich is obviously a different case from Plath and/or Sexton, because of her politicized departure into feminist and lesbian inquiries, but even her most “experimental” poetry tends to remain ghosted by the formality with which she began her career.

⁸ It's interesting that *narcissism* emerges as such a hot button in both Fraser's and Notley's accounts. In a sense, the title “Dear Dark Continent” can be read as another instance of toying with the concept, insofar as “narcissism” means, psychoanalytically speaking, “an arresting of development at or a regression to the infantile stage of development in which one's own body is the object of erotic interest” (*AHD*, 830)—a stage that very well might entail writing a poem addressed to one's own “dark continent.” But, importantly, the phrase is Freud's, not Notley's, and Notley's ironic play with it—evident

in the poem's refusal of the Freudian imperative that figures a baby (as an extension of a penis) as that which "completes" the female subject—introduces the arch disobedience which comes to characterize both her feminism and her poetry.

The charge of narcissism might also make more sense when placed in a larger cultural/poetic context: while neither Fraser nor Notley worked in explicit service of the kind of consciousness-raising ethos that characterized the "women's lib" of the 70s, both were active participants in a related community-based movement—the mimeograph revolution in poetry in the 1960s and 70s, which posed an alternative to the more establishment, individualistic industry of monograph publishing.

⁹ See Gooch's description of the circumstances surrounding the poem's writing, in *City Poet*, p. 322-325.

¹⁰ To preserve the look of the text of *The Descent of Alette*, which employs double quotation marks throughout as a form of measure, I use single quotation marks when excerpting from it.

¹¹ Not to be misleading, I should also note that Spurr's essay in *Scenes*—"Koch's 'Serious Moment'" is somewhat unique in its willingness to take seriously the role of violence and sadomasochistic fantasy in Koch's work.

¹² I'm paraphrasing Ronald E. Martin in his book *American Literature and the Destruction of Knowledge: Innovative Writing in the Age of Epistemology*, p. 10-11.

¹³ Myles is here making reference to the work of the poet Tim Dlugos.

¹⁴ Notley goes on in the interview to address the important and vexing issue of audience or lack thereof for poetry in general: "I think that so-called popular poetry underestimates the verbal intelligence of so-called ordinary people, who in turn haven't been properly taught poetry in school," she explains. "Meanwhile so many people's careers in the academy and in poetry seem to depend on their obfuscating poetry, making it as theoretical and intellectual as possible. The consequence is that ordinary people think they can't understand poetry, and popular poetry talks down to them. . . . My books are for anyone, anyone who feels like taking the chance, and the time. Of course, that still won't be a lot of people" (6).

¹⁵ Other feminist utopia writers include Joanna Russ, Marge Piercy, Suzy McKee Charnas, Margaret Atwood, Christiane Rochefort, E.M. Broner, Ursula LeGuin, Pamela Sargent, Luce Irigaray, Helene Cixous, Joan Slonczewski, and many, many others. All of their visions vary wildly, of course—for more on the subject, see Frances Bartkowski's book *Feminist Utopias* (Lincoln: University of Nebraska UP, 1989). I'm not sure if too many American feminists, being a fairly pragmatic bunch, have ever gone in for utopia as a means of social change, so it's notable that there are few Americans on this list. See also Bernadette Mayer's 1984 collection *Utopia* (NY: United Artists Books).

¹⁶ See also *Debbie: An Epic* by the Canadian poet Lisa Robertson (Vancouver: New Star Books, 1997), which calls itself an epic but does not tell a narrative story.

¹⁷ See Notley's "The Poetics of Disobedience," a talk posted on the Electronic Poetry Center website out of SUNY-Buffalo, at <http://wings.buffalo.edu/epc/authors/notley/disob.html>.

CHAPTER FIVE

“When We’re Alone in Public”: The Metabolic Work of Eileen Myles

Over twenty years ago, Ted Berrigan called his friend and fellow poet Eileen Myles “the last of the New York School poets,” and the label stuck. Unlike Notley, however, Myles never really chafed against it. When asked in a recent interview with Frances Richard (2000) if the appellation still resonated with her, Myles responded:

It depends on who asks. Once I was introduced at a reading by someone whom I thought of as a Language poet, and when they described me as “New York School” I experienced it as a critique—like I was retro. But, yes, those were the writers (O’Hara, Ashbery, Koch, Guest) who woke me up, who gave me a sense of what an adventure being a poet could be . . . Ultimately, though, “New York School” just means I learned to be a poet in New York. As an aesthetic it means putting yourself in the middle of a place and being excited and stunned by it, and trying to make sense of it in your work. (25)

Myles here points out how the dimensions of the label are necessarily defined by a host of social contingencies: particular mentors, friendships, and other personal relations; specific aspects of a specific city; the contexts in which a term gets circulated—literally, who speaks it—and so on. Her ease with the appellation thus has much to do with her longstanding interest in the formation and power of aesthetic and/or social communities: “I move in groups,” she explains. “[M]y feeling for literature is communal” (Richard, 25). “The last of the New York School poets” is indeed a catchy phrase—not to mention a convenient frame for a final chapter—but what does it mean? Beyond the semantics of age and/or generational distinction (O’Hara was born in 1926; Berrigan, in 1934; Mayer and Notley, in 1945; Myles, in 1949), the phrase clearly places Myles within a certain lineage while also positing her as a liminal figure—a vector rooted in one particular cultural moment or milieu but shooting off into others. It’s a useful image to

keep in mind, I think, as we begin to consider how Myles' career has expanded the social and political capacities of O'Hara's "Personism" perhaps more radically than any of my prior subjects.

For while Chapters Three and Four discuss the skewing that motherhood and/or female "dailiness" have provoked in the context of New York School poetry, Myles' poetic career represents a different trajectory: that of a lesbian whose work self-consciously and repeatedly dramatizes the disruptive appearance of the "female personal" in the predominately masculine "public sector." This path may initially seem a reiteration of feminism's "the personal is political" mantra, but a more sustained inquiry will hopefully elucidate the substantial alteration and amplification of this equation that Myles has performed over the past three decades. And whereas Chapter Two focuses on the importance of homosexuality and gender trouble in the works of Ashbery, Schuyler, and O'Hara, it is largely (if not solely) due to Myles' presence on the scene that the so-called "queerness" of the New York School does not surreptitiously slip into signifying only male homosexuality. I am keenly aware that the word "lesbian" has barely appeared in my study thus far; in fact, while writing about the many (male) ghosts that populate Notley's work, I could not help but feel haunted by another specter: that of the "apparitional lesbian," as Terry Castle has put it—i.e. the lesbian that patriarchal culture "ghosts," then exorcises—that it drains of corporeality, sensuality, danger, and authority, then conveniently disappears. Castle begins her book *The Apparitional Lesbian* (1993) with a "polemical introduction" in which she articulates, with admirable lucidity and economy, the by-now standard (yet still potent) objections to the umbrella term "queer." In a section entitled, "[*The lesbian*] is not a gay man," Castle explains: "As soon as the lesbian is lumped in—for better or for worse—with her male homosexual counterpart,

the singularity of her experience (sexual and otherwise) tends to become obscured. We ‘forget’ about the lesbian by focusing instead on gay men” (12). Thus far, this study has entertained this all-too-familiar peril.

Myles has audaciously championed the queerness of her predecessors and contemporaries, and labored tirelessly to record the “vivid and close-knit way of life” she has shared since the late 70s “with a number of dykes and fags, mostly artists.”¹ And while many critics interested in the New York School seem content to chart its lineage through the great (but straight) cadre of writers such as Charles North, Ron Padgett, David Shapiro, Tony Towle, Paul Violi, Michael Brownstein, and others, Myles’s interpretation summons a different, more anarchic roster—one that might also accommodate Kathy Acker, Dennis Cooper, Tim Dlugos, David Trinidad, and David Wojnarowicz, among others. At the same time, Myles has never flinched from addressing the various difficulties that can exist between gay men and lesbians. Throughout the 80s and 90s, AIDS often rendered these links particularly acute. “As a literary lesbian vis à vis gay men I’m more alone than ever before,” she wrote in her 1994 talk, “The Lesbian Poet.” “The awesome mortality AIDS conjures up leaves fags ever more protective of their lineage. Melvin Dixon pleading at the 1992 Outwrite conference in Boston, ‘Who will call my name when I’m gone.’ We will, I whisper but I’ve never been so aware of the conversation between lesbians and gay men, not going on” (126). Myles also consistently disallows the lethal breed of amnesia or “ghosting” that Castle describes above by articulating (on the page) and actualizing (in performance) a poetry rooted in bodily presence—that is, in the force and rhythm of her own particular body: “I think we all write our poems with our metabolism, our sexuality,” she explains in

“The Lesbian Poet.” “[F]or me a poem has always been an imagined body of a sort, getting that down in time” (124).

This latter image may not seem particularly novel—at first glance it might even seem to echo the essentially conservative poetic doctrine espoused by Robert Pinsky in his 1998 handbook, *The Sounds of Poetry: A Brief Guide*. “The theory of this guide is that poetry is a vocal, which is to say bodily, art,” Pinsky asserts. “The medium of poetry is a human body: a column of air inside the chest, shaped into signifying sounds in the larynx and the mouth” (8). But Myles’s elaboration of a “metabolic” poetry—or a “proprioceptive” poetry, as she has termed it elsewhere² (“proprioceptive” meaning “receiving stimuli that arises from within the organism” [*AHD*, 994])—differs decidedly from Pinsky’s theory. As is apparent in the above formulation, with one totalizing colon, Pinsky narrows the entire body, with all its various chemical processes and rhythms, into “a column of air inside the chest.” (Charles Olson accomplishes something similar in his manifesto “Projective Verse,” though he pays some attention to the head and heart: “The two halves are: the HEAD, by way of the EAR, to the SYLLABLE/ the HEART, by way of the BREATH, to the LINE” [Allen, 390].) The energy that Pinsky and others have relentlessly focused on orality not only privileges a particular line of poetry that claims Homer as its source, but also effectively displaces or sublimates messier, perhaps more voracious bodily processes, such as the anal, the digestive, the hormonal (including the menstrual, the menopausal, and so on), the orgasmic, and the cellular.³ For while Pinsky is in some sense speaking literally—i.e. the enunciation of words aloud does necessitate the use of one’s “column”—he is also speaking metaphorically, insofar as not all poetry is “meant” to be read aloud, nor is it often composed aloud. Its relation to the body is more mysterious, protean, and unpredictable, as the roots of the word

“metabolism” suggest: *meta* (change) + *ballein* (throw).⁴ Indeed, the body Pinsky imagines as poetic source quickly slips into a telling metaphor: “poetry is a centaur. That is, in prose, one aims an arrow at a target. In a poem, one does the same thing, while also riding a horse. The horse I take to be the human body” (8). This metaphor does not easily mesh with the body that concerns Myles. Compare Pinsky’s centaur, for example, with the following passage from “The Lesbian Poet”:

My poem rumbles through it all, unbelievable, and as the month turns the poems get manic, crazy, weird, sullen and bloody, stay at home, the words I use narrate a female cycle, probably much more than a female orgasm. (. . .) It’s my poetic dilemma, it seems. To include the body, the woman’s as I see it, to approach this blood as part of the score. It should show up regularly in the culture’s poems, this female conversation, because most of the poets who write bleed every month until they pass childbearing years. I’m waiting to watch the room change. (130)

This “female conversation” may sound like *écriture féminine*, but Myles’s “proprioceptive” poetry has less to do with finding an essential mode of female expression and more to do with scribing “an economy, a metabolism or energy flow” that is particularly hers. “If anything, my work is about being inside your body and taking your time and taking your space and telling it your own way,” she says in an interview with Liz Galst in *The Boston Phoenix*, in reference to her book of autobiographical stories, *Chelsea Girls*. “And that’s . . . important in terms of being a female and a lesbian—that you can take that time.”

