A LEXICON OF AMERICAN VERNACULARS

by

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Abstract

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A Lexicon of American Vernaculars is an interdisciplinary project that combines poetics, social and aesthetic history and literary theory. It brings together American history, poetry/poetics and questions of language, with a particular focus on ethnic, transnational and Diasporic contexts, and on the political implications of such writings. My central thesis is that we cannot understand what makes an American literature "American" without looking at the international contexts that have shaped our country and our citizens—all very pertinent questions to ask in a our new "Global Village," where English often plays the role of Lingua Franca. What I call "American Vernaculars," therefore, are poetic approaches by writers from marginalized groups that are normally not represented in our national literature(s): African-Americans, Latin@s, Asian-, and Greek-American poets. Within the American context, and historically speaking, I also examine the ways in which the lyric has been often (mis)read in a highly depoliticized manner, something my dissertation seeks to address and correct.

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Introduction

Since 1955, poetry or verse as some would prefer it be called has, despite all forebodings that it was dying, taken through a handful of writers in the United States, a stranglehold on established modes of thought, analysis & attention.

-John Wieners, "Mass: Verse in the U.S. Since 1955"

This dissertation examines a variety of intersecting issues and themes that have been prevalent in American poetry and poetics of the last hundred years. Organized around the trope of vernacular language, my project seeks to examine the ways in which certain American poets have attempted to use the lyric form in order to elucidate the contours of poetry's role within the social life of the nation; this is a poetry that is interested in politics, therefore, even though it is not political in any proscriptive sense of the word. I maintain that all vernacular languages are fundamentally concerned with issues of social and political belonging because they are, by their very definition, the primary medium through which citizens speak. A vernacular, however, as I define it, need not simply be a language in the strict sense of the word, but also a theory, an ideological viewpoint, an outlook that shapes and forms our relationship to the impossibly complex world, a world that can never truly be grasped or reduced to one such theory. The poets discussed herein are also cognizant of the ways vernaculars can function as discourse, as a means to foreclose, isolate, and exile thought from language. I designate thought, therefore, as a generic—and, admittedly, problematically abstract—term that notes the possibility of an escape from discourse, outside of rational logic, from the crude and reductive vernaculars that can also imprison and restrict real and honest thinking. It is with this brief introduction that I turn to John Wieners as preamble for what follows.

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I have struggled for some time now with the quote above, always finding myself at a great remove from anything that might resemble an actual answer or satisfactory definition of what Wieners was really trying to say. It almost reads like a Zen koan, resisting and inviting contemplation at the same time. As one continues to read the brief essay, published in the collection of prose, poems and miscellany titled *Cultural Affairs in Boston*, certain ideas begin to take shape, and yet much is left undefined:

> Now the secret poet's doctrines of The Holy Grail, the Tarot, especially, and the I Ching, have become popular courses for the inquisitive browser in any chic magazine or Bookstore. Where before Tibetan Buddhism and Zen as well as marijuana and jazz were esoteric pastimes of the wealthy or decadent, they now become scholastic careers for contemporary scientists and priests; i.e., the shopping plazas actually vend handbooks on all these heretofore, only 15 yrs. ago, occult arts. How has this change taken place? Mostly because artists read and wrote poems about them, wore their emblems upon their clothing, and incorporated them into their paintings and electronic music titles. (132)

It is the languages[iii] of the poets—the Holy Grail, the Tarot, the I Ching, the "esoteric pastimes," the "occult arts"—that have become the languages of the people, the languages of the consumers, the latest vernaculars. And it is through these languages that we may arrive to thinking and thought[iii] or at least one can infer such from the abstract connections that Wieners is attempting to establish. I define thinking here as the actualization of the social grounds on which language and relations exist. However, this actualization, as I will argue throughout this dissertation, can never be a totalizing one, it can never be whole. While Wieners may be writing of esoteric ideas, these concepts are nonetheless grounded within the particulars of language, experience and social relations. The poet, like any artist, makes available and apparent those arts and knowledges that exist on society's margins and are

typically ignored. In another sense, he acts as a translator, a redactor of the arts, and as interpreter of the "thinking," or the social grounds, that make actual the aesthetic object. The poet makes clear the connections between art and life that are normally obfuscated, and while the message is usually different the medium is always language. Things change, are altered. Poetry, if only because it is language, has a social reality that cannot be denied: "How has this change taken place? Mostly because artists read and wrote poems about them…." A poem, therefore, can have agency and power in fashioning the tastes of the world.[iv] But what is made tangible here is what we usually consider only in the abstract: the dialectic between world and art, and how that relationship unfolds. It is appropriate that Wieners goes on to quote Ezra Pound's dictum that artists are "the antennae of the race," for the argument goes that they are the ones that are most in tune with the ways of the world.

I am reminded here of something Robert Creeley once wrote about Charles Olson's poetics as being "based upon the presumption that literature is attendant to what one otherwise thinks of as actual. It is the familiar sense of 'holding a mirror up to life,' making of literature a reflective act which has as its most decisive effect a seemingly accurate description or judgment of that which it so addresses. 'To tell what subsequently I saw and what heard,' in William Carlos Williams's phrase, would be its most significant disposition, the act of testament, of bearing witness to an otherwise unacknowledged world" (1997, XV). But holding up the mirror to life does not necessarily mean that the image reflected therein will resemble reality as we see it; the reflection need not be "mimetic" in the strictest sense. The urge towards the mimetic is another reduction, another obfuscation, even if, at times, it is a necessary one. For poets such as Williams, Olson and Creeley, what is important is the subjective, but not in any narcissistic way. The self or "I" as living and breathing representation of community and the world is what interests these poets, an "ALTERNATIVE TO THE EGO-POSITION" (Faas 1978, 40) but also looks for "The deep

ground of measure . . . the prereligious feeling of being positioned inside something that is larger than oneself and to which one is being called to respond" (Nichols, 99).

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But let us return to Wieners. Concepts such as "thought" and "analysis" and "attention," when used in such a manner, echo with a profound portent, one beyond the tepid and tame notions we normally associate with them; there is a gravity to Wieners's singular thought, one that defies easy articulation. But what is thought? We wait for a true thinking to arrive, but will it? To paraphrase Whitman: missing meaning in one place, I stop somewhere else waiting for an answer to arrive. Or, better yet, in language much clearer, as put by Amiri Baraka: "Thought is more important than art. Without thought, art could certaintly not exist. Art is one of many products of thoughts. An impressive one, perhaps the most impressive one, but to revere art, and have no understanding of the process that forces it into existence, is finally not even to understand what art is" (2009, 197). But still we are left waiting to discover what a real and true thinking might be. The historical lens brings with it little clarity. In the case of Wieners: why the year 1955? Does he have in mind Ginsberg's first reading of "Howl," given that very same year? Is that the great moment of turning, the event that announces the fact that poetry is not only alive, but has become the American language in which thinking actually takes place? Is it simply an autobiographical reference, to the year before, 1954, when Wieners moved to Beacon Hill, in Boston? Or perhaps he meant to draw our attention to the centennial anniversary of Whitman's *Leaves of Grass*, another of the seminal events in American literary history. Or is the year simply an arbitrary historical marker, a caesura that splits the century comfortably into two, creating an easy cleavage that divides Modernism and Postmodernism, epochs which, in 1955, would not have been as clearly defined as they would later become? And who are the handful of writers he speaks of? The declaration is as opaque and startlingly true as Woolf's famous claim from her essay