Like the “visual diary” created by Nan Goldin’s photographs, a major facet of Myles’s work is its construction of an ongoing “poetic documentary” of her life—a documentary in which certain primal scenes recur and get transformed via performance and repetition. One of these scenes is a reading she gave at St. Mark’s in 1977, in which she “came out as a poet and a dyke maybe all in one reading.” As she explains in “The

Lesbian Poet,” “It wasn’t that I wasn’t a poet before that [reading], but I’m addressing some kind of surge, a moving forward that happens at some points in a poet’s life, so I mean I was all there, body and soul, after that” (123-4). Myles moved from Boston to New York in 1974, and she describes her first few years in New York as follows: “I was basically a cute girl in her twenties wanting to be a poet that all the guys would then try to fuck. I mean that was just the lay of the land. And be advised not to be a feminist, you know. And so I just sort of caroused around, and I drank a lot, too” (Foster, 54). In the Richard interview, she elaborates further on this period:

When I came to New York in the 70s, I didn’t know I was a lesbian. I didn’t want to come out. I was homophobic, or scared—I just didn’t want to be a dyke. There wasn’t a woman in that circle of poets, either, who could receive me and let me know I was heard. Alice Notley, who was married to Ted Berrigan, was there, and we were, and are, great friends, but she was a married woman and a mother and she was going to have a different life. . . . I made the model of what I needed there to be. I put lesbian content in the New York School poem because I wanted the poem to be there to receive me. (26)

Here Myles draws crucial distinctions between herself and Notley (and Mayer, though she doesn’t mention her here). Yet Myles’s wish that the New York School poem would “be there to receive her” echoes Notley’s sentiment in her poem about “Joe’s Jacket,” in which she hopes that O’Hara’s poem will fit her, too. (Myles also gestures toward the paradoxical reciprocity of this process: the poem is there to receive you, and yet you have to create the poem so that it can receive you.) Notably, in both cases, the emphasis is on aesthetics—that is to say, on style. The leap of faith, so to speak, that these women made in the 70s had more to do with finding and joining an aesthetic community than an explicitly feminist and/or political one. (“[E]verybody told me something different, so finally when I went to St. Mark’s and met Paul [Violi] and was in his workshop, I mean I just decided to believe this guy,” Myles explains, in reference to how she ended up getting “educated” in a New York School milieu [Foster, 54].) Myles’s “lesbian

content”—like Notley’s voice of a so-called “new wife and new mother”—thus forms an intricate weave with the aesthetic impulses and experiments that preoccupied O’Hara, Schuyler, Ashbery and others throughout the 50s and 60s. And apart from Guest (and the female painters), most of the forerunners at this time were men. As Myles explains in “The Lesbian Poet,” “When I teach workshops I’ve always brought in both men and women, poetic models, but actually I’ve got many more fathers. I was writing poems, like I said, before I came out and wanted to get ahead, to know what you had to know to be in the conversation. It was mostly men who were doing the talking” (126-7).

On the one hand, Myles’s situation is familiar to almost every woman (and man) in almost every art form, as “having many more fathers” is the natural effect of a male-dominated canon. But her description deepens in resonance when placed in the context of a butch lesbian for whom masculine identification—along with working-class affiliation—is paramount. (As Myles writes in “Bath, Maine,” the opening piece of *Chelsea Girls*: “This is baseball hat and truck country. I loved it. The men were all men, and we were all lesbians, and everyone loved to get smashed” [12].) In terms reminiscent of Notley’s aversion to Rich, Myles explains (in a piece called “My Intergeneration” in *The Village Voice*) that even though she came out in the late 70s, “lesbian feminism left me feeling like I didn’t cut the mustard, like I’d gone to the wrong non-Ivy League school and liked punk rock and amphetamines too much and Aphra Behn too little. Generally I hung out with the boys and often I was alone. With poetry.” She explains further:

When I did connect with a girl (I could drink with), we were at war with the lesbian culture around us. I remember throwing beer cans off the balcony at an Alive concert. They were these dykes in leisure suits playing fusion jazz to a roomful of women with dangly earrings. “Ugh,” we yelled up the street. . . . For dykes, generations are less about age than attitude. Try standing with a clump of your lesbian contemporaries. The dividing lines of race and class, shoes and

musical taste, will predictably send us flying to our corners quicker than you can say *butch/femme*.

Myles's observations here demonstrates the funny yet fierce manner in which she customarily fuses aesthetics and politics. "A lesbian is just an idea. An aesthetic one, perhaps," she memorably says in "The Lesbian Poet." It may be initially tempting to hear this comment as an extension of Butler's declaration (from "Imitation and Gender Subordination") that "it is always finally unclear what is meant by invoking the lesbian-signifier," but I think they're actually saying distinct things. I take Myles's line as a terse yet enigmatic manifesto of sexual and artistic liberation, in which the "lesbian-signifier" (or "lesbian content") means something very clear and powerful, but also remains inextricable from the vicissitudes of form and attitude.

The investigations that Butler, Sedgwick, and other theorists have done into queer performativity are obviously relevant here, especially in their shared insistence that sexuality always remains in excess of its performance. Koestenbaum has described this phenomenon perhaps most poetically and most inclusively in his book *The Queen's Throat: Opera, Homosexuality, and the Mystery of Desire*:

Sexuality, whether homo or hetero, does not arrive only once, in that moment of revelation and proclamation that we call "coming out." Our body is always coming out. Every time is the first time. Every performance is a debut. Every arousal is a repetition of the first arousal. Every time you speak, you are coming out. Every time air makes the trip upstairs from lungs to larynx to mask, every time your body plays that old transcendental number, you are coming out. You *are* the OUT into which sexuality comes. Coming out is way of telling a coherent story about one's sexuality, and it has worked political wonders, and it is a morally and psychologically cleansing process. But coming out is only one version of the vocalization underlying sexuality itself. (174)

Just as vocalization is but one aspect of the bodily, coming out is but one version of vocalization, and one means of expressing sexuality. Seen in this light, Myles's 1977 "coming out as a poet and a dyke all in one reading" marks a beginning of a long and

restless poetic journey, in which her stream of texts becomes the “OUT” into which sexuality—and bodily rhythms by other names—endlessly come. Myles’s poems often play with the ceaselessness, variability, and comedy of coming out, as in the following section of the poem “A Blue Jay” (from her 1991 collection, *Not Me*):

... Let’s
 say I’m
 clothed
 in Nature
 w/ an
 open ear.
 Any more
 riddles for
 the human
 race while
 I’ve got
 you here.
 There’s
 a hollow
 in the
 trees. A
 bush I
 could crawl
 in and
 pee. The
 trees are
 my friends.
 Hello Tree.
 Can I come
 out to a
 tree. I know
 you’d hardly
 know it
 to look at
 me, but
 would you
 believe I’m
 a Lesbian. But
 Nature is
 no stage.

(65-66)

The poem is typically fluid and forthright, punctuated by surprising turns and a lascivious wit (I especially appreciate the part about peeing on a bush). Indeed, with

skinny lines like these, surprise is paramount: for example, one might not expect “pee” after “crawl/ in and,” but it brings sudden satisfaction (especially to the ear, as it picks up the “trees” from seven syllables before). Something stimulating can’t happen at every line break—there are simply too many—but Myles keeps the poem flickering by scoring the enjambment with occasionally startling pauses: “Hello Tree.” Otherwise the eye follows the river of words down the page—for Myles, often down many pages—never knowing when the sentences, protracted by enjambment, are going to end. When they do, they often go out with a bang: “I know/ you’d hardly/ know it/to look at/me, but/would you/believe I’m/a Lesbian.” The whole poem invokes Whitman, especially the earlier lines, “it’s hard/to be/at peace./This is/a song/to that.” Indeed, if Whitman were writing a century later, I can easily imagine him wondering if he, too, could come out to a tree. In the end, Myles decides that “Nature is/no stage.” But it is and it isn’t: the poem uses it as a stage, while also having fun with the ways in which human terms of sexuality and/or identity may fail to mean in its context. This musing recurs in a later poem, “Tulip,” from *on my way* (2001):

Tulip

The incandescence
of poetry
is a result
of the
moment of
being alive

so to be
afraid
that the
body that
emitted
the light
was consciously
a lesbian
does not

have a
 huge bearing
 on the
 work but
 is it
 a lesbian
 moment
 truly no
 I don't
 think so
 I was
 alone.

(28-29)

The poem starts off with clarity and beauty, pools out into the disorienting syntax of the second stanza, then lands firmly with understated humor in the final lines: “is it/a lesbian/moment/ truly no/I don't/think so/I was/alone.” (Whether intentional or no, Teresa de Lauretis’ so-called “catchphrase” from “Toward a Theory of Lesbian Sexuality”—“It takes two women, not one, to make a lesbian”—feels invoked and subtly mocked here.) But as immediately gratifying as the poem is, its rhetorical questions linger. “Tulip” brings us back to asking, with Butler, what the “lesbian-signifier” can mean or fail to mean: if it means desire for another woman, what does it mean when one is alone? Not that one doesn’t desire in solitude (some might argue that solitude renders desire most acute), but what about the state of non-desiring? What kind of creatures are we, apart from the shifting field of our desires? Especially if “[t]o be a person is to be asking for something,” as Adam Phillips has eloquently put it in his book *Terrors and Experts?* (3) Though Notley’s poetry does not revolve as explicitly around sexuality, her pursuit of “Basic I” is kindred in spirit. The issue, once again, is female transcendence, and the terms in which it can be accessed or thought. In “Tulip,” Myles makes use of the image of a body emitting light—an image that recurs throughout her poetry, as in the final lines of “An Explanation” (from *School of Fish*): “I have nothing more/to offer you

but stripes of light” (147). For Myles, “light” functions analogously to “air” for Guest: the lacunae and spaciousness of Guest’s poems hope to offer the transcendent experience of “seeking air,” while Myles’s choppy, incandescent lines offer themselves up as “stripes of light”—literally, as pulsating waves.

Sedgwick’s thinking about queer performativity makes heavy use of the linguistic philosophy of J. L. Austin—specifically, Austin’s notion of the “performative utterance.” Sedgwick is interested in “the implications for gender and sexuality of a tradition of philosophical thought concerning certain utterances that do not merely describe, but actually perform the actions they name: ‘I accuse’; ‘Be it resolved . . .’; ‘I thee wed’; ‘I apologize’; ‘I dare you.’” Sedgwick sees this site of linguistic performativity as particularly rich and provocative because it represents “a place to reflect on ways in which language really can be said to produce effects: effects of identity, enforcement, seduction, challenge” (*Tendencies*, 11). I know of no other American poet in the latter half of the 20th century who has wielded the power of the performative utterance as astutely and exhaustively as Myles. As I’ve already discussed at some length, New York School poetry in general (save Guest’s, perhaps) is known for its investment in speech. But Myles’ exploration of the possibilities of linguistic utterance is of a different nature, as it has been shaped by her involvement with performance art and political activism. Though performative utterances can clearly take place in private (“I am sorry”; “I forgive you”; etc.), they proliferate in the public sphere. You can fight forever about whether or not your lover is “really” sorry, or whether or not you “really” forgive your parents, but to argue that a minister didn’t “really” marry you, or that a judge didn’t “really” sentence

you, etc., opens up a whole different can of worms. That is to say, it brings in the question of social power, and of authorization.

Myles's public disclosures have obvious ties to the confessional poetry of the 50s—perhaps to Sexton most specifically, who was known for her theatrical readings—but the terms explored by Sedgwick and Butler and others strike me as a more fruitful context, in part because of their emphasis on queer sexuality, but also because they draw our attention away from the more intimate, partitioned confessional scene and into the realm of public proclamation. For example, critics have often read one of Sexton's earliest poems, "For John, Who Begg Me Not to Enquire Further," as a sort of confessional manifesto. In it, Sexton writes:

I tapped my own head;
it was glass, an inverted bowl.
It is a small thing
to rage in your own bowl.
At first it was private.
Then it was more than myself;
it was you, or your house
or your kitchen.

(CP, 34)

The inverted bowl, the bell jar, the house, the kitchen: all are metaphors of containment that dominate in both confessional poetry and Cold War ideology. Sexton's poem is bold insofar as it asserts that its speaker will no longer stay confined to her own bowl. In fact, just beneath its lyrical surface, the poem is quite threatening: her rage is growing, and it threatens to take over the reader—his house, his kitchen, and, by the end of the poem, his face: "my kitchen, your kitchen,/my face, your face." But notably, Sexton jumps directly from her bowl to John's, from her kitchen to his kitchen, and bypasses the public domain altogether. In fact, the term "confessional poetry" has served to conflate

three distinct but equally privatized scenarios: the act of reading and writing; the act of confessing (in a church); and the act of speaking to an analyst or psychiatrist.

The class implications of this particular poetic milieu are fairly obvious: one hardly needs to flip open Foucault's *History of Sexuality* to recognize that we are deep into the woods of bourgeois individualism. Myles engages different models altogether. Like Stein, who famously set out to write "everybody's autobiography," or like Notley, who insisted that "*Someone*, at this point, must take in hand the task of being everyone, & no one, as the first poets did," Myles habitually asserts an ambitious, all-encompassing role for herself as poet: "I would like to replace the poet with the whole human race," she recently wrote in her contributor's note in *The Best American Poetry 2002* (210). In an essay entitled "How I Wrote Certain of My Poems" (which concludes the collection *Not Me*), Myles explains that she wants to address her culture—"some new, larger [culture] out there which I suspect exists"—by "making work which violates the hermetic nature of my own museum—as a friendly gesture towards the people who might recognize me. I mean exhibitionistic work, really" (202). Critics who disapproved of the personal theater of Plath and Sexton customarily used the term "exhibitionistic" to denigrate their work ("narcissistic" coming in a close second); Myles's relaxed reclamation of the term points further toward her difference. As Patrick Durgin puts it in his essay on Myles in the *Dictionary of Literary Biography*, "A confession, strictly speaking, insinuates that readers are made privy to something which, in Myles's aesthetic, was always in the fore, assuming the nature of traditional wisdom. Her type of disclosure precludes the tension inherent in coming clean." "Exhibitionism" is a particularly interesting concept when applied to or used by a woman, as its clinical meaning is "compulsive exposure of the sexual organs in public" (*AHD*, 475). Putting aside breast-baring for the moment, given that

psychoanalytic schema typically figure the vagina as absence, the question of what, exactly, women can exhibit or “flash” necessarily invokes the spectacle of phallic appropriation. And it is precisely at this point of tension that Myles situates so much of her work. To broadcast the “female personal in the public sector,” as Myles has put it, is necessarily to impinge on male territory. “Although women are very visible as sexual beings, as social beings they are totally invisible, and as such must appear as little as possible, and always with some kind of excuse if they do so,” Monique Wittig argues in *The Straight Mind*. “One only has to read interviews with outstanding women to hear them apologizing” (8). Myles’s poems expressly avoid any such excuses or apologies. They also reject and transform the misogyny of the psychoanalytic schema described above, by performing pussy-as-presence in both the private and public realms. One instance is her incantatory anthem (from *Maxfield Parrish*) that begins, “I always put my pussy/in the middle of trees,” and goes on to assert: “I always put my lover’s cunt/on the crest/of a wave/like a flag/that I can/ pledge my/allegiance/to. This is my/country. Here,/when we’re alone/in public” (48). In her interview with Foster, Myles explains the locus of her interest as follows:

There’s a privacy in public [that men have] that women do not have . . . I’m really interested in public poetry and a private person’s public nature. And I haven’t found that a lot in women’s work because it’s not in women’s lives. I mean it’s kind of a fool’s journey in a way, too, because I have the fate of a woman, that destiny. And so, much as I might like to move it over there, a lot of the reason my privacy will always be disturbed is that I am female. (60)

A “fool’s journey” it may be, but it is one that has already transformed the boundaries of what kinds of claims on public space a female poet can make.

In an illuminating essay that discusses Baudelaire’s reaction to the French “poetess” Marceline Desborde-Valmore, Barbara Johnson notes that Baudelaire—a notorious misogynist—celebrated Desbordes-Valmore for her “avoidance of

monstrosity or masculinity”—i.e., for a femininity so innate and natural that it represented “the total absence of pose.” Myles’ aesthetic steers in precisely the opposite direction. As she writes in her autobiographical novel *Cool For You*:

There is hardly any femininity in my family. We are weak people, we are not striving people, we are not brave people, but we are posturing people, and we are masculine. We like the weapons of our time: the clothes, the belts, the boots, the hats, the lifted legs, leaning on cars. We like to look great. When we do, we know “I am.” It’s an adolescent kind of power—it reigns in the world of photographs, of moments triumphed over in a flash of appeal. (95)

As this passage suggests, Myles is the first to admit that the exhibitionist pose stems from a lack of power—a lack of power that has as much to do with class as gender. (This idea becomes vivid elsewhere in *Cool For You*, as in Myles’ description of the day when all the Harvard alums come back to town: “everyone was so happy and sometimes they had a golden son with them, and even outside you could hear the goony Harvard Band marching around the Square and when you rode along Memorial Drive they would be out there sculling and you could see it was their river and you were entirely fucked. Slam” [10].) Myles often talks about how her Catholic school education worked together with her working-class background to drill into her the sense that she wasn’t “something special.” (When she got to New York, she says she was consequently just “glad to be in the phone book” [Foster, 55]). “There’s a lot of class stuff in the internal voice that says, ‘Don’t think you’re so special,’ ” Myles says in her interview with Richard. “In some ways my whole art impulse derives from saying, ‘I know I’m not special’ ” (29).

This impulse has led Myles to experiment with many forms of “mock-exaltation,” as Durgin has put it: in “The Windsor Trail” (from *Maxfield Parrish*), she invents a “Lady Eileen”; in “Immanence,” she aligns herself with god; in “The Poet,” she is “the only saintly man in town”; in the opening poem of *School of Fish*, she is “The Troubadour”; elsewhere she casts herself as road warrior, shepherd, hunter, captain, and

so on. These characterizations are not static dramatic personae, but rather momentary flashes of identification (mostly masculine) that glimmer throughout the work. One of her most well-known poems in this vein is “An American Poem,” which cannily performs being “somebody” and “nobody” at the same time. It begins:

I was born in Boston in
 1949. I never wanted
 this fact to be known, in
 fact I've spent the better
 half of my adult life
 trying to sweep my early
 years under the carpet
 and have a life that
 was clearly just mine
 and independent of
 the historic fate of
 my family. Can you
 imagine what it was
 like to be one of them,
 to be built like them,
 to talk like them
 to have the benefits
 of being born into such
 a wealthy and powerful
 American family.

(13)

In a recurring move, autobiographical detail bleeds seamlessly into fictive conceit: Myles *was* born in Boston in 1949; it isn't until the line “a wealthy and powerful family,” that one begins to catch on to the poem's ruse. The poem continues:

. . . I hopped
 on an Amtrak to New
 York in the early
 '70s and I guess
 you could say
 my hidden years
 began. I thought
 Well I'll be a poet.
 What could be more
 foolish and obscure.
 I became a lesbian.
 Every woman in my

family looks like
 a dyke but it's really
 stepping off the flag
 when you become one.
 While holding this ignominious
 pose I have seen and
 I have learned and
 I am beginning to think
 there is no escaping
 history. A woman I
 am currently having
 an affair with said
 you know you look
 like a Kennedy. I felt
 the blood rising in my
 cheeks. People have
 always laughed at
 my Boston accent
 confusing "large" for
 "lodge," "party"
 for "potty." But
 when this unsuspecting
 woman invoked for
 the first time my
 family name
 I knew the jig
 was up. Yes, I am,
 I am a Kennedy.

(14-15)

The poem stages a scene of faux-interpellation: "It is right that a/ woman should
 call/me out now," she later writes. The line "I am beginning to think/there is no
 escaping/ history" takes on a particularly complex meaning here, in that the poem
 dramatizes a means of escape from her own personal history, while also fusing her story
 with the "historic fate" of the Kennedys, thus refusing to allow her "foolish and
 obscure" roots to be relegated to history's sidelines. As the poem goes on, its complexity
 thickens, as the speaker continues to posit herself as near-royalty slumming it as a poor
 poet and dyke, while she also *is* that poet and dyke, boldly asking her audience: "Am I
 the only/homosexual in this room/tonight. Am I the only/one whose friends have/

died, are dying now.” The rhetoric of the poem balloons as it heads toward its final, climactic lines: “It is not normal for/me to be a Kennedy./But I am no longer/ashamed, no longer/alone. I am not/alone tonight because/we are all Kennedys./ And I am your President” (17).

The phrase “mock-exaltation” begins to seem inaccurate in light of such brazenness, as one of the most compelling aspects of Myles’s posturing is how it eventually becomes indistinguishable from exaltation itself. The performative utterance “I am your President” is technically “infelicitous,” to use Austin’s term, in that Myles lacks the authorization or social power to make herself the President. But as Butler makes clear in *Excitable Speech: A Politics of the Performative*, not only is it “clearly possible to speak with authority *without* being authorized to speak,” but this kind of “insurrectionary speech” is often a means by which social transformation occurs (157). (For a non-verbal example of this phenomenon, Butler uses Rosa Parks: Parks had no authorization to sit in front of the bus, but her assumption of the authority to do so sparked meaningful change.) Butler explains this idea further (by means of comparison with Pierre Bourdieu):

For Bourdieu, then, the distinction between performatives that work and those that fail has everything to do with the social power of the one who speaks: the one who is invested with the legitimate power makes language act; the one who is not invested may recite the same formula, but produces no effect. The former is legitimate, and the latter, an imposter.

But is there a sure way of distinguishing between the imposter and the real authority? And are there moments in which the utterance forces a blurring between the two, where the utterance calls into question the established grounds of legitimacy, where the utterance, in fact, performatively produces a shift in the terms of the legitimacy as an *effect* of the utterance itself? (146-7)

Myles’s performance in “An American Poem” explicitly sets out to blur the boundaries between the “imposter” and the “real authority.” She is indeed a Kennedy imposter, but the authority claimed via the poem’s dialogic utterance ends up no sham. Further, it is

not hers alone. “Shouldn’t we all be Kennedys?”, she asks her audience, before concluding: “we are all Kennedys.”

A similar dynamic animates Myles’s prose. Listen, for example, to the opening of the short piece “Light Warrior” (from *Chelsea Girls*): “My name means Light Warrior when you bring it home to the present day through Latin and Gaelic. I am a significant person, maybe a saint, or larger than life. I hear that you judge a saint by her whole personality, not just her work. I’m beginning to see my work as my shadows, less and less necessary, done with less and less care” (35)—yet another instance of “not caring,” perhaps to be placed alongside Notley’s “Let’s have a page of good writing here . . . (Lack of interest).” “Light Warrior” appears, however, just stories away from “Popponesset,” Myles’s chilling, four-page account of getting gang-raped at a party at a beach house in Cape Cod while nearly unconscious from drinking. “A bunch of good-looking suburban guys, 18 or 19, same as me, who all owned cars, trashed me for two reasons: I was drunk, they didn’t know me,” she writes. The morning after, she wakes up alone, sick, and “painfully numb.” She walks down to the beach, where she writes her name in the sand with her toe. “EILEEN MYLES. Yes, that’s who I am. I rubbed it out with my foot” (190). The “larger than life” celebration of her name in “Light Warrior” cannot be disentangled from the name written in the sand in a solitary act of survival and protest. Myles’s developing role as a “hero” and “cult figure to generations of young, post-punk female writer-performers” (as Holland Cotter put it in a 2001 profile of Myles in the *New York Times*) stems in part from this dynamic—from the Stein-like conviction of her own genius and significance that runs alongside a startling—indeed a shameless—exploration of shame. “I think the form of the novel gives dignity to my shame,” she says in *Narrativity*, in reference to *Cool For You*. “Sometimes I’m just ashamed to block

the sun.” A more recent poem from *Skies*, “Inauguration Day,” which corresponds to the controversial inauguration of George W. Bush in 2001, returns this combination to the public sphere. The poem concludes: “you cannot insult/Me. I hold this sense of awe” (204). The sense of awe is hers inalienably, so to speak—the speaker holds it, contains it, *a priori*. But she also has to hold onto it, grasp it, protect it from that which might insult it. The poem itself then becomes the container, which holds itself out as both spectacle and offering.

“An American Poem” is but one of many of Myles’s poems that rhetorically address a civic audience; other poems take the form of actual addresses written for public occasions or ceremonies, such as “To the Class of ‘92” (from *Maxfield Parrish*). These poems differ from other “publicly-minded” poems (the kind you might read on the Op-Ed page of the *New York Times*, or hear recited at a funeral, inauguration, or other ceremony) in that Myles customarily engages the rhetoric of these platforms in order to violate it. As she tells the “class of ‘92”:

. . . The time you spent
 here, 4 years goes very
 fast so perhaps what you’ll
 be saying goodbye to when
 you leave here is slow
 time. (Long silence.) Wasn’t
 that hell? Something in
 me gets de-railed mentally,
 it’s always been so. I
 make most of my living
 as a public speaker, this
 is what I do & yet I
 freeze up like a deer
 in the light of your attention &
 like something that’s bound
 to be killed by the swerve
 of your attention I’ve
 begun to relish it. Because

it's so slow before you
die. Think of it this
way—you're dying now.
I just knew I'd say the
wrong thing.

(113-114)

The poem goes on to tell its audience that it's too late to change the world, that "[g]raduation day is/meaningless," "[y]ou don't believe in those gowns," and "I'd like my check." Throughout, Myles explores the strangeness and precariousness of being "in the light" of the audience's attention. Indeed, the condition that lights up the poem is the *intimate reciprocity necessary for speech acts to occur*, even in public forums: "You have invited me/to speak today because I/love you," she says, then closes the poem with the imperative: "Need each other/as much as you can bear./Everywhere you go in the/world." The poem sustains the promise of O'Hara's "Personism," in which O'Hara realizes "that if I wanted to I could use the telephone instead of writing the poem, and so Personism was born . . . It puts the poem squarely between the poet and the person, Lucky Pierre style." But whereas O'Hara's "occasional" poems generally correspond to more intimate, coterie events ("Poem Read at Joan Mitchell's," for example), Myles often takes on the largest, most formidable of cultural settings. "I've always thought a poet should think big, not small," she has said (Richard, 26).