"Mr. Bennett and Mrs. Brown" that "on or around December 1910 human nature changed." I make mention of this lacuna only to suggest that the historical does not always provide us with answers. It is, in other words, simply another discourse, another way of ordering the world, as Hayden White, amongst others, has illustrated.[v]

This project of defining and articulating a handful of what I call American Vernaculars is, to some extent, an extension of Wieners's quote, or at least an engagement with the thinking that drives it; this dissertation is an attempt to define the how, why, and in what contexts American poetry of the last hundred years has placed a "stranglehold" on certain discourses (or rejected the very notion of "discourse" in any theoretical sense of the term) and certain modes of thinking. This genesis of this particular work began years ago, with my M.A. thesis on the work of Emily Dickinson. In that work, I sought to further contextualize and historicize Dickinson's work in a manner that I felt was lacking. Following the lead of Susan Howe's magisterial *My Emily Dickinson*, I approached the poet's oeuvre as one directly engaged with social and historical forces. In particular, I looked at the unexamined relationship[vi] between the poet's most prolific years and the American Civil War. My M.A. thesis attempted to counter the prevailing trend of most Dickinson scholarship to show that the poet was, in fact, not simply an isolated recluse with little or no concerns beyond those of her household, but an artist who wrote a poetry of social and political reflection. And in the background hovered Whitman's notion of the United States as the greatest poem of them all, and what this meant for a poetry—Dickinson's—traditionally viewed as not being a part of the nation.[vii] In other words, American poetry of the last century has sought to rewrite the very grounds on which it stands, suggesting that it is not so much poetry in any traditional sense of the term but something radically new and different. Poetry now does the work of philosophy, politics, aesthetics, and thinking, changing the way we view such concepts but also altering the very notion of poetry itself. As Oren Izenberg puts it,

"At the extremes, [contemporary poets] long, threaten, or enjoin themselves to do away with poetry altogether. More precisely, they strive to conceive of or even produce a 'poetry' without poems; as though the problems with what philosophy calls 'persons-concepts'—our definitions of and attempts to give an account of personhood—could be addressed by subverting or destroying the very medium that bears them" (4).

A recent anthology title *American Hybrid* edited by Cole Swensen and David St. John makes a similar argument. In her introduction to the anthology, Swensen makes the argument that contemporary American poets are no longer driven into two camps—the "conventional and the experimental"—but are now writing in forms that encompass both camps of the divide and yet are totally different. She states that "the two-camp model, with its parallel hierarchies, is increasingly giving way to a more laterally ordered network composed of nodes that branch outward toward smaller nodes, which themselves branch outward in an intricate and ever changing structure of exchange and influence. Some nodes may be extremely experimental, and some extremely conservative, but many of them are true intersections of these extremes, so that the previous adjectives—well-made, decorous, traditional, formal, and refined, as well as spontaneous, immediate, bardic, irrational, translogical, open-ended, and ambiguous—all still apply, but in new combinations" (xxv).[viii] While a view of American poetry that splits it down the middle in order to deconstruct it as binary is somewhat misleading and reductive, Swensen's anthology and introduction does wonderfully suggest that there is something new happening in American poetics, and it is something that cannot easily be reconciled within the critical vocabularies and traditions we have already established. This is what Wieners was also suggesting: that the traditional approaches to understanding or reading poetry are now passé and antiquated. What we have now is a poetry beyond the discursive, one that resists being reduced to categories such as political, realist, Modernist, Postmodernist, etc.

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The ghosts of Dickinson and Whitman—and their Romantic contemporaries— haunt this work. They are everywhere and nowhere at the same time. For example, my entry on Pound's poem "A Pact" is my way of trying to make clear the connections that the Modernists and, to some extent, the Postmodernists discussed herein reach back historically to Romanticism in order to define their own historical positions in relation to their art. I make mention of this to suggest that Wieners may have pushed his date—"Since 1955 . . ."—a little too far to the middle of the century, a failure of sorts in acknowledging how the American poets of high Modernism such as Stein, Pound and Williams were, to some extent, already practicing a poetics far more radical that we give them credit for. A historical term such as Modernism, for example, is meant to foreclose and eliminate differences; Pound and Williams, poets who could not be more different, are brought under a historical term that, while suggesting affinities, also eliminates the amazing particularities of their work. This project, to some degree, seeks to establish new connections between such poets, but to also suggest that any critical approach, by its very nature, obfuscates as much as it uncovers. Again, we are left with the words thought, analysis, attention. We could, theoretically, begin anywhere. But broadly speaking, what is being discussed here in one manner or another is the political, especially if we conceive of the political as the messy and impossible knot where the social and the personal come together. It has become clichéd to say that the personal is political and the political personal, even if it is true; but I would also argue that it is impossible to deduce where one begins and the other ends. As such, I do not wish to define the political in any static or reductive manner as the practice of "politics." My concluding entry on Olson and organic form will further elucidate this issue. Rather, I consider the political to be those instances where social antagonisms arise, and where a multiplicity of voices and positions contend with one another in order to establish themselves[ix]. I am especially concerned with

the ways in which aesthetics—here, poetry—represent this experience of the "political." Echoing Alain Badiou's notion of a metapolitics: "By 'metapolitics' I mean whatever consequences a philosophy is capable of drawing, both in and for itself, from real instances of politics as thought. Metapolitics is opposed to political philosophy, which claims that since no such politics exists, it falls to philosophers to think 'the' political" (1998, xxxix), American poetry is both of and against political thought as well. It seeks to define the political but only to the extent that it seeks to do away with it as well. My entries on "Experience," "Conceptual Poetry," "Flarf" and the "Imagination" serve to illustrate this point as concretely as possible without arriving at a concrete definition. For the purposes of this dissertation, I will consider how poets take it upon themselves to think "the political," but also how American poets have sought to critique the grounds which structure social life, language and thought.