And in the United States, what could be bigger than the Presidency? In a blurring of so-called "life" and "art" that O'Hara certainly would have understood, and which Allen Ginsberg pioneered in the 50s and 60s, Myles ran as an "openly-female," write-in candidate for President in 1992. In this context, the conceit of "An American Poem" collapses: the poem no longer just resembles or apes a Presidential campaign; it becomes a part of one. By this point in her career, Myles had already published several books of poems, including *The Irony of the Leash* (1978), *A Fresh Young Voice from the Plains* (1981),

and *Sappho's Boat* (1982). ("When I came out as a Lesbian poet I named my first book *Sappho's Boat*," she explains in "The Lesbian Poet." "Very definitely because my earlier book's content was half in and out and a bookstore called Oscar Wilde wouldn't carry it because it wasn't gay enough. I wanted to be in the store. You want gay, here's *Sappho's Boat*." [130].) She had also written several plays and two books of prose, *Bread and Water* (1987) and *1969* (1989); edited the poetry magazine *dodgems* (1977-1979); served for two years (1984-1986) as the artistic director of the Poetry Project; and performed extensively. ("In the 80s I remember a friend telling me he thought I was 'bringing Personism to performance,'" she tells Richard [26].) In 1990, she began touring a stage show called "Leaving New York." As the title suggests, around the time she turned forty, she was feeling "fed up" and ready to leave New York altogether. While touring, she was constantly "thinking of where I was performing and who I was performing for. Just regarding the public space as a political one, thinking what would be political for this particular group of people" (Durgin). In the end, the experience brought her "to a whole new place with my art and my dealing with community." Instead of leaving the city, she had "one of those lightbulb experiences . . . I thought, I'm 40, I can run for president. I'm female, but I can run. I went down to the board of elections and looked into it and I found out the regulations for being a write-in candidate, so I did that for about a year and a half" (Durgin).

Myles's run for president wildly amplified the personal-is-political formula. She describes the campaign experience (in an online interview with Michelle Alb at Naropa) as follows:

I toured 29 states, I fund-raised to continue the campaign. I was on MTV, *Interview* did a piece on me. If the point was to get attention, I could have gotten more. But I was sort of treating it like a performance artist doing duration, and my idea was, no matter what, I was going to run to the election. And I was going

to run according to how I felt. Because a candidate never really tells you how they're feeling. And I thought I would be the candidate who did do that. My campaign was total disclosure, and I would endlessly disclose details about my life. It also enabled me to politicize personal poetry. Because it was all political, it was all personal. It was exhausting. It invaded every part of my life. You know, I'd go to a party, people would say, how's the campaign. I just could not get away from it. So I got a sense of how much, when you put something out there, it's really beyond your control. . . . Every public appearance I had, I would turn into a political opportunity. Every reading was a campaign opp [sic], every performance, every panel. So I already had some [recognition] and it gave me more. Of course, interestingly, I did get more attention as a presidential candidate than I ever did as a poet. But the fact of the matter was, it was a poetic experience.

Her candidacy didn't just politicize personal poetry; it also revealed something about the poetics of politics. What made it "a poetic experience" was the revelation that "when you put something out there, it's really beyond your control." In politics as in literature, rhetorical effects always exceed intention, they cannot be fully governed. According to Shoshana Felman (and Freud, for that matter), this is the scandal of the speaking body, that "speech is always in some ways out of our control." (See Butler, *Excitable*, 155.) And the unpredictability of both poetry and politics designate them both as sites of potential transformation. That Myles wouldn't win the election was a foregone conclusion. But her candidacy was scandalous, not only in its spectacle of a broke, avant-garde, lesbian poet making a claim on phallic power, but also in her willingness to dedicate a period of her life to the production of unforeseeable effects.

Not all of Myles's claims on public space have been as explicitly political as her civic addresses or presidential candidacy. Many of Myles's poems continue the tradition of poet-as-*flâneur*—a role made famous by Baudelaire in 19th-century Paris, and refashioned in mid-20th-century New York by O'Hara. But when a woman poet takes on the role of "street-walker," the terms of the tradition inevitably alter. In 1949 (the year

Myles was born), Plath famously wrote in her journal, “I want, I think, to be omniscient . . . I think I would like to call myself, ‘The girl who wanted to be God.’” A year or so later, Plath returned to the sentiment, but this time with a defeated spirit: “Yes, my consuming desire to mingle with road crews, sailors and soldiers, barroom regulars—to be part of a scene, anonymous, listening, recording—all is spoiled by the fact I am a girl, a female always in danger of assault and battery.”⁵ Plath’s cocky lust for “omniscience”—along with her anger and depression at the limitations of her gender—give voice to how compelling and frustrating the fantasy of a powerful, roving female can be. Of course, fierce class distinctions come into play here, as “walking the streets” has historically posed a different kind of problem for good, middle or upper-middle class girls (like Plath) with a reputation to protect. (For a story that depicts the dangers faced by a lower-class “slut” hitchhiking in America in the late 60s, see Cookie Mueller’s humorous and disturbing autobiographical story, “Abduction and Rape—Highway 31 Elkton, Maryland—1969.”⁶) Yet the “danger of assault and battery” that Plath alludes to—and, by extension, the general policing of the public activities of women by means of the threat of rape (by strangers) or punishment (by the system)—continue to affect women everywhere.⁷ Thus, regardless of whether or not the political content becomes explicit, Myles’s “street haunting” (as Woolf elaborated in an essay by that name) or “street hunting” (as Myles herself puts it) constitutes another expansion of the public possibilities for the female poet.

The poem “Hot Night” (from *Not Me*) is a classic instance. It begins: “Hot night, wet night/you’ve seen me before./When the streets are/drenched and shimmering/with themselves, the/mangy souls that wan-/der & fascinate its/puddles, piles of trash. Impersonal/street is a lover/to me” (51). Continuing in a kind of rhapsodic fever, the

poem roams through the scabrous, trash-filled, shimmering East Village landscape on a hot, rainy evening in July. “It could/ be another city/ but it’s this/ city where/I start/being alone/ & alive bringing/ my candles/ in while/I go walking/ in the rain,” Myles writes, using terms that echo Ashbery’s claim that New York is “really an anti-place, an abstract climate” (Lehman, 26). As in O’Hara’s lunch poems, or Guillaume Apollinaire’s great pedestrian poem “Zone,” “Hot Night” creates the illusion of being written while actually walking. Myles explains the actual writing of the poem as follows: “I literally stepped out of my house that night, feeling a poem coming on . . . I’ve had this feeling before—of going out to get a poem like hunting . . . I felt ‘...erotic, oddly/magnetic...’ like photographic paper. As I walked I was recording the details, I was the details, I was the poem.” After the walk, she says she went directly to Yaffa (a café on St. Mark’s Place) and wrote the poem down. “[I] haven’t changed a thing,” she insists. “[N]aturally I left a big tip” (“How I Wrote Certain of My Poems,” *Not Me*, 202, 201). The writing of the poem thus becomes analogous to developing a roll of film, as the shocks (as Walter Benjamin might put it) have already been registered in the poet’s consciousness. “I’ve always felt that writing is to a very large extent the work of a scribe,” Myles explains (Foster, 62).

In an essay entitled “Walking in the City,” Michel de Certeau discusses what he calls “practicing space” in an urban milieu. He suggests that a walker moves through urban space not as its author, but rather as one “turned and returned according to anonymous law” (152). “[Walkers’ bodies] follow the thicks and thins of an ‘urban text’ they write without being able to read it,” he writes (152). The text of “Hot Night”—which is, if we take her word for it, essentially a one-draft performance—collapses the metaphorical dimension of de Certeau’s “urban text.” The poem itself follows the thicks

and thins, gets turned and returned, feels driven by unknowable forces: “who’s driving? God?/I don’t believe in/God. New notebook/I’m scared. My/hand tries to fly/free, but it’s my/life, not my/death.” In her interview with Richard, Myles testifies to the mystery of this process:

I have a strong experience of dictation. I’ve always felt that writing the poem is listening. . . . I feel like I’m drawing. I’m paying attention to something, and some part of me someplace is doodling, but it’s not a real place and the only thing that’s really getting done is this nice kind of printing that I love. I’m always very into my materials, and I usually use a little notebook. The size of the notebook often dictates the size of the lines. I get these at a stationery store on Avenue A. Mostly I feel I’m experiencing a kind of tension release that feels curt and tough. (28)

Here Myles explicitly links her “materials”—i.e., the small notebooks that hem in the line length of her poems—to her peripatetic habit. Though not all of her poems are skinny, the majority of them are—enough to incite Dennis Cooper to write in *Artforum*, “Myles basically talks shit in skinny columns and calls them poems.” (Cooper doesn’t mean “talking shit” as an insult, as the rest of his review makes clear: “Thing is, hers is one of the savviest voices and most restless intellects in contemporary literature—honest, jokey, paranoid, sentimental, mean, lyrical, tough, you name it.”) Myles herself has characterized her writing similarly: for example, the back cover of *A Fresh Young Voice from the Plains* reads: “[Myles] describes her poems as ‘cheap talk’ and most critics agree.” The most immediate precursor of the “skinny column” poem is, of course, Schuyler. And Myles—who worked for Schuyler—knows that his skinny lines stemmed from a similar process: “when he was an art writer he used small books . . . that’s actually why Jimmy’s poems look like that too.” (This method may also have had an impact on Schuyler’s prose. As Myles tells it, “[Schuyler] said that when he wrote about art, he wrote it in poems first and put the prose thing in later” [Foster, 52]). Thus, whether walking around the city in a “magnetic” mood, or going out to look at art and making

notes about it, Schuyler and Myles share a poetics of the peripatetic line shaped by small notebooks. “When I get home the legal pad becomes my material of choice, and the poems get fatter,” Myles says (Foster, 52); one suspects that Schuyler might have shared aspects of this compositional process, as his fattest poems, such as “A Few Days” and “The Morning of the Poem” seem most clearly set at his desk, in repose.

This vacillation between skinniness and fatness returns us to Myles’s notion of a metabolic, or proprioceptive, poetry. It’s important to note here that both Schuyler and Myles are famous dieters. Schuyler struggled with obesity and diabetes, and his *Diary* is filled with beautiful and poignant lines about food and weight. “Yesterday an early supper at Grand Central, six Wellfleet, sweet and cold, and oyster stew, OK, but I really wanted a pan roast,” he writes on 4/16/88; “I lost four pounds. A pound a week, which [the doctor] says is fine,” he writes a few days later (213-4, 216). *Cool For You* is Myles’ most extensive chronicle to-date of her experiences with binge-eating and dieting: “I had never experimented with this kind of eating as much as you could. I was just out to smash something as hard as possible . . . You know what it’s like to eat seven candy bars, one after another” (62). The *Chelsea Girls* story “Merry Christmas, Dr. Beagle,” which deals with buying speed from a “diet doctor” in Queens, puts a comic spin on this topic. “Watch the breads,” the corrupt doctor tells her, “and I’m sure we’ll see some *progress*.” “What a cynical bastard I thought to myself, dropping the tinkling container of pills into my bag,” Myles thinks, before stopping in the local pub to wash them down (31).

The relationship between the length of a poetic line and the management of one’s desire for food can be profound. “One day sitting in [David Rattray’s] house I told him when I was a dieting nineteen-year-old in Boston I would close my eyes and see the day as an empty page with horizontal stripes which represented meals,” Myles says in

“The Lesbian Poet.” “David said that’s interesting because the first writing occurred in Egypt, and the parchment represented the Nile and its first use was to indicate future shipments of food and how much. Rafts and rafts of the stuff. Poetry, not prose. It indicates desire. My poem is a menu” (124). Myles later acknowledges that this story about the Nile may not be historically precise, but she doesn’t mind. It provides a foundational image for a poetry whose primary task is to take inventory of transient goods and desires. (“A few days/are all we have. So count them as they pass,” Schuyler wrote, inadvertently providing an anthem for this model.) The poem-as-menu image places the action of desire at center stage: a menu aims to tempt a hungry audience. This isn’t to say, however, that the poem can speak only to unquenchable yearning. Rather, Myles hears in it the promise of satisfaction. As she writes in *Cool For You*, “These little marks tell us about the things that are coming down the river in the future. That we will be okay, that we will be fed” (192). In a letter-to-the-editor that Myles recently sent to the *New York Times Book Review* (in response to a piece by Judith Shulevitz called “Sing Muse . . . Or Maybe Not,” in which Shulevitz argues that recorded poetry is better than live poetry because one can always turn it off), Myles articulates her sense of the voracity, and the potential satisfaction, of an audience’s desires:

. . . the human need to hear *any* speech live, but particularly rhythmic speech, is unstoppable,” she argues. “Judith, people just like it. They really do. They like to sit communally and hear messages that aren’t tinkered with by the government, or intended to sell a product, or gauged to spin some denatured piece of information that’s already been stripped of its dangerous content. Poetry is and has been for a while where lots of citizens get the real and irregular news of how others around them think and feel. What’s so discomfoting about that?”

It would seem that the *Times* found something discomfoting [or irrelevant] about Myles’ response, as they did not publish it. So Myles recently published the letter as a pamphlet entitled *We, the Poets*.⁸

I'd like to return for a moment to de Certeau's observations about practicing space in an urban setting, a process he characterizes as "being other and moving toward other" (180). A walking poem such as "Hot Night" inhabits both modes, in yet another instance of making a claim on being both "somebody" and "nobody." "[L]et me be lost/ in the lonesome/ place, the human/ sea of no one," Myles writes, then states, "You know a/ genius when you've/ seen one, don't/ you. I am one./ Take a good look,/ you've seen me/ before. Don't/ turn back." The poem performs its alienation—its state of "being other"—while also moving "toward other." *Let me be no one*, it pleads, alongside the equally potent imperative: *Recognize me as someone*. The British psychoanalyst D. W. Winnicott might hear these lines as evidence of his theory that artists of all kinds find themselves in an "urgent dilemma" characterized by the co-existence of two trends: "the urgent need to communicate and the still more urgent need not to be found" (Phillips, *Winnicott*, 151). This predicament is also, of course, a classic recipe for cruising. As the title "Hot Night" suggests, the speaker is out hunting for sex as well as a poem, and the poem concludes accordingly: "I need/ whiskey sex/ and I get/ it." One fairly unimaginative way of gendering the terms of this discussion might be to designate the "somebody" as the embodied, differentiated female, and the "nobody" as the anonymous, universal male subject. But in "Hot Night" and elsewhere, Myles creates a great deal of slippage between such distinctions, by creating a space in which an "undeniably female" speaker easily slips into being "nobody, this human, a man," and vice versa. As she concludes another "scribing" poem (this one from *on my way*, and called, appropriately enough, "Scribner's"): "I do this./ Appear to/ be a bum/ in my hiking/ boots & hairy/ legs I'm no/ longer a dyke/ just a man// hello little/ bird" (58-59).

In “The Lesbian Poet,” Myles tells a related anecdote:

Last summer I was standing alone on a hill with my dog and a car as an amazing shower of meteorites *flash flash* had stained the sky orange. It was so sensational and I was utterly alone with my animal. I knew I was a man. It was utterly clear, there was no thing of woman at all. I was standing in nature alone, this guy. It was a terrifically human feeling. Alone. Completely full. (125)

Myles’s work is in fact rife with ambivalence about—if not downright loathing of—being a woman. “I used to pray to be a boy. I used to pray to God to make me be a boy. And I don’t know if that was because I thought I was masculine or because I liked what masculine people got or that I wanted women,” she explains to Foster (59). Indeed, one of the most powerful segments of *Cool For You*—the piece that tells the story of her getting her period, among other things—begins with the blunt declaration: “I hate being a woman” (87). A poem called “Misogyny” from Myles’s first book, *The Irony of the Leash*, humorously extends the theme: “‘My new tack will be to hate women,’/I uttered to Ann,/my voice quivering with discovery./ ‘But, Eileen . . . you *are* a woman,’/ my sister Ann uttered back,/the usual disdain creaking through the air./ ‘That’s the only hitch . . .’ I slowly sighed// and another near adventure was bypassed” (*Maxfield Parrish*, 214).⁹ Yet Myles consistently tethers these sentiments to an insistent focus on the rhythms, specificity, and attractions of the female body. “I like the smell and taste of women’s bodies,” she writes in *Chelsea Girls*. “Sometimes I’m sure that’s what I’m living for” (80). The aforementioned segment of *Cool For You* plows straight into hating being a woman, and hating one’s period, and comes out somewhere else:

All that blood like some kind of sex with yourself. Is it clotty. Is it red, brown; does it look too bright. Don’t you think better when you’re bleeding, don’t you want to stay home and smoke and read and write. Don’t you feel tremendously sexy. Have you spent years hiding it, arming yourself against revelation, the stains and the bloody smell. Do you want to fuck. I remember my friend describing his face when he described eating the pussy of a bleeding woman. That he had red wings. (88-89)

Passages like the above practice a sort of alchemy—they venture into ambivalence and come out with desire. Above all, they avoid a polar situation, as Cage might put it, for Myles’ masculine and feminine identifications are nothing if not fluid. They are, in fact, almost as simultaneous as syntax will allow, as is evident in the following lines from her prose poem, “The Poet”: “we are the women we are the women I am full of holes because you are. I am the only saintly man in town.” (*MP*, 110) To return to the passage I quoted earlier from “The Lesbian Poet,” Myles says, “I feel self-conscious about lesbian things, in nature like I said I’m nobody, this human, a man. (. . .) It’s my poetic dilemma, it seems. To include the body, the woman’s as I see it” (130). It’s worth pointing out here that “dilemma” has two slightly different meanings. The first is “a situation that requires one to choose between two equally balanced alternatives”; the second, “an argument in which a choice of two or more alternatives, each being conclusive and fatal, is presented to an antagonist” (*AHD*, 397). The first requires that an impossible choice be made (i.e., between being human or being female); the second acknowledges the deadliness inherent in such an impossible binary. As when pitched a Zen koan, one must instead seek out an idiosyncratic and inventive response if one hopes to avert the polar, potentially “fatal,” terms of the argument.¹⁰

Myles’s shifting gender identifications are but part and parcel of her exploration of “identity” at large. In fact, in the *Dictionary of Literary Biography*, Durgin cites Myles’s “thoroughly postmodern, if not somewhat confrontational, view to the problem of identity in twentieth-century American poetry,” as one of her principal achievements. “Identity” is an enormous and amorphous topic, and Myles’s poetic experiments with it are accordingly expansive. If we return to the dictionary for a moment, we find that “identity” has two back-to-back, nearly opposite meanings: “the quality or condition of

being the same as something else” (i.e., the collective identity that enables the formation of groups); and “the distinct personality of an individual regarded as a persisting entity” (i.e., the conglomerate of traits that forms a specific, recognizable individual) [*AHD*, 639]). By creating a poetry that is simultaneously politicized, communal, and unabashedly personal, Myles engages both models. Notley, by contrast, nominally shuns the former: “The minute, actually, there is more than one person involved in any assertion, truth is lost and aggression is possible,” she writes. “We is a difficult word. And I don’t use it in *Mysteries*” (Email interview, 2/4/02). Compare this attitude with the title of Myles’s pamphlet, *We, the Poets*, and at least one point of divergence between them becomes clear. In “Tradition and the Individual Talent,” Eliot famously says that poetry ought to be an escape from personality and emotion. Less famous, however, is his next line: “But, of course, only those who have personality and emotions know what it means to want to escape from those things” (43). In a weird echo of Eliot, Myles freely admits that she is “plagued with personal identity.” But whereas Eliot advocates escape, Myles ventures into the heart of the storm, with all its attendant risks and shames. “The body always seems like the shame,” she says. “The camera must cut away to the trees, the animal is telling too much” (*Narrativity*). But Myles defiantly keeps the camera on the animal, on the animal’s talking body.

As exemplified by the transparent ruse of “An American Poem,” Myles’s autobiographical writing often employs a pleasurably perverse form of artifice. The title of the collection *Not Me* provides a condensed example: on the one hand, “not me” could be an intentionally unconvincing disavowal; on the other, it asserts something patently true—that the collection is “not her,” as representation is always incomplete, and identity always in excess of its performance, no matter how “personal” the work.¹¹

Recently Myles has extended this form of artifice into the problem of genre. Though many would consider *Cool For You* a memoir, as its main character is named Eileen Myles and its autobiographical details correspond to her life, Myles insists on calling it a novel. In an interview in *Time Out*, she explains: “This is not a quote-unquote real novel. It’s my kind of novel—pasted together and funky. While writing this book I thought, It’s going to explain more than novels are supposed to; it’s just going to do any fucking thing it wants to do, and then I’m still going to say it’s a novel when I’m done.” The “confrontational” aspect Durgin notes in Myles’ approach begins to become audible here, though Notley’s “disobedient” may be the more apt adjective. “I think literary categories are false,” Myles explains to Laurie Weeks in *Index* magazine. “They belong to the marketplace and the academy. It’s the obedience issue that I’m saying fuck you to, the scholar or the editor trying to trap the writer like a little bug under the cup of ‘poetry’ or ‘prose.’” Her finger, too, does its share of up-pointing.

The Artaud epigraph that begins *Cool For You*—“*Jamais real, toujours vra?*”—sheds more light on Myles’s particular conception of autobiography and her use of the first-person. The epigraph recalls the line that prefaces *Roland Barthes by Roland Barthes*: “*It must all be considered as if spoken by a character in a novel.*” Myles’s stance is similar, but more Pop: she likens her “I” to a character in a comic strip—a comic strip in which the figure “Eileen Myles” is necessary to carry the action from frame to frame, speaking in word-bubbles. “It’s just that, for me, the pictures are invisible—the poem is purely the balloons, and the balloons are infinite,” she explains. The character “Eileen Myles” should not be understood, however, as a masque or a front for a self that pre-exists or undergirds it. Myles does not rely on any tired “the-truth-is-in-the-mask” platitudes that hope to wedge a safe distance between speaker and poet. Instead, she zeros in on the

intricate relation between her public “character” and her “self.” “There are certain ways I didn’t know who I was until I developed that character, so it gets a little dicey,” she says. “Really the character is more firm than I am . . . So of course it’s easy to get up and do her in a reading, because I know what she sounds like” (Richard, 29). We might here recall the distinction Myles drew earlier between her work and that of the first-generation New York School poets: “They would all assert that the poetry was not about them. It’s about skimming the surface of the self. Using that facility to shape the poem. My dirty secret has always been that it’s of course all about me” (*Narrativity*). Myles, too, takes on the project of “skimming the surface of self,” but she does not partake in any paranoia about collapsing into the “dirty” realm of the overtly or overly personal.

As one might imagine, given her commitment to the complexity and risks of such a project, Myles has little patience for critics who dismiss her work as “too personal.” “I’ve actually been criticized in my writing for being ‘personal.’ Like that’s not so important . . . I mean in some reviews I got for *Chelsea Girls*, the reviewer was saying that what was trivial and unimportant about my work was how personal it was. It’s a funny way of making their objections to my writing sound abstract. They basically just didn’t like hearing about a woman, a lesbian” (Foster, 60-61). (Interestingly, *Chelsea Girls* anticipates this criticism: the epigraph to the story “Toys R Us” is an excerpt from a *Village Voice* review that reads: “Myles’s social observations are scattershot, and when she turns her eye exclusively on herself, as too often she does, she sinks to sharing sappy diary entries.” The story then humorously begins: “That’s when I knew my play was over” [145].) As her inclusion of the reviewer’s negative comment into her story suggests, Myles is uncowed by this breed of criticism. Her camera will not cut away to the trees; the imperative to speak is too strong. Further, like Mayer, like Ashbery, Myles

is unafraid of boredom: “My vehicle, my cartoon, coincided with say, Warhol and the soup can, or *Interview* magazine, these really boring interviews with people saying, ‘Um.’ I thought, ‘Wow, boring. Great!’ Warhol’s movies, people just talking—pouring all that detail into poetry” (Richard, 29).

In addition to Warhol’s movies, another influence Myles cites is the Alfred Leslie film *The Last Clean Shirt* (1964), with subtitles by Frank O’Hara. *The Last Clean Shirt* consists of the same footage shown three times—once in silence, then twice with a different set of subtitles. The footage shows two people—a dark-skinned man and a white woman—getting into a convertible with a prominent clock on the dashboard, then driving in circles around Astor Place and the Bowery. Throughout, the woman talks excitedly to the man in an indecipherable blur while he drives in silence. The first set of O’Hara’s subtitles supposedly corresponds to the woman’s speech; the second, to the silent man’s thought. Like O’Hara’s poetry in general, the titles range from the non sequitur to the hilarious to the deeply philosophical. As in Leslie’s more famous Beat movie, *Pull My Daisy*, in which Kerouac’s voice-over purports to correspond to what the characters are saying but obviously does not, much of the humor in *The Last Clean Shirt* stems from the suspected discrepancy between O’Hara’s lines and what the woman is really saying, and then what the man is really thinking. O’Hara’s subtitles are the word-bubbles, which constitute the poem; the footage is the cartoon, the vehicle that makes it possible.

When it was originally screened, people booed *The Last Clean Shirt* because it was so boring. It’s still boring, as it loops the same, real-time footage for forty minutes. But the boredom co-exists with tremendous excitements—the excitement of O’Hara’s witty lines; the woman’s excitement as she verbalizes; the excitement of driving around in a

big car in downtown New York City at mid-century; and, perhaps, the excitement of a dark-skinned man and a white woman driving together in 1964, appearing together in private and public simultaneously (i.e. in a car, but with the top down). As is often the case with repetitive art, the boring miraculously morphs into the riveting and vice versa. Myles characterizes the tone and import of *The Last Clean Shirt* as follows:

It was kind of like yippee! and kind of like sorrow, and it was profound and excited in the way the O'Hara's voice just shifts and shifts and shifts and keeps taking in everything and letting it out. When I saw the movie I thought, "That's it." That is, in the most classic sense, who O'Hara was, even what the New York School was. The poet was like this open car in the middle of the century, at some peak moments just saying, "Yes!" and catching the shape—moving through it all in a very excited way. People who romanticize and imitate O'Hara's moment mistakenly think that abundance gets to be what it's about—that mid-century excess and heroism and triumph, which it isn't. (Richard, 28).

Myles reiterates her understanding of the New York School aesthetic as “putting yourself in the middle of a place and being excited and stunned by it”—epitomized here by the open car. Later on in this same interview, Myles explains that she thinks of the New York School aesthetic as essentially metonymic as opposed to metaphoric. For Myles, metonymy is “about proximity—an open universe, not a closed one. In O'Hara's movie, it's the car” (Richard, 28). Myles even sees the creation of the character “Eileen Myles” as a metonymic move, for, as she says, “instead of inventing some symbolic name for my narrator, I use a real piece of me.”