It should be evident by now that I often speak of these categories in terms of generalities; or rather, that when I do speak of these terms, I do not take them as holding true for all these writers. This is simply the nature of the project, in part because my scope, perhaps, was too broad to begin with. But categories such as the social and politics do exist, even if, as I have briefly touched on above, they almost always inherently exist as abstractions. Baraka touches upon the difficulty of naming the social when he writes in an essay titled "Expressive Language": "the social, though it must be rooted, as are all evidences of existence, in culture, depends for its impetus for the most part on a multiplicity of influences. Other cultures, for instance. Perhaps, and this is a common occurrence, the reaction or interreaction of one culture on another can produce a social context that will extend or influence any culture in many strange directions" (2009, 190). The social as impossible to locate, confidently name, multiplicity of cultures, forces, pressures. Joseph Harrington also writes about the inherent tensions at play when it comes to defining or

locating the political or the social in modern American poetry. In *Poetry and the Public*, Harrington, guided by Ernesto Laclau's and Chantal Mouffe's work on the concept of social space, writes "U.S. poets and critics have had a marked tendency to regard poetry as either an alternative to or refuge from the public, as a vehicle or mode for participating in and engaging with the public, or as a way of negotiating or problematizing the separation of public and private spheres" (11). Harrington's project is to examine a "poetry scene" that is really "an empty space that is not defined in advance, in which many different (and fluid) types of poetries and poetry communities compete to determine the meaning of poetry (which they never do, once and for all), and in which any clear distinction between public and private has dissolved—except (and this is crucial) in the discourse employed by some of the contestants in this struggle" (13). But it is this empty space we must consider, because, as Harrington states, it is not defined in advance. To extend this argument a little further: whenever a poet or poem enters this space, there is always the possibility that the very category itself will change and alter due to her/its presence. A singular poem, therefore, is complicatedly bound to the very social reality that gave it shape and form because it is both of it and part from it. I would simply like to suggest that it is impossible to truly and completely locate the beginning or the end of such a dialectical process. To reduce a poem by Langston Hughes, for example, to the fact that he was African American would miss the impossibly complex realities that made the poem possible. As Nathaniel Mackey would put it: "My view is that there has been far too much emphasis on accessibility when it comes to writers from socially marginalized groups. This has resulted in shallow, simplistic readings that belabor the most obvious aspects of the writer's work and situation, readings that go something like this: 'So-and-so is a black writer. Black people are victims of racism. So-and-so's writing speaks out against racism.' It has yet to be shown that such simplifications have had any positive political effect, if, indeed, any at all" (1993, 17-18).

What, therefore, is politics? And what is poetry? And a third question follows: what can the one learn from the other? These are the questions that Wieners is gesturing towards, but does not fully articulate: the how and why of where poetry begins to enter into those realms of life that we can define as political and/or social. And while I ask certain pointed and specific questions, I also hope to preclude the notion of any complete and utter closure to the thinking that such questions bring with them. There is in my idea of the political—as with my idea of the poem—a sense of the unending openness in both of them. The questioning should always remain open, always hostile to any semblance of a final answer. Again following Wieners's lead, I would hope that this project would "make room for the little, the unknown, and the ignored" that vernacular cultures both highlight and efface at the same time.

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Wieners, I would argue, does not suggest concrete definitions for his terms in part because he is speaking of the empty space that Harrington also spoke of. Wieners is writing of a place that has yet to be established, yet to be fully defined; all he has are the languages that will lay the groundwork for this soon to be realized social space. Rather than confuse this as a lack of sorts, a negative subtraction from a larger truth, we should consider it as an opportunity. What is under consideration here is the decentering of an agreed upon reality, an attack on systematized modes of thinking. It is important we should not confuse poetic abstraction with lack of thought. It would be easy to suggest that Wieners is as "opaque" as he is because of poetic abstraction; but such an argument, once again, seeks to reduce poetics to an easily digestible discourse.[x] There can be no thought, no true thinking, without the exchange between the abstract and the concrete, the understanding that we should place the same amount of value on the question as on the answer. This is what poetry retains: a constant and inherent critique of language as rational discourse. Language need not structure the world in

rational ways. Instead, it can upset, challenge, and overthrow the hegemonic order of rationality.

Consider Plato's revolt against the poets. Poets lie, we are told, because they traffic in the abstraction of reality. As Eric Havelock[xi] explains, "For Plato, reality is rational, scientific and logical, or it is nothing." "Poetry," therefore, "is not so much non-functional as anti-functional" (25). As Havelock explains it, Plato desires to banish the poets because they are writing from experience, from a position of subjectivity rather than objectivity. Poetry, and art in general, becomes an examination removed from reality; it becomes discourse[xii]. Here is an essential virtue to poetry: it is a threat because it posits an anti-functional project, a project that runs counter to the hegemony of social and political realities. For the philosopher of the *Republic*, poets and poetry are threatening because they fail to speak and write of the world as it is. For Plato the most important function of any object, aesthetic or otherwise, is its mimetic quality, its functionality, and that is what makes it of value. We have here a theory of aesthetics that values utility above everything else. This notion of utility as fundamental value is, perhaps, more apparent than ever, a byproduct of our age of late capitalism. As Nathaniel Mackey, for example, illustrates in his discussion of Robert Duncan's work, there is a non-utilitarian aspect to it that makes it, almost paradoxically, of great value.[xiii] Mackey interprets a dream Duncan writes of, a dream in which "he [Duncan] is in a crowd of people chased by a giant carpenter. The carpenter wants to convert them all to carpentry, to bring them over to worthwhile, socially useful work." A little further, he continues: "The carpenter embodies all the utilitarian biases of the social order the poet is an outcast from. He embodies as well the authoritarianism that makes those biases binding, what Duncan in the concluding words of the letter calls 'the marches of relentless power'" (2005, 95-96). Poetry, for Mackey and Duncan, is meant to counter the hegemony of traditional capitalistic modes of production, a rationally ordered view that marginalizes and seeks to make useless aesthetics. This does not,

of course, mean that poetry is truly useless, only that it stands counter to a world that seeks to denigrate and exclude those modes of living that it cannot easily digest or consume or make sense of[xiv]. Therefore, there can be great value in that which is viewed as being "useless." But of course this conservative and rather reductive notion of the mimetic precludes any notion that an aesthetic object, a poem, can very well alter the dynamics and shape of reality itself. It can, if only in a provincial manner, if only for the few. The image of the young Robert Duncan comes to mind, he who was born anew while listening to his teacher read an H.D. poem. The story is recounted in *The H.D. Book*:

> In the poem of H.D's, the image stirred not only pictures from my knowledge of a like world, from the shared terms of orchard, pear, and grape at the stem, and the shimmering medium of air in the heat; but it stood too for another statement, arousing and giving a possible articulation to an inner urgency of my own to be realized, to be made good. The poem had a message, hidden to me then, that I felt but could not translate, an unconscious alliance that made for something more than a sensual response. (2010, 41)

Poetry can transform lives, it can stir to being "an inner urgency." Poetry, like any true art, is a Truthful abstraction, an irreducible phenomenon. However, we must never fail to understand the potential of poetry to allow for radical change. But why do we think such narratives or beliefs to be naïve, foolish? What has been lost? As Miriam Nichols puts it: "the 1950s and '60s represent the last moment in recent cultural history when a serious poet could write the word *cosmos* without irony or quotation marks and expect serious intellectual attention" (12). As Muriel Rukeyser writes in her *Life of Poetry*, "we have failed poetry, as it has failed us (23)." But it is the reasons for such failures that we need to address. As my reading of *Spring and All* suggests, one reason for such a failure has been the inability of recognizing the political possibilities of the imagination. Another explanation rests in the practice of reading a poem simply as an aesthetic object. The New Critics are the usual culprits here, although such readings continue to exist long after their supposed demise. T.S.