Myles thinks of metonym as a “filmmaker's term,” and her embrace of it thus corresponds to her desire to move away from the “literariness” of poetry. “I experience writing poems as the chance to make a little movie,” she says in her contributor's note in *The Best American Poetry 2002* (210). Her interest in meshing filmic devices with poetic tropes recalls the kinship that the first-generation New York School poets felt with Abstract Expressionist art. (As Schuyler once said to Myles, “I think anything that's all

poetry is pretty boring, don't you babe?" [Richard, 28]). Myles regularly posits her speaker as a camera and the poem itself as a snapshot or collection of snapshots, complete with recurring "clicks": "used magazines,/poetry books on a blanket, click" ("Hot Night"); "I'm not a fool (click)" ("My Light"); "this is a relationship/click/this is a relationship" ("Scribner's").¹² This photography/poetry parallel saturates the collection *Skies*, as exemplified in the poem, "Where's ya camera," which opens: "That's so beautiful//framed by the wood stain/the sky stained palest orange/for only one moment//I must be precise/the tree is pure silhouette/pure black" (139). The poet's job here is to point the camera and shoot. Myles often uses extremely plain language to describe what she sees, and lets the principal artifice lie in the art of juxtaposition.

Juxtaposition as a primary structuring principle is clearly not a new concept—it is indeed a modernist staple, plumbed endlessly throughout the twentieth century in the development of the collage and the collage-poem. Myles's contribution to the tradition is an un-precious, increasingly abstract minimalism, propelled by nerve and in relentless pursuit of beauty, in all its simplicity and strangeness. As its title suggests, the poem "Writing" (from *Skies*) could be read as a sort of manifesto for this technique:

Writing

I can
connect

any two
things

that's
god

teeny piece
of bandaid

little folded

piece
of bandaïd

I ran
to the
bathroom

to see
my face

sometimes
I don't
want to

see my
face in

the mirror

sometimes
I can't
bear
my thoughts

sometimes
I can't
do anything

but that's
okay

bandaïd
book
god

that's
right

(80-81)

The nerve appears right from the start, as the poet feels, or flexes, her power—indeed, her godlike power—to “connect any two things.” But just after proclaiming this power, a trip to the bathroom (of course) derails it, as the shame of the body—here, of the face and the thoughts it reflects—is never far behind: “sometimes/I don't/want to/see my/face in//the mirror.//sometimes/I can't/bear/my thoughts.” The poet talks herself

away from the shame-spasm by remembering, indeed by performing, her poetic powers: “bandaid/ book/ god.” The concluding remark, “that’s/ right,” is tonally complex—it sounds reassuring, but also vaguely panicked, like an internalized parent or teacher trying to calm the speaker down.

The movement of the poem—its swing from the power and pleasure of writing, to an intense flash of self-contempt, then back to power/pleasure—suggests an aspect of speech (particularly logorrheic speech, though not only that) that I haven’t yet explored: its intimate relation to shame. In Chapter Four, I noted that Notley’s investigations into “fast talk” reveal rapid speech as a deep and voluptuous pleasure. But as the psychologist Silvan Tomkins has made abundantly clear, whenever one experiences a “positive affect” such as interest, excitement, desire, or enjoyment, shame may always jump in to reduce or inhibit it. Eve Sedgwick and Adam Frank explain the relationship succinctly in the introduction to their Tomkins’ reader, *Shame and Its Sisters*: “Without positive affect, there can be no shame: only a scene that offers you enjoyment or engages your interest can make you blush” (22). Thus, the more deeply one invests in the pleasure of rapid speech—the woman babbling excitedly in the front seat of the convertible; O’Hara writing not one but two sets of subtitles—the more intense the accompanying shame may be. “The pluralism of excitement and enjoyment is without limit,” Tomkins writes, “and hence shame, too, knows no bounds” (150). For a writer, the stakes of this boundless excitement and boundless shame run high, as one of shame’s main effects is to curtail speech and/or bodily expression. “Shame is both an interruption and a further impediment to communication, which is itself communicated,” Tomkins observes (135).

Myles takes the latter approach—that is, she lets her shame communicate instead of letting it shut her down. “I find self-hate extremely motivating,” she writes in an early

poem from *Sappho's Boat* (MP, 142). Often she places herself in the center of its sickening swirl, and charts the action from its inside. One of my favorite instances is Myles's description of P.M.S. in *Cool For You*:

The whole world becomes my enemy. You start to go crazy. I know I do. I cry for myself. All alone. A life ruined. Tragic mistakes, things I repeat again and again in my head, trying to get right. Sometimes I can taste the thought of the thing I should have said, should have done. I'm so ashamed of myself. Bragging, raging, remaining quiet. Everyone I talk to has that edge in their voice. They pity me. I'm over. You can see it in my eyes. And you must leave me forever. I can never forget what you've done. I didn't deserve this. I don't love you anymore. You had my body. I was completely open to you. It's taken me years to get this way. No one could touch me. They couldn't get through. I gave you such a gift. My cunt. And now we're through. And then I bleed. (89)

The blood breaks the spell, but the cycle will continue. In fact, the passage itself recycles sentiments expressed over a decade earlier in the poem, "Exploding the Spring Mystique." "I go home to my lover, who's of course/in her early 20s/A Younger Poet. There's note on my pillow/*Sorry, Honey, you peaked.*/ Arrrgh! I shriek at the heavens. (. . .) I collapse on my bed, a sexual and artistic homicide./Though still breathing, and it is Spring" (MP, 144).

As anyone who has lain awake at night replaying a botched scene over and over again well knows, repetition is one of shame's closest allies. As Tomkins has theorized, shame has its own cycle: "Once shame has been activated, the original excitement or joy may be increased again and inhibit the shame or the shame may further inhibit and reduce excitement or joy" (135). Unafraid of repeating herself ("I know I've told you this before but I'm lonely tonight and it's raining out," she says on page one of *Cool For You*), Myles retells certain shameful stories throughout her poetry and prose. The effect is somewhat similar to the looping of *The Last Clean Shirt*—it may be the same story, but the subtitles, or the word-bubbles, keep shifting, ever-expanding the dimensions of the past. Some of her toughest stories revolve around her father, an alcoholic who died in

front of Myles when she was eleven. In “The Kid,” a story from *Chelsea Girls*, Myles relays a brief but astonishingly painful anecdote. Her father is lying sick with one of his “awful headaches,” and he makes a gesture to her—two fingers to his lips. Thinking he wants a kiss, Myles kneels down and kisses him, only to have him growl: “No, God damn it, a cigarette.” Desire is a tremendously exciting and vital force, but when desires are misunderstood, or when they do not match up, or when they are rejected, ignored, or ridiculed, the result can be a stunning shame. “I know you got angry because of your headache, Dad,” Myles writes to the dead man, years after the fact, “but I felt like such an asshole” (25).

“The Kid” goes on to tell the story of his death, a scene Myles revisits at the close of *Cool For You*. In both cases, Myles’s narrative contends with a staggeringly complex happenstance: when her father died, Myles was in the room with him, writing “*I will not talk in the corridors*” 500 times—a punishment given to her by a nun at school. At the end of *Cool For You*, she describes the scene in detail:

Around the two hundredth repetition of *I will not talk* I could see all the ‘wills’ crookedly lining up and the talk, talk, talk, talk, talk with all the messy *k*’s. I stopped for a moment. I was trying to decide if a public school standing I, a big capital letter, was easier than the fat loopy I of Ignatius Loyola which we had been taught . . . Yes. It would definitely go smoother and look better once my hand got crampy . . . and then it began. My father’s blue notes. Sometimes I wake up in the middle of the night and my breathing is short and I fling myself up to save me. I look around and the thing that frightens me in that waking moment is that I am dying and I am alone. It would be the worst thing in the world to leave your life that way, and I suppose this fear is printed on my breath, breaths can suddenly go false and shallow and the bowl of you can be perched, still, and then shatter from everything that doesn’t return—air, life. I took notes. I heard my father die. I saw him die, but it was the sound. Believe me. Words are empty. It’s the squawking of the animal, the wheezing, the desperate wind of a life rattling through the body, I heard him, he was not alone. This man who tried to hear me. I became possible. Now the message is complete.

I am not alone, I wrote. Words are nothing. The empty repetition of language, that holds me like a friend, a pattern, a net. I will not talk, I will not talk, I will

not talk, my rattle, sash. I must not die alone. I heard his blue notes as he slipped away. I yelled, Mom. (194-5)

It's difficult to do this section of the book justice, partly because of its brutal emotional impact, and partly because there are simply so many elements of the story that compete for attention. The meaning of the simultaneity of Myles's vow not to talk and her father's loss of his own voice, his own "air and life," remains essentially multi-faceted and unfixed. Like most pivotal moments in a life, its import necessarily changes with time and representation. Myles's written vow is itself paradoxical, for while its content blunts her verbal expression, its form affirms that she will write—that she must write—and voluminously. The punishment thus intended to make her ashamed of her inappropriate speech ends up setting the stage for her to "become possible." Further, she "becomes possible" via witnessing the death of another—and not just another, but a father. His death spurs her to speech—indeed, to a yell: "Mom." Needless to say, this perceived trade-off—a father dies, a daughter speaks (and calls out "Mom")—is an incredibly vexed site for a girl, not to mention a girl who will become a feminist and lesbian writer/performer.

In thinking back for a moment to Pinsky's heroic poet-orator, who uses his "column of air," then his larynx and mouth, to shape breath into the signifying "sounds of poetry," it seems clear that Myles's dying father—with his squawking, his wheezing, his "desperate wind of a life rattling through the body"—demands a place at the table. For his inarticulate death rattle is the underbelly of poetic expression. He fails to make words, he fails to shape breath, he eventually fails to breathe. The animal dies. Yet Myles's "coming to writing" isn't just the story of a daughter supplanting a father with her own breath and words. Hearing him die, not letting him die alone, is what "completes the message." His "blue notes" are still the poetry of a metabolism, but of a

metabolism shutting down. Crucially, she is there to scribe it, while she simultaneously grasps that “words are nothing.” It’s the squawking of the animal that counts—and our potential to bear witness to each other’s sounds, or to turn away in anguish, disgust, or indifference. The closing lines of “Class of ‘92”—“Need each other/as much as you can bear/Everywhere you go in the/world”—deepen in urgency when placed in this context, as does Myles’s riposte to Shulevitz: “the human need to hear *any* speech live, but particularly rhythmic speech, is unstoppable.”

One might also hear in this dynamic yet another manifestation of the “caring/not-caring” conundrum. In fact, taken as a whole, *Cool For You* makes a crucial contribution to this discussion by exploring the drama of caring/not-caring on an institutional level. The novel couples an unflinching record of time spent working in institutions that supposedly care for people—a school for severely retarded adult males, a nursing home—with a painful inquiry into the life and death of Myles’ grandmother, Nellie Myles, who lived for seventeen years as a mental patient in a state hospital before dying there. Myles’s typically candid, often harsh look at her own “non-caring” (“I cared about them more than their relatives did, and I didn’t care about them at all,” she says in reference to the elderly people she feeds and cleans in the nursing home [80]) is accompanied throughout by her rage at the wayward care received by her grandmother at the hand of the state, not to mention Myles’s own fury at the institutions that have bound her. Myles has called *Cool For You* a captivity narrative, and the penultimate line of the book—“I’d like to thank the state of Massachusetts and the bowl of language that surrounds and survives me”—bristles with the ambivalence that can accompany such an endeavor.

Myles's earlier supposition that the fear of dying alone "is printed on [her] breath" makes another necessary alteration to Pinsky's image of the signifying, breathing orator. In fact, Myles's treatment of breath in the story of her father's death has as much in common with the fragile *Atemwende*, or "breath-turn," as theorized by Paul Celan, as it does with the blustery "breath-line" as elaborated by Whitman, Olson, or Ginsberg. In Celan's "The Meridian Speech," he writes:

Poetry is perhaps this: an *Atemwende*, a turning of our breath. Who knows, perhaps poetry goes its way—the way of art—for the sake of just such a turn? . . . I think—and this will hardly surprise you—that the poem has always hoped, for this very reason, to speak also on behalf of the *strange*—no, I can no longer use this word here—*on behalf of the other*, who knows, perhaps of an *altogether other* . . . Nobody can tell how long the pause for breath—hope and thought—will last. . . . It is true, the poem today shows—and this has only indirectly to do with the difficulties of vocabulary, the faster flow of syntax or a more awakened sense of ellipsis, none of which we should underrate—the poem shows a clear tendency toward silence. (408)

"Nobody can tell how long the pause for breath will last": Celan's "breath-turn" bases itself on the deep uncertainty that breathing—along with hoping and thinking—will continue. The abyss of death and silence is always right around the corner, ready to shape, deform, or exterminate poetic diction, line, and structure. Myles is similarly haunted—she knows that "breaths can suddenly go false and shallow and the bowl of you can be perched, still, and then shatter from everything that doesn't return—air, life." Generally speaking, Myles is a prolific writer, but her poems privilege compression, silence, failure, emptiness, and ellipsis to a greater extent than many of her New York School peers—certainly more than Mayer, Notley, Ashbery, Koch, and O'Hara, for example. (As one may have noticed by now, Myles' prose also relies heavily on "curt and tough" leaps and gaps.) The aesthetic affinity between Myles and Schuyler moves again to the fore, as both are comfortable writing minimalist, landscape-oriented poems that hope to record the fleeting and seemingly insignificant contingencies of the natural

world. (Myles's recent collection *Skies* focuses on precisely this task, as many of its poems chart the shifting features of the sky above.)

Myles's telling of her father's death also underscores her sense that writing is "just making a mark. It's your mortality, your need to exist. It is probably totally linked to feeling endangered" (Richard, 29). Myles reiterates this idea in Cotter's profile of her in the *New York Times*: "There was something about my particular life—as a female, as a person prone to drug and alcohol abuse, as a lesbian—that I sensed was endangered. I had a feeling nobody would know what it was like if I didn't tell it." Though she doesn't mention it here, her working-class background clearly contributes to this feeling. Myles's interest in a metabolic poetry has also led her to meditate on the various links between one's class, one's speech, and one's body. "You know so much about people from the second they open their mouths," she explains. "Right away you might know you want to keep them out" (Cotter). Her most explicit meditation on the subject to-date is the short essay "The End of New England" (from *on my way*) which discusses speech patterns of the white working class in Massachusetts. Myles begins by exposing the assumption—an assumption written "up there on the wall where all the secret thoughts of our culture are written in invisible ink"—that "people who work with their bodies, I don't mean artists, but people who lift things, people who say move the huge sculpture from there to there, I'm talking about the working class, that these people are stupid. Those people are dumb. They speak in short hand these people, they say: hey behind you. They say, on your left" (62). Though Myles can be brilliant at articulating the economy, rhythm, and phonetics of language from this environment, her main concern isn't the nailing down of any one particular idiolect. Neither her poetry nor her prose labors to recreate a dialect in the way that other writers—Zora Neale Hurston, for example—have done. Instead,

Myles's curiosity about speech forms of all kinds draws her into wide, speculative circles. "The End of New England," for example, touches on the speech-sounds of a sarcastic parrot, a Russian woman named Alla, an Irish immigrant wailing over the dead, John Cage's silences, a lecture by highbrow theorist Avital Ronnel, and many others. The point is the wild movement between forms of speech, and, by extension, forms of class identity, that we unconsciously (or consciously, as the case may be) hear and perform on a daily basis:

. . . those of us who write about it—class, and/or utilize the dialects that link one class with another . . . are *typically* moving between one language and another, for instance—shuttling between the literary language which is written and more affiliated with the middle class and up, and the working and lower classes whose story is generally spoken: it's a language of pleasure, adjustment and use. By its very nature it's a language of repetition, shorthand, working class speech is incomplete. *Heads up!* Whatcha gonna do means something vastly different from What are you going to do? The first is a shrug, expects no answer except its own echo in a culture than knows exactly what it means. What are you going to do is a guidance counselor, a human being demanding a reply from another, not a human looking at another human looking at a machine, the job, or the bigger machine, which is life. (64)

Myles aims to sharpen our ability to discern and name the distinction between "whatcha gonna do" and "what are you going to do." But she simultaneously reveals the extent to which class identity can be as ambiguous and fluctuating as any other category of identity. "Frankly I don't know what class I am today," she admits. "I can tell endlessly all about my family and how much money we had and education and what were the things inside our home. But class I think is utterly not about content" (66). What class may ultimately be about—at least in this context—is sound. Just as the "blue notes" of her dying father emptied words of their meaning, class's content—"how much money we had and education and what were the things inside our home"—begins to fade as its timbre takes center stage. Myles's emphasis on "shuttling" is not, however, a blithe tribute to "social mobility." To the contrary: in Marxist terms, one might say that her

rejection of class-as-content is another way of insisting on the interdependence of base and superstructure. Her emphasis on “shuttling” thus assures that *relations*, both social and material, remain the focus.

Myles’s ideas about class and the speaking subject have much in common with the aesthetic theories of Mikhail Bakhtin, who emphasized “the shifting planes of intention that can occur whenever one language meets another” (Richter, 528). Both Bakhtin and Myles care deeply about the political ramifications of *heteroglossia* (“the word of another”), and dialogical discourse; both actively despise the stultifications of monological discourse, of authoritative speech which “tries to have its say in a vacuum” (Richter, 528). In his inquiries into dialogism, Bakhtin focused on the novel—especially Dostoyevsky’s novels—as he considered poetry “typically single-voiced.” Myles’s poetry clearly stands as an exception (though her gravitation toward novelistic projects may end up speaking to Bakhtin’s novel-centered vision). What Bakhtin values in the “confessional,” novelistic speech of Dostoyevsky’s “Underground man” could easily be applied to Myles’ poetic discourse. I quote here from Bakhtin’s “Problems of Dostoyevsky’s Poetics”:

The discourse of the Underground man is entirely a discourse-address. To speak, for him, means to address someone; to speak about himself means to address his own self with his own discourse; to speak about another person means to address that person; to speak about the world means to address the world. (. . .) It cannot be seen as a lyrical or epic discourse, calmly gravitating toward itself and its referential object; no, first and foremost one reacts to it, responds to it, is drawn into its game: it is capable of agitating and irritating, almost like the personal address of a living person. (Richter, 547)

The latter part of Bakhtin’s comment bears an uncanny resemblance to an observation that Notley once made in an essay on Myles in *Talisman 17* (Summer 1997), that “there’s always the possibility of the reader’s reacting to this work as if it were a person to be loved or liked or disagreed with or found obnoxious.” In performance, Myles generally

combines this “discourse-address” with a self-conscious consideration of “where [she is] performing and who [she is] performing for . . . and thinking what would be political for this particular group of people.” Thus instead of allowing the political import of dialogic discourse to remain latent, Myles renders it explicit. To complete an earlier quotation, Myles says, “my feeling about literature is communal and I think it’s important to know, literally, who you’re writing for” (Richard, 25)

Myles’s essay “The End of New England” concludes with a complex, compassionate gesture of linguistic and familial reclamation:

. . . my mother that wonderful secretary the queen of language tried very hard to get us to speak correctly so that we would fit into America and advance but my neighbors spoke pretty poorly or I loved the way they spoke “bare naked” taping words together, really making the point, *biney*, a million ways to be dirty and there were eight of them so you heard it again and again, I guess you call it an idiolect. My sister said “nakin” she adamantly dropped the p, I miss her, I miss my family, it was another way to say us. Nakin. (69)

Myles continues to disobey her mother’s wish that her kids would “speak correctly and fit into America and advance,” but she does so in a published essay that negotiates many different levels of language, thus demonstrating Myles’s capacity to shuttle between the so-called high and low. And, of course, as Myles makes clear in her final lines, “Nakin” is a way of expressing love for her family, of honoring its specificity. Standing alone as its own sentence, “Nakin” becomes the sound of lament and defiance.

As one may have gathered by now, reclamation is a recurrent and far-reaching gesture in Myles’s work. The following excerpt from her interview with Frances Richard suggests something of its scope:

FR: So how do you address yourself to a contemporary avant-garde?

EM: I like the term. It’s a little pedantic, but if I’m not that, what am I? “Experimental” has a much more tentative sound to me than “avant-garde.” I

always think of Bob Perelman saying that “experimental” sounded to him like you have some test tubes and a white lab coat and you might just blow up the science building. Bernadette Mayer always liked the word and used it.

FR: “Avant-garde” has that military connotation. You *meant* to blow up the science building.

EM: Yeah. You had to! It’s like “queer.” It’s taking on a term of contempt and saying, “No, I’m proud to be avant-garde.” I might feel the same way about the name “New York School.” (27)

Myles’s investment in the terms “queer,” “avant-garde,” and “New York School” returns us to the pressing questions of social power and authorization that preoccupy Butler in *Excitable Speech*. For whatever one’s reservations about the efficacy of reclamation as political strategy, Myles here demonstrates that she is not willing to cede these terms in the way that Notley is, for example, when she says, “I just go by whatever anyone else says about the New York School. Really. They can have it.” Myles has too much riding on the power of the performative utterance to excuse herself from the conversation. For Myles knows that there exist no objective criteria for what constitutes a “real” avant-garde and what doesn’t; she knows that articulating the existence of a viable movement—be it artistic or political—can go a long ways toward consolidating one.¹³ The *Times*’ recent characterization of Myles as a hero to “a generation of young, post-punk female writer-performers who are creating a niche for poetry in the better-known world of pop music, and, in the process, forming a new literary avant-garde” attests to her savviness in this arena.

The progress of Myles’s own career has already taught her a great deal about the possibility of prognosticating an audience or a movement. When she came to New York in the early 70s and “put the lesbian content in the New York School poem because [she] wanted the poem to be there to receive [her],” she didn’t know who or what,

exactly, would be there to receive her vision. But as she explains in “My Intergeneration” (here in reference to Sister Spit, the all-girl spoken-word group from San Francisco with whom Myles toured nationally in the mid-90s): “What was so great about meeting this bunch of punky girls twenty years later was that I was received. But I was received *later*. It was like I had been talking to an imaginary tribe that then appeared, and that weirdly I even invented. Because when they saw my work they thought, ‘Oh, I can do this.’ I sort of created my own audience.” Despite the enviable and seemingly unique nature of this situation, in “My Intergeneration,” Myles insists she’s not alone:

. . . there’s a teeming society of women who identify the postpunk third wave of feminism as the beat we’re listening to, because unlike the taboo-laden feminism of my youth, the new lesbian mise-en-scène is a fierce, wildly infectious, and inclusive cultural force. It’s a dyke world where straight girls can come too, and maybe even men. Who needs separatism if you’re the boss? (. . .) Lots of the Sister Spit girls are working-class like me, and to shoot our wry and explosive wad of lyric culture here on a Cambridge stage was the sweetest success. I have never been so proud in my life, standing about a block away from where my mother was born, being a member at last of a utopian cadre of female outlaw optimists, teeming butch/femme talent, total tattoos and fearlessness, gaudiness, booziness, and flaunting a complex sexuality that would embarrass anyone’s mother. (. . .) I was 46 on that tour. I’m 50 now. I just had to wait to be young.

The word “girl” is pivotal here. It indicates a powerful identification, an abiding care for the next generation, and another important site of reclamation. “There’s this huge girls’ art movement going on, straight girls and gay girls together,” Myles explains to the *Times*. “The energy has been building for years. It reminds me of the explosion of rock n’ roll in the ‘60s.” Notley’s “girl theory” of poets—that “all poets are essentially girls”—is relevant here, along with Notley’s attempt (in *Mysteries*, most notably) to “find my four year old self . . . because it seemed to me that when I was that age I was both most natural and most good. I identified essential self with that age—the problem then became, what was the purpose, if any, of my later experience?” (Goldman, 6). Mayer’s

extensive meditations on the speech, actions, and desires of her two young daughters in *Midwinter Day* are also key here, along with Mayer's complicated kinship with Stein, that most "babyish" of writers.

In her *Index* review of *Cool For You*, Laurie Weeks eloquently summarizes the stakes of Myles's *Bildungsroman* as follows: "I don't know if anyone's ever so utterly captured the weirdness of being a girl, and by extension, the weirdness of being." On the one hand, Weeks is simply making a critical observation. But on the other, she is making a revolutionary claim, one that serves the same purpose as Notley's "girl theory" of poets: she is claiming girlhood—in all its weirdness, pleasure, danger, agony, ferocity, lasciviousness, and fantasy—as a rich and fundamental site of human experience. (Myles's description of *Cool For You* as the first installment of a "female human history" further speaks to the challenge at hand.) Though it may have hit a peak in the 1990s, the reclamation of the term "girl" remains an ongoing cultural phenomenon—one that is perhaps best understood as part and parcel of the feminist demand that grown women be called women (instead of "coeds," "office girls," and so on). To insist that others call you a woman is to demand that the world stop infantilizing you; to call oneself a girl is to refuse and resist "becoming a woman" in all the pernicious senses of the phrase—i.e., entering the heterosexual marketplace, renouncing clitoral sexuality, becoming defined (or "defiled") by menstruation or heterosexual intercourse, allowing male desire to take precedence over one's own, giving up one's name in marriage, bearing children in a compulsory fashion, and so on. To reclaim the term "girl" is to insist on remaining in a more inchoate place, before enthusiasm, self-assurance, and desire become thwarted. It is also to refute the power of reproaches such as *You fight like a girl, you throw like a girl, you*

cry like a girl—condemnations which seamlessly merge misogynistic taunt with homophobic policing.