Eliot once argued in his essay "The Social Function of Poetry: "But it seems to me probable that if poetry—and I mean *all* great poetry—has had no social function in the past, it is not likely to have any in the future" (3). And while Eliot does attempt to parse through the different kinds of poetry, including the ones that have, in the past, served a distinct "social" practice—Epics, funeral chants, prayers, etc.—he also attempts to move poetry away from the social field by insisting that poetry must "give pleasure. If you ask what kind of pleasure then I can only answer: the kind that poetry gives …" (6). We have come a long way since the New Critics; there are numerous socially and politically astute readings of poetry that exist today. But we still live in a time where a critique of hegemonic modes of existence are more necessary than ever, a role that poets are especially adroit in. Kenneth Rexroth: "I believe that to a certain extent always, but in modern times especially, the poet, by the very nature of his art, has been an enemy of society, that is, of the privileged and the powerful. He has sometimes been an ally and spokesman of the unprivileged and the weak, where such groups were articulate and organized, otherwise he has waged an individual and unaided war" (1). Or, as James Scully would have it: we often desire an "apolitical poetry," "The dream of writing on a blank sheet of paper" (50). Even the most seemingly obvious or lucid of poems contains something of the abstract, a dialectical back and forth between the real and the unreal, hiding and making obvious the politics behind it. Anything that can be called a poem is never easily decipherable, easily interpreted. In this sense, I am strictly following Wieners's lead—and that of his handful of writers—and am grateful that a path has been drawn, that a permission—to use a word the poet Robert Duncan often sounded because of its wonderful nuances and gradations of meaning—has been granted.[xv]

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Again, the two questions: What is poetry? What is politics? And how are the two bound together? I am haunted—and relieved—by the fact that the poetic lacks definition. How to

define it? Muriel Rukeyser herself conceded as much: "I cannot say what poetry is…" (172). Robert Duncan: "poetry is not anthropology, and poetry's not philosophy, and poetry is not logic—It may ransack any of their occasions, but what it spreads is a ground of . . . possible engendering of—of creation, of a creation, in itself—in a language that we use in most of its occasions …" (2011, 18-19). We should not, however, reduce such thoughts to certain absurd conclusions. We can, within certain limits, define what poetry is, what a poem looks like, how it reads. We can easily differentiate between a sonnet and a villanelle. But those definitions are, again, to some extent, limited articulations of the real thing; a simulacrum that is not aware of itself as a simulacrum. If poetry is not discourse it may be for this simple reason: that it is a discourse that is aware of itself as discourse.

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There is a constant opening to the poetic that forecloses the possibility of an answer. Attempting to define the political is easier, more tangible, if also a troublingly provincial act. I've found great value in Jacques Rancière's notion of the political as the process by which competing voices and subjects search for meaning and ways to articulate experience. For Rancière, the politics of literature "intervenes in the relationship between practices and forms of visibility and modes of saying that carves up one or more common worlds" (2011, 4). Literature, therefore, creates new spaces, subjects, modes of thinking. In a similar manner, and as I will elaborate below, the poetry being discussed in this dissertation seeks to critique conventional modes of thought, practice, space, language through the employment of the vernacular.

I should also briefly suggest some justification for my methodological approach of using certain political and poststructuralist theorists in helping to define the contours of some of the poems and arguments mentioned herein. I've attempted, as best as I can, to avoid the

use of such theorists in a strictly prescriptive manner. As will become apparent throughout this text, I do not ascribe to one methodological principle: I am not, in any simple way, a Marxist or a Postcolonialist or a Feminist or Queer theorist, although I find many great things to value in all these schools of criticism, and find myself, in most respects, politically and ideologically agreeing with them. When I turn to theory, it is almost always to make a specific point or to highlight a certain contour in an argument I am trying to establish. But my use of theory, I hope, is not strictly supplemental. My hope has always been to allow the poetry to speak for itself, and to look to theory only as a means of showing how poetry itself thinks. I'm also hopeful that the occasional concessions to theory are not read as a trumping of the poetry, an attempt at mastery of the material at hand; far from it, in fact. Still, there is much that both schools of thought can learn from one another. What I find in common between much contemporary theory and poetry is the link between form and content, a certain amount of self-reflexive discursivity that is important to both. It is no coincidence for me, therefore, that I would begin a definition of the political with a writer such as Rancière, a thinker whose work, at times, is as unclassifiable as that of his great precursor, Michel Foucault. Primarily, however, I have looked to poets to help guide my thinking and arguments. Reading Pound to understand Williams, for example, or using Williams to critique Pound, has been more fruitful and engaging than looking at what certain academics have said about the relationship between those two poets. The correspondence they held for decades would be enough to make sense of their relationship, their differences, their historical moment.

Following the course of a poetics, my dissertation operates under the "creative" rubric of the Lexicon. It is my hope that such an approach will help to counter tired and traditional ways of thinking about some of these writers and texts. Nathaniel Mackey, for example, writes of "Creative kinship" and how "the lines of affinity it effects are much more complex,

jagged, and indissociable than the totalizing pretensions of canon formation tend to acknowledge" (1993, 3). Perhaps this is the only way to view American poetics, as a series of disconnects, fissures, gaps. As Murat Nemet-Nejat states, "Reading American poets is essentially following a series of distinct, discontinuous personal strategies in language. Tradition in the European sense is an illusion in American poetry" ("Question of Accent," 1993); Olson claims: "We [Americans] have no history" (1987, 21). How then to construct a linear, easily digestible historical record? For Mackey's own seemingly arbitrary but telling juxtapositions of writers, milieus and thinkers in his *Discrepant Engagement*, I follow his "willingness to risk obscurity," in order to show how such thinking "diverges not only from mainstream notions of clarity but also from the prescription of such notions, in the name of political urgency, to writers from socially marginalized groups" (1993, 17). We must never forget that coherence is ideological. We can never escape ideology, of course; but my hope is that by showing the fissures and gaps within certain critical practices, we can, at the very least, make it apparent. Theory, therefore, becomes an active practice rather than a passive application. Angus Fletcher, in his *A New Theory of American Poetry*, reminds us that for a poet such as Whitman there was little or no dividing line between theory and practice:

> When Whitman speaks of poetry and its theory, he means the theory of the making of poems, which are made symbolic objects, poemata. He does not mean interpretation, that is, he does not mean anything like what scholars have been calling "theory" ever since about 1965 or so. His concern is poetics, and neither rhetoric nor any sort of hermeneutics, immediately making it remarkable that he includes in his poetics the idea that "these United States are the greatest poem," hence raising the question: what is the poetic theory of this political union? We are left holding a most bizarre hybrid … namely that the USA and "Song of Myself" are equally "poems." (96)

But theory as poetry is another book. What this project outlines is how poetry can engender thought through language, and in particular through the trope of the vernacular. I forget

where it is said, but every book is also a record of one that has not been written. So is the case with this one.

*

Politics as language, as vernacular, as poetry. We need a new grammar, a language in which to communicate with those improbable unions. But we must also be conscious of the ways in which such a grammar does not posit freedom or escape; it can just as easily bind and oppress. Ezra Pound wrote "Dante for a reason wrote *De Vulgari Eloquio*—On the Common Tongue—and in each age there is a need to write *De Vulgari Eloquio*, that is, to insist on *seeing* the words daily in use and to know the *why* of their usage. No man has ever known enough about words. The greatest teachers have been content to use a few of them justly" (1973, 75). In attempting to elaborate on the fraught relationship between the rational and the imaginative, between language and reality, Muriel Rukeyser writes in her *The Life of Poetry*:

> But in the areas dealing with emotion and belief, there is hesitation. The terms have not been invented; and although that does not impede expressive writing—a poem, a novel, or a play act emotions out in terms of words, they do not describe—the lack does not impede analytical work. We have no terms, for example, for "emotional meaning" or "emotional information." We have not even the English for Claude Bernard's "milieu interieur," that internal condition of a body, the invironment [*sic*] where live the inner relationships.
>
> That obstacle is nothing.
>
> We are poets; we can make the words.
>
> The emotional obstacle is the real one.
>
> For the question is asked in a thousand ways each day: Is poetry alive? Is there a place for poetry? What is that place? (13)

Who are the "We" of the quoted section? There is a democratic yearning in this singular word as Rukeyser uses it, a call to the reader and a reminder to the writer herself that poetry can be

the language of all, and that it does not exist apart from us. “We” and “poets” are one and the same. This is when social relations—and poetry— take shape: when we are made conscious of the ways we are implicated within language. Rukeyser goes on to perform the poetic function she speaks of. “We can make the words,” she claims. Her suggestion that “we” are poets, for example, changes the social dynamics of reading and interpretation. One need not invent terms and phrases, such as *milieu interieur*, to give new life to the language; one can also do the same by suggesting a new usage for a pronoun as common as “we.” We are all poets; we are all initiators, creators and agents of the language, Shelley’s “unacknowledged legislators of the world.”

In my *Lexicon of American Vernaculars*, I attempt not to coin new words, but to show how certain terms and phrases echo with much larger resonances than usually considered. As Emerson would have it: “Language is fossil poetry.” Robert Creeley: “It would seem that the American writer has constantly to refine, and, equally, to redefine wherein lies the value of the words he uses” (1989, 230). The singular value in a word rests in its plurality. I hope to create a new “grammar,” an exploratory textbook for defining the intersections of politics, poetry and social life. But more importantly, to also suggest that there can never be a lexicon comprehensive enough to make actual sense of the social. Lexicon and not a dictionary, because the latter posits the fallacy of a complete knowledge: “The dullest men are always satisfied that a dictionary lists everything in the world. They don’t care that you may find out something *extra*, which one day might even be valuable to them. Of course, by that time it might even be in the dictionary, or at least they’d hope so, if you asked them directly” (Baraka 2009, 194).

And language’s existence presupposes a community. But this last century of ours has seen the notion of community challenged as in no other time in history. As Jean-Luc Nancy writes, “The gravest and most painful testimony of the modern world, the one that possibly

involves all other testimonies which this epoch must answer (by virtue of some unknown decree or necessity, for we bear witness also to the exhaustion of thinking through History), is the testimony of the dissolution, the dislocation, or the conflagration of community" (1). Robert Duncan from "Up Rising": "the victory of American will over its victims," "in terror and hatred of all communal things, of communion, of communism" (1968, 81). The annihilation of community, of communal experience, is a condition of being that has come to define the experience of being American in the 20th century. Creeley, for example, speaks of this condition in relation to why it is of necessity to travel:

> To move in such a fashion through nine countries … in a little over two months is a peculiarly American circumstance, and the record thus provoked is personal in a manner not on the effect of my own egocentricity, but, again, a fact of American social reality. The tourist will always be singular, no matter what the occasion otherwise—and there is a sense, I think, in which Americans still presume the world as something to look at and use, rather than to live in. Again and again, I found that other cultural patterns … could not easily think of one as singular, and such familiar concepts as the "nuclear family" or alienation" had literally to be translated for them . . . Not long ago, reading poems at a communal center in Indianapolis, I was asked by a member of the black community to explain my going to such places as the Philippines and South Korea—where overtly fascist governments are in power—sponsored by our State Department. The same question was put to me by an old friend, Cid Corman, in Kyoto. How could I answer? That I am American? That the government is mine too? I wish I might find so simple a vindication. No, I went because I wanted to—to look, to see, even so briefly, how people in those parts of the world made a reality, to talk of being American, of the past war, of power, of usual life in this country, of my fellow and sister poets, of my neighbors on Fargo Street in Bufallo, New York. I wanted, at last, to be human, however simplistic that wish. I took thus my own chances, and remarkably found a company. (91)

For Creeley, travel becomes the means through which to better understand what it means to be an American. Alienation through displacement allows him, as it does for most, to better understand what home means. It can also make apparent one's own relation to the rest of the world. But what is most important in Creeley's articulation of himself as tourist is the

development of a communal understanding of the self, the founding of a "company," an acceptance of one's own political and social belonging: "That I am American? That the government is mine too?" The realization of such political and social privilege gives Creeley the ability, to some extent, to critique those very same ideological positions in which he participates.

Baraka undertook a similar trip, his to Cuba, in the early sixties. He says of the experience: "Being an American poet, I suppose, I thought my function was simply to talk about everything as if I knew … it had never entered my mind that I might really like to find out for once what was actually happening someplace else in the world" (2009, 24). The trip is informative if not totally transformative. It allows Baraka to examine "The weird stupidity of the situation" that finds "the so-called American intellectual … not even aware of what is happening any place in the world" (53), let alone in a place that is ostensibly in his backyard. It all brings to mind Olson's poetic explorations of locality. From his examination of the "polis," to his essay on "Proprioception," Olson, perhaps more than any other Postmodern-American poet, was concerned with what it means to be an American in relation to a locality that is at once wholly alien and home at the same time. The beginning of *Call me Ishmael* makes this clear: "I take SPACE to be the central fact to man born in America, from Folsom cave to now. I spell it large because it comes large here. Large, and without mercy" (1997,17). I would extend this fact to all who inhabit America, whether born here or not.

It is no coincidence, therefore, that we have found ourselves in an age where poetry finds itself in a state of confusion. As Rukeyser's (perhaps imaginary) interlocutor asks her in the very beginning of her *The Life of Poetry*: "'And poetry—among all this—where is there a place for poetry?" (3). The condition of tourist, of wanderer, is the state of being for the New Worlder, and if there is one supreme irony to much of American poetry it is in the fact that it

seeks to represent the nation in a language that is as foreign to its soil as most of its inhabitants are.

To be an American, therefore, is to be conscious of the ways in which one does not belong, and to either come to terms with such a fact or to completely ignore it. While Emerson and Whitman called for an authentic and real American literature, a literature that would mirror the promise and grandeur of the new nation, little or no questions were asked of what such a project would also efface, obfuscate, and confuse. As Olson claims, the Postmodern is he/she who feels truly comfortable with their place in the world. To be Postmodern, in one sense, can mean being lost to the realities of place and dwelling. Is it any wonder then that the American century has also been the Postmodern century?

*

In the nascent stages of this project, I considered American vernaculars strictly within the confines of actual linguistic practices. I was interested in poets who illustrated the fundamental truth of this nation's multilingual and culturally diverse history, and wanted to illustrate how poets sought to represent a nation that is diverse and built on a history of cross cultural contact. Writers such as Cathy Park Hong, Olga Broumas, George Economou, Gloria Anzaldua, and Jimmy Santiago Baca were just some of the poets I was reading in such a context. I also wanted to illustrate how such trends were not entirely new, and how Modernist American writers—in particular Gertrude Stein, William Carlos Williams and Ezra Pound—were also deeply engaged with many of the same issues when it came to defining what an English language is and how it speaks of an American literature and culture different from any other Anglophone literatures. These arguments in regards to Modernism's transnational, global aspects have recently seen an explosion in terms of academic research. Michael North's *The Dialect of Modernism*, Matthew Hart's *Nations of Nothing but Poetry*, Charles

Pollard's *New World Modernisms*, Paul Giles's *Virtual Americas*, and Brent Hayes Edwards's *The Practice of Diaspora* are just a few of the titles that have looked at the international scope at play within a variety of different Modernisms, especially in light of the American context which also inform this project. Where I differ with such projects is in my use of the vernacular as guiding trope and metaphor.

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Somewhere along the line I also began to consider the vernacular as something more, as a concept that brings with it a double-bind: the vernacular can be progressive and challenging of the status quo, but it can also be the very static and deadening sameness that art and poetry often seek to overcome. Vernacular languages as actual language, but also as vernacular ways of thinking, vernacular bodies, vernacular notions: anything that is commonly accepted, the hegemonic means of control and oppression. Expanding on this notion, my consideration of historical movements such as Romanticism, Modernism, and Postmodernism also views them as vernaculars, as established and agreed upon discourses through which we view writers, works of art and historical traditions. Following such logic, I do not support a naive view of the vernacular as being inherently transgressive or resistant to the status quo. The vernacular can also be a category of exclusion, a means by which those in power can further minoritize and isolate those who already exist on the margins. Populism does not automatically equal an egalitarian politics. For example, my consideration of the William Carlos Williams poem, "Danse Russe," and my discussion of the word "Cow" in the works of Gertrude Stein and Ariana Reines illustrates how certain vernacular modes of thinking can marginalize different bodies and subjectivities from coming into their own in terms of value and self representation.

The return of the body, or the acknowledgment of the body in modern American poetry, is a thread that I've picked up in a variety of places throughout this project, and something that I wish I had more time to develop; it is a theme that became apparent to me only during the explorative process of writing, and was not something I was actively pursuing from the beginning. The body, as abstract and as stratified as that category is, may not be the origin of a poem but it certainly is its vessel. Consider, for example, Olson's attempt in "Projective Verse" to return the poem back to the body, a means for the poet to "register both the acquisitions of his ear and the pressure of his breath" (241), what Duncan might call "the yoga of the poem" (2011, 36). Harryette Mullen's poem, "Dim Lady," to give yet another example, critiques and deconstructs America's racist notions of what is or is not considered beautiful. In doing as such, Mullen returns to a now-classical standard of poetic beauty as defined by Shakespeare, and Petrarch before him, in order to illustrate how canonical standards affect not only literary texts but also which bodies are viewed as acceptable or not.

But the vernacular, at least for the scope of this project, also extends to the notion of critical practice and the mastery that is meant to extend from such a position of authority. The critical enterprise, especially as it has come to take shape through theory, usually assumes a troubling control over the aesthetic object at hand. The somewhat unorthodox form of this project was an attempt to counteract such theoretical posturing. In my (at times random, other times less so) selection of entries, for example, I have attempted a broad, thematic coherence, one that is also meant to resist easy subordination or control to one outlook. Yes, some of these pieces do not actively and completely enage with one another. However, that was never the point of the project to begin with, and I can only hope that my readers will be sensitive to the fact that everything here is not meant to cohere (even if it does in many senses).

Poetry, as with any aesthetic, is not inherently subversive, even though a specific poem, or poet's work, can be read as such. To further illustrate such a point, I have tried,

where applicable, to read certain poets against the grain of conventional thinking. My opposition of Pound and Williams, for example, suggests that Pound can be read as a rather progressive (!) thinker in certain respects, especially if one looks at his willingness to engage sincerely and honestly with traditions, cultures and languages that are normally dismissed in the West. All this in contrast to a certain strain of thinking and searching in the works of Williams that sought to isolate and make crystal clear the existence of an American literature apart from all other Englishes, a move that could be read in a chauvinistic, or even jingoistic manner.[xvi]

In terms of a historical trajectory, my argument ends with the contemporary scene of American poetics, and with conceptual poetry and flarf in particular. My central thesis in regards to conceptual poetics is that the movement mirrors—in an allegorical sense—many of those most pressing concerns that surround language usage and the imagination in America today. Flarf, perhaps the most "controversial" conceptual poetry out there, quickly left behind its absurdist and playful origins and became a tool for many poets to critique and deride the political state of post-9/11 America. Flarf also engages with that most ubiquitous of vernacular objects: Google. For all its problematic aspects, flarf does, by its very nature, suggest a certain kind of democratic process by which anyone can create a poem. Flarf's Modernist precursor, therefore, is clearly surrealism: if anyone with an unconscious can be an artist, then the same can be said of anyone with a search engine. Whether or not flarf is truly "democratic" or not is up for debate; as Dan Hoy points out, its practitioners often hold a simplistic and troublingly uncritical view of the ways in which Google actually works. Despite all its claims of egalitarianism, Google is still what it is: a multi-billion dollar company that places profits above privacy rights or even human rights in the case of China.[xvii] As such, any critique of flarf needs to keep in mind its origins as a poetics in relation to Google, and the implications thereof.

My examination of conceptual poetry, and of constraint based poetry in particular, seeks to contextualize such a poetics within the current political landscape of neoliberalism. I am especially interested in the ways in which neoliberalism posits an unfettered world of freedom and choices, while constraint based poetics seeks to undermine such notions. A constraint based poetics, therefore, calls into question the often unacknowledged notion behind the politics behind language and speech: who is it that gets to speak and have a say in a society ruled by the concerns of the free market? And in a country that is as trusting and willing to promote neoliberal values as ours is, these are necessary issues to consider and examine.

And (from Ezra Pound's *The Cantos*)

Most poems can pivot and turn on the simplest of words, and a single word can construct an entire world. It is no coincidence that the most important long poem of American modernism, Ezra Pound's *The Cantos*, begins with the conjunction "and," leaving us to ponder the peculiar feeling of beginning in *medias res*, something that Hugh Kenner also acknowledges in *The Pound Era*:

> What comes before "And"? In mankind's past, before even Homer, a foretime; a foretime even before the dark rite of confronting shades which Pound thought older than the rest of the Odyssey, reclaimed by Homer as he reclaims Homer now. In the Odyssey the ten books that precede … and in the history of the poem, much precedent groping and brooding, out of which mostly unspecifiable [sic] darkness the poem as we know it emerges. (349)

Through the use of one of the most common words in the English language, a one syllable utterance that we almost never consider, Pound conjures up not only one world—that of the poem we are about to read—but entire worlds that have come before, cosmologies of poetic traditions. He calls forth ghosts that haunt *The Cantos* and that Pound remains, in a sense, silent on. Why the silence on what came before? Because it is that which is most familiar to us, and there is little or no necessity to recast it again in language: the Western poetic tradition that begins, as Eliot[xviii] and many others would have it, with Homer's *Iliad* and *Odyssey*. We are not given the entirety of the *Odyssey*, only the snippet that will announce Pound's own poetic journey. This is loaded with potential problems. We could be celebrating the construction of poetries that "create 'worlds' by blotting out the one they exist in. Their triumph is to conceive lands without people" (James Scully, 50). But the case with Pound is a bit more complicated, for he conceives of lands where tradition and history are meant to be

made lucid and apparent, even if his primary mode of representations seem to be opaque and inscrutable—and strictly European.

We are in a *selva oscura*, but one that is strangely comforting and familiar to us. But what we also have here is a distinctly American tradition or, at least, the shadow of one. As William Carlos Williams sought in *Spring and All* to distinguish between two different traditions within the English language through the metaphors of the "wedge," the "cleave" and the "imagination"— those terms that are meant to announce a distancing and a separation between the European and American traditions— so too does Pound initiate a split, a bifurcation with his "And." But where Williams felt that this distance, this gap, could hold, Pound does not. It all coheres, but not without the whole showing its fractures and tears. As Derek Walcott would put it: "Break a vase, and the love that reassembles the fragments is stronger than that love which took its symmetry for granted when it was whole. The glue that fits the pieces is the sealing of its original shape" (69). Coherence, yes, but with a price, and with a language creased with the scars and marks of radical difference.

Pound takes for granted and yet also complicates the violent yoking of those traditions that are the least heterogeneous. There is no attempt to separate traditions, whether American or European or Chinese; it all belongs in the vortex of tradition.[xix] As Matthew Hart puts it: "In unifying a defense of poetry's social function to an attack on the modern compartmentalization of knowledge, Pound . . . links the project of reforming poetic language to his social and intellectual activism" (47). The didactic impulse is always vibrantly apparent in Pound (Stein dismissively called him "the village explainer"), as it is in *The Cantos*. But it only begins there: consider his *ABC of Reading*; or the *Guide to Kulchur* in which he attempts to "provide the average reader with a few tools for dealing with the heteroclite mass of undigested information hurled at his daily and monthly and set to entangle his feet in volumes of reference." We are in darkened times, for "No living man knows enough to write" (1970,

23); or his insistence on reading the Kung sections of *The Cantos* as philosophical and political lessons applicable even today. Why the emphasis on the didactic aspects of the poetic? Two reasons: For Pound the West has lost its way: "Today the whole Occident is bathed daily in mental sewage, that is, the 'morning paper' in ten millions of copies rouses the Western brain daily. Bunkus is called a philosopher, Puley an economist, and a hundred lesser vermin swarm daily over acres of print" (1973, 76). The assumption behind such writing: that poetry can actively and honestly participate in changing the means of the world through altering the dynamics of how we think. How so? Williams provides an answer: "All other presentation uses writing to speak about something else, as in the writing of philosophy wherein philosophers themselves are frequently mistaken since they are not primarily writers. But poetry is all of a piece, knowledge presented in the form of pure writing which is made of the writing itself" (1974,73). "All of a piece," a wonderful and splendorous coherence by which the fragments make sense as a whole, by which the picture can be seen. Here one sees in full measure Williams' Romantic idealism take shape.

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What makes *The Cantos* such a distinctly American poem is the manner in which it imports and translates traditions into English,[xx] or, what Pound called in his essay on translating from the Italian, "Guido's Relations," "a series of Englishes." Translation, broadly conceived, becomes the open door through which Pound allows a variety of traditions to enter the American and English-language vortex: "American English is the quintessential unnatural, insufficient, weak language which the writer has to bend, distort, to translate into, to interject his or her vision" (Nemet-Nejat, "Question of Accent"). Pound must, therefore, turn nothing into something. As in Walter Benjamin's "The Task of the Translator" translation becomes the moment where one's mother tongue is jolted and awakened to new possibilities, where an

estrangement of our comfort in language becomes an opportunity for new aesthetic possibilities. Pound on translating from the Italian:

> What obfuscated me was not the Italian but the crust of dead English, the sediment present in my own available vocabulary—which I, let us hope, got rid of a few years later. You can't go round this sort of thing. It takes six or eight years to get educated in one's art, and another ten to get rid of that education. Neither can anyone learn English, one can only learn a series of Englishes … I hadn't in 1910 made a language, I don't mean a language to use, but even a language to think in. (2004, 28)

There is no single English to learn, fractured endlessly as it, and every other national language, is. But most important of all: a language to think in, challenging the convention that to exist in a language means to automatically think in a language. We have pacified, to our great detriment, the real activity and energy behind that verb, to *think*. Not all thoughts, Pound is suggesting, and not all language, bring with it a real and honest thinking. What may cohere is the world and our way of thinking of it, around it, and actively with/against it.

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The Cantos is a poem in translation, if only in the ways it subsumes and turns "foreign" traditions into living, American ones. As Yunte Huang makes clear, so much of Pound's work and understanding of different traditions was made possible only through translation: "But the Imagists [and Pound] seldom appropriated directly from linguistic cultures of which they had very little firsthand knowledge; instead, they relied intertextually on the work of other ethnographers" (62). For Pound, therefore, translation becomes not simply the literal movement of one language into another, but also the shifting of one tradition into a different context. My entry on Imagism will further this argument. The process becomes a means by which to construct new American traditions.

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Pound's juxtaposition of American leaders Thomas Jefferson and John Adams with Confucius and Malatesta suggests a historical equivalency between traditions that are normally not considered in relation. But this juxtaposition operates as a translation of sorts, a bringing together of different traditions, contexts and histories through the use of a specific language, here English. This is not simply the writing of history, and should not be considered in such a reductive way. Yes, Pound spoke of epic as a "poem including history." But in the very same breath he said "I don't see how anyone save a sap-head can now think he knows any history until he understands economics" (1968, 86). There is, in other words, no single discourse at play here, but a multiplicity of them at play. History as a series of particular forces and actions, not as a monolithic and abstract force at play.

*

Why this fascination with the east? Pound's use of Confucius—Kung as he is called— is a didactic one, the implication being that the diseased west needs the east to revive it. "For those who read only English, I have done what I can. I have translated the TA HIO so they can learn where to start thinking" (2010, 58). Both Pound and Eliot believed that the East could, in many ways, revive the West, an idea that, at times, sounds like crass Orientalism, the exotification and exploitation of a tradition that they may have had no legitimate claim to in any manner. But both poets were, to a great degree, sincere in their engagements with the "East," especially in the case of Pound. As Zhaoming Qian puts it, "Admittedly, Pound is not free from all Western biases, but his refusal to think of the West as the cultural center of the world and his allusion to 'Chinese colours' as an antidote to European 'evil', have, in the main, separated his Orientalism from what we now call Saidian Orientalism" (142). Pound again, from his essay "Immediate Need of Confucius": "We in the West need to begin with

the first chapter of the Ta Hio, not merely to grant a casual admission of it in some out-house of our ethics or of our speculations. There is nothing in this chapter that destroys the best that has been thought in the Occident. The Occident has already done its apparent utmost to destroy the best Western perceptions" (1973, 77).

Pound sought to reinvigorate the West—to make it new again—by attempting to make the lost new again, by illustrating what has been forgotten and ignored. It was not, however, only the east that contained knowledge(s) that are necessary. As Kenner points out, Pound felt the Nekyia episode of the *Odyssey* was far older than anything else in Homer, an attempt to find roots, an originary principle, to reconnect with the lost path. In this sense, Olson is at his most Poundian when, in his "Special View of History," he argues that since Plato and Socrates Western man has gone astray, that great work needs to be done in order to reconcile the human with his/her alienated experiences, localities and realities. Their poetry seeks to find that which has been lost, forgotten, unclaimed.

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Back to our first point of examination: why begin *The Cantos* like this? Because tradition is greater than any single poet/voice. As both Kenner and Joseph G. Kronick[xxi] have argued, Pound's epic starts, but it never actually begins, primarily because Pound is asking his readers to be aware of the tradition in which he is partaking. *The Cantos* is a text that asks of a certain degree of devotion and patience from its readers, a text that, as Julia Kristeva would say, "takes shape as a mosaic of citations" since "every text is the absorption and transformation of other texts" (Culler 1975, 139). Pound in his *The Spirit of Romance*: "All ages are contemporaneous" (2005, 6). In modern American poetry, there may be no better example of this than Pound's epic, a text that exists as a series of translations and citations, all put together through the means of collage. Perhaps the only other long poems that equal

Pound's frame of reference and ongoing engagement with different traditions are Robert Duncan's "The Structure of Rime," and "Passages."

Pound begins by suggesting that his work, while singular in its scope and enterprise, is also to be read as footnotes to the poetic tradition from which it originates and of which it is, perhaps, the last. It is derivative in the sense that Duncan defines the term: as fully aware of its own place within a long-standing history of poetry. His now famous claim that he was writing an epic for a time and people that did not deserve such a thing is compelling for the very fact that he is aware, in the sense that Agamben speaks of in his *The End of the Poem*, that the time of the poetic spirit is long gone; poetry is the language of the dead, only available for those who are ready to dive into the wreckage of history to reclaim it.

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To be within a tradition to this degree also implies an effacement of ego, of self. *The Cantos* is Pound at his most Eliotesque, using many of the younger poet's ideas as formulated in "Tradition and the Individual Talent," in particular the theories of depersonalization:

> What happens [to the poet] is a continual surrender of himself as he is at the moment to something which is more valuable. The progress of an artist is a continual self-sacrifice, a continual extinction of personality… There remains to define this process of depersonalization and its relation to the sense of tradition. It is in this depersonalization that art may be said to approach the condition of science. (2007, 539)

A more productive reading of Pound's greatest works—which I take to be *The Cantos* and his translations from the ancient Chinese— suggest that he and Eliot were very much of the same mind set in regards to the poet's need to remove the self in order to replace it with tradition. *The Cantos*, I would argue, suggests a text that was composed by an auditor, translator, editor, historian rather than what we traditionally consider to be a "poet" or "writer." It suggests, therefore, a limited kind of agency or aesthetic control.

The poet is meant to give himself over to tradition and language, to allow the poem to speak through him, a complete effacement of the self, bringing to mind Jack Spicer's notion of the poet as transistor radio, a medium receptive to poetic signals from the "outside": "And here the analogy of the medium comes in, which Yeats started out, and which Cocteau in his *Orphée*, both the play and the picture, used a car radio for, but which is essentially the same thing. That essentially you are something which is being transmitted into, and the more that you clear your mind away from yourself, and the more also that you do some censoring—because there will be all sorts of things coming from your mind, from the depths of your mind, from things that you want, which will foul up the poem" (1998, 7). In a similar sense, the translator attempts to efface his presence in the text, to become one of those Homeric ghosts, as the "best" translations are those that suggest, for Pound as for Benjamin, something new, an estrangement of English and a necessary aspect of the language itself: "English literature lives on translation, it is fed by translation; every new exuberance, every new heave is stimulated by translation, every allegedly great age is an age of translations, beginning with Geoffrey Chaucer, *Le Grand Translateur*, translator of the *Romance of the Rose*, paraphrase of Virgil and Ovid, condenser of old stories he had found in Latin, French, and Italian" (1968, 35).

For a poet whose original tongue was English, translation always meant attempting to change the course of the American tradition by introducing new and different traditions into American poetry.

The Blues

I'd like to begin my discussion of the blues as American vernacular with the quote below from Amiri Baraka's seminal study, *Blues People.*[xxii] Baraka's socio-historical examination of the blues aesthetic proposes a "theoretical endeavor. Theoretical, in that none of the questions it poses can be said to have been answered definitively or for all time, etc. In fact, the book proposes more questions than it will answer" (ix). In that sense, I would like to draw two relations between Baraka's text and my own: first and foremost, a shared solidarity with the theoretical goals of our "poetic" endeavors, a scope that is meant to encompass aspects of critical discourse that may be considered unconventional; and secondly, both our projects are far more interested in asking questions than in providing answers, for this is poetry's gift, one it shares with philosophy as well: valuing the question as much as the answer. For Baraka, the blues inaugurates the transitory moment between an African consciousness and an African American[xxiii] one:

> The Negro as slave is one thing. The Negro as American is quite another. But the path the slave took to "citizenship" is what I want to look at. And I make my analogy through the slave citizen's music—through the music that is most closely associated with him: blues and a later, but parallel development, jazz. And it seems to me that if the Negro represents, or is symbolic of, something in and about the nature of American culture, this certainly should be revealed by his characteristic music. (ix)

For Baraka, the blues represents "the reaction and subsequent relation of the Negro's experience in this country in his English" and is "one beginning of the Negro's conscious appearance on the American scene" (xii). As Nathaniel Mackey puts it rather succintly, *Blues People* "has to do with the various transformation—from African to Afro-American, slave to citizen, rural to urban—undergone by black people in the United States and the

attendant transformation of African-American music." Furthermore, the blues becomes "a deeper conviction that a continuum exists within which the threat of dilution, co-optation, or amalgamation by the dominate white culture has been and continues to be repelled." It is a "black position," and "one of alienation and resistance" (1993, 26). Baraka's definition of the blues is particularly important because of its emphasis on the United States' unacknowledged traditions of global and multicultural influences, making explicit the diasporic roots/routes[xxiv] of the African-American tradition; or as Kerouac would put it in his "History of Bop": "Bop is the language from America's inevitable Africa." Baraka's theoretical stance, while important for its emphasis on the socio-historical pressures represented in the blues, also essentializies the aesthetic long after the fact of its creation, something that I see as a problem and which I will address below. In large part, my readings of what blues poetry has become explores how authors use the form in order to subvert and challenge essentialist notions of identity in relation to aesthetics, here the lyric poem. As Baraka makes clear, the blues is not the beginning, but one of many possible beginnings, as he resists, as we should, the possibility of any simplistic genealogical procedures. Any single origin would be reductive, and of little or no help in truly understanding how aesthetics come into being in relation to socio-historical forces.

What interests me is the intersection of a particular American aesthetic and the subjectivities it gives rise to, how the blues traces the formations of such subjects and their formations: the "beginning of the Negro's conscious appearance on the American scene." I would also like to suggest that Baraka's musical "genealogy" is one that retains a large degree of indeterminacy and possibility, as made clear by his assertion that there is not simply