Notley's feeling that her girl-self was somehow her "essential self," and that everything that has happened to her since then represents a nefarious seduction away from that self, could be caricatured as a New Age veneration of one's "inner child." I would argue against such a caricature for many reasons, one of which being that it actively suppresses gender specificity. Instead, I would call attention to the powerful outpouring of clinical interest in the particular problems that girls face as they head into adolescence—an outpouring that has in fact coincided with the aesthetic reclamation of "girl power" in literature, music, and visual art. The psychologist Carol Gilligan—a founding member of the Harvard Project on Women's Psychology and Girls' Development—has been a crucial figure in this movement. In an essay entitled "Reframing Resistance" from the collection *Women, Girls, & Psychotherapy* (1991), Gilligan explains the impetus for her research:

Taken together, this evidence suggests that girls face a psychological crisis at the time of adolescence—a crisis to which some girls respond by devaluing themselves and feeling themselves to be worthless, while others disagree publicly and disassociate themselves from institutions that devalue them—in this case, the schools. Both solutions, however, are costly for girls. Yet despite this remarkable convergence of clinical observation, developmental findings, and epidemiological data, pointing repeatedly to a striking asymmetry between girls' and boys' development—and one which has clear implications for preventing suffering and fostering development—this persistent observation of difference has, until recently, remained unexplored and unexplained theoretically. (14)

As the title of her essay indicates, Gilligan—along with feminists in a number of different fields—is deeply invested in understanding how and why girls resist socialization, and how their resistance might be read as a "protest against the available fictions of female becoming," as Nancy K. Miller has put it in a literary context.¹⁴ The "huge girls' art movement" that Myles refers to above—indeed, that she justly credits

herself with having a hand in creating—has played and continues to play a significant role in this protest.

Myles's teaching—both in and out of schools—has furthered her contribution to this movement. In addition to her many stints at a variety of colleges and institutions, throughout the 90s Myles also regularly organized and led informal, unaffiliated writing workshops throughout New York City, usually taught out of an apartment or loft and advertised via word-of-mouth and/or flyers. These workshops—several of which I participated in—constructed a loose community of people (mostly women, but not all) who were fiercely combining experimental writing practices with personal and political convictions. These workshops were not populated solely by “poets,” but rather by artists of all kinds. Idiosyncratic genius abounded—and here I'm thinking of the brilliant and often hilarious work of Annie Iobst and Lucy Sexton, who performed as the duo Dancenoise, the screenwriter/ playwright/ fiction writer Laurie Weeks, the video-artist Cecilia Dougherty, the artist/boxer Nancy Brooks Brody, rock musicians such as Anne Kugler and Cynthia Nelson, the art writer Nathan Kernan, the painter Jennie Portnof, and many, many others. These classes also inadvertently provided a place for a younger generation of women, often newly-arrived in the city, to meet and learn from slightly-older artists who had already been working in New York for some time. Such an environment provided the grounds for a casual form of “affidamento,” a term Italian feminists use to describe “a relationship of trust between two women, in which the younger asks the elder to help her obtain something she desires,” as Myles puts it in “The Lesbian Poet” (130). The time I spent in these workshops continues to remind me of the possibility and power of artistic communities that exist apart from any institution.

In a review of *Skies* in the *Village Voice*, Cathy Hong says that Myles has an “anarchic post-feminist energy that has inspired legions of baby dykes to vent in front of the mic” (53). I know Hong means it as a compliment, but I’m sensitive to the shadow of distaste for these “venting baby dykes,” even if it’s just an unfortunate side-effect of journalistic punch. I would resist this distaste wholeheartedly. It’s easy to get blasé about social change, and harder to remember that “baby dykes” making a claim on public speech—what Myles describes as “a utopian cadre of female outlaw optimists, teeming butch/femme talent, total tattoos and fearlessness, gaudiness, booziness, and flaunting a complex sexuality that would embarrass anyone’s mother”—would have been unthinkable a short time ago, as would high schools and community centers specifically designed for gay, lesbian, transgender and/or transsexual youth. Likewise, when faced with a flood of open mikes and poetry slams, it’s understandable that some might feel annoyed by the “venting” of poetic speech. But Myles leads the way down a different path—one that embraces the flood. “The pleasure of meeting all this wealth of live speech simply requires a fearless listener,” Myles says in her response to Shulevitz. “It invites some kind of aesthetic citizenry. Who will take the bumps as they go” (*We, the Poets*, 4). Myles’s push for “aesthetic citizenry” links back up with to the concept of *affidamento*, insofar as *affidamento* emphasizes the possibility and power of a *social*—indeed a hierarchical—relation between women. A relationship in which “you tie yourself to a person who can help you achieve something which you think you are capable of but which you have not yet achieved,” as the Italian feminist Luisa Muraro describes it, presumes that women have something to offer each other. Namely, it presumes that women can in fact claim and exchange power. Muraro goes on to explain: “The relationship of entrustment between one woman and another . . . is simultaneously

intimate and external, personal and social, which makes a coherent whole of being a woman and having a social existence” (Muraro, 124, 125). The concept and practice of *affidamento* is thus one way for women to conceive of themselves, and to actually become, empowered citizens, aesthetic or otherwise. Myles’s devotion to a poetry which is both personal and social, along with her urging for a new kind of citizenry, illuminates the potential of such a process.

In her *Times* piece, Shulevitz also expresses her irritation with the phenomenon of “poetry voice”—i.e., the monotonous, plodding iambic measure in which many poets inexplicably read their work aloud. Myles has this to say in response:

Poetry is like jazz, in that you go to watch it happen. The more it’s predictable the more you do get “poetry voice,” as Judith describes it. It’s a poet putting a predictable rhythm on unpredictable speech. It’s a situation of someone getting into a car distractedly, closing the door on their own coat and then absently hearing its buckle drag for hundreds of miles. When people started writing in what Williams described as “the variable foot” they probably did often miss that he was advocating reading poetry in actual speech rhythms, not poetry voice. It’s something in between that you’re hearing, Judith, it’s aesthetic failure. It happens. When you hear poetry voice you’re hearing the poet’s fear, and I agree with you, Judith, but, ugh, *move on*. (5)

Ugh, move on may be one of the New York School’s most inspiring messages. In the face of aesthetic failure, it simply shrugs: “It happens.” Instead of fixating on obstacles, it advocates “putting yourself in the middle of a place and being excited and stunned by it.” It says, *Get back in the convertible, start driving, start looking around. Feel free to babble to your co-pilot. Don’t be afraid of speech, be it your own or that of others.* Aesthetically speaking, it says *Keep moving*, but unlike Olson’s demand that “one perception must must must MOVE, INSTANTER, ON ANOTHER!” (Allen, 388), it isn’t bossy. It says, *It’s OK to move in a circle, to drive around the block, to cruise. It’s OK to chart what’s coming down the Nile.* To these credos, Myles crucially adds (in “The Poet”): *Don’t be afraid to be feminine* (MP, 110). It

would have been easy to write a study that repudiated the matrix of terms that Myles here reclaims—most notably, “queer,” “avant-garde,” “girls,” and “the New York School.” Instead, I’ve taken my cue from her tenacity, and tried to consider them together, and each at the point of tension it deserves. Like “lesbian,” or “woman,” or “feminism” itself, what each of these terms signifies will remain endlessly subject to debate, while also retaining an undeniable, pragmatic power. The best of “New York School poetry,” as I choose to understand it, feeds on this perversity, along with experiment and extravagance. “Poetry is complexity—seeing the world in the terms it’s arriving in,” Myles insists, and I can think of no better journey (Richard, 25). As she concludes one of the poems from *Not Me* that first inspired me to come along: “I / wink. I/ take the ride” (72).

¹ See Myles's comments in "Chewing the Fat about AIDS—Arts Today with Eileen Myles," from *Artery: The AIDS-Arts Forum*, online at www.artistswithaids.org/artery/symposium/symposium_myles.html.

² See Patrick F. Durgin's entry on Myles in *Dictionary of Literary Biography. Volume 193: American Poets Since World War II*. Ed. Joseph Conte. The Gale Group, 1998. p. 203-212, here cited from the online version at Literature Resource Center 3.1, Author Resource Pages. Durgin notes that Myles uses the term "proprioceptive" in a letter.

³ The writer/dancer Deborah Hay is the only artist I know of to elaborate explicitly on this "cellular" idea—see her book *my body, the buddhist* (Wesleyan University Press, 2000), in which she describes her body as her "53-trillion celled teacher," and her dance practice as the observation of "cellular consciousness." Muriel Rukeyser also insisted that her poetry came from her female body in a more expansive way. See Kate Daniels' preface to Rukeyser's *Out of Silence: Selected Poems*, in which Daniels reports that Rukeyser once told Cynthia Ozick at a 1976 panel, "You, Cynthia, write from the mind, but I write from the body, a female body" (xv).

⁴ Pinsky admits that there do exist other kinds of poetry: "Other conceptions of poetry might include flamboyantly expressive vocal delivery, accompanied by impressive physical presence, by the poet or performer; or the typographical, graphic appearance of the words in itself, apart from the indication of sound." But, as he quickly adds: "Those areas are not part of this book's conception." Fair enough, but such a comment certainly complicates his earlier claim about what poetry essentially "is." It's a kind of sleight-of-hand that serves to disappear entire dimensions of the art. (I won't even get into the weird word choice of "flamboyant," with its connection to the "flaming" queer spectacle.)

⁵ The 1949 quotation is cited by Rose, 145; the second is from *The Unabridged Journals of Sylvia Plath*, p.77.

⁶ Cookie Mueller, "Abduction and Rape . . .," in *Walking Through Clear Water in a Pool Painted Black* (NY: Semiotext(e), 1990). Mueller recounts the story of her abduction and near-rape while she and three girlfriends were hitchhiking. Mueller writes: "I have always been an astute observer of sexy women and unsexy women, and in all my years I've never seen a crazy woman get chased by a man," Mueller writes. "Look at bag ladies on the street. They rarely get raped. And look at burnt-out LSD girls. No men bothered with them much. So I decided that I would simply act crazy. I would turn the tables. I would scare him" (49). See Caleb Carr's article "'Spies Like Us': On the Road with Myles, Rower, and Mueller," for a comparison of these three works (Ann Rower's book is called *If You're A Girl*), in the *Village Voice Literary Supplement* June 1991, p. 29.

⁷ In the U.S., the punishment I'm thinking of is of a psychological (and occasionally legal) variety, the "she was asking for it," blame-the-victim defense. Clearly in a number of other countries and cultures, the prohibition against women in the public sphere is

legally explicit and enforced by violent retribution, such as honor killings of women who appear in public with a man who is not a family member.

⁸ See Myles, *We, the Poets* (NY: belladonna*Books, #38, Winter 2003). Shulevitz's article appeared in the *New York Times Book Review* on November 24, 2002.

⁹ *Maxfield Parrish* compiles "early and new" poems, and thus contains selections from *The Irony of the Leash*, *Sappho's Boat*, and *A Fresh Young Voice from the Plains*.

¹⁰ A related anecdote about koans and gender: I recently heard the story of a woman in Zen training who asked her (male) Buddhist master if women could achieve enlightenment. He said no. She went away enraged. After meditating on the topic, however, she had a realization. She went back to her master and said that she now understood that her question had been framed by a binary—a gender binary that made no sense as far as enlightenment was concerned. Her master applauded her response, but admitted that he, too, had been meditating on the matter, and he had come to realize the opposite: i.e., that his response had actually been unthinkingly sexist in nature. Both master and student, apparently, had equally an important lesson to learn, neither of which cancels out the other.

¹¹ The title "Not Me" also invokes the "not-me" as theorized by Emerson and others, and the attendant revelation that "[e]ach of us dichotomizes the Kosmos in a different place," as William James put it at the end of his essay, "The Stream of Thought" (in *Principles of Psychology*).

¹² "Hot Night" is from *Not Me*; "My Light" from *Skies*; "Scribner's" from *on my way*.

¹³ As of late, the inverse phenomenon has become disturbingly clear in contemporary American politics, re: opposition to the war in Iraq. It becomes increasingly obvious that if it is not in the government's interest to acknowledge any "meaningful opposition" to its policies, then it will work with the media to ignore, disparage, enervate, and/or deny its existence. Instead of—or in addition to—focusing so much attention on the deficiencies of current forms of resistance, we might also ask hard questions about our practiced cultural deafness to dissent. For the relationship between this dynamic and literary history, see Erica Hunt's essay, "Notes for an Oppositional Poetics," in which she writes: "The principle of cooptation is this: that dominant culture will transfer its own partiality onto the opposition it tries to suppress. It will always maintain that it holds the complete world view, despite the fissures. Opposition is alternately demonized or accommodated through partial concessions without a meaningful alteration of dominant culture's own terms. The opposition is characterized as destructive to the entire social body and to itself. State power in dominant culture depends upon its reducing social and political problems into pathologies requiring the police. It is a small step from that point to reducing world politics to individual aberration and to gaining our consent to maintain a world-wide police." Hunt goes on to discuss how such a dynamic can replicate itself in the land of literature. (*Moving Borders*, 685.)

¹⁴ Miller, quoted by Carolyn Heilbrun in *Writing a Woman's Life* (New York: W. W. Norton and Company, 1988) p. 18. Notably, one of the papers in *Reframing Resistance*, Lyn Mikel Brown's "Telling a Girl's Life: Self-Authorization as a Form of Resistance," quotes this line from Miller in the context of Brown's clinical study (72).

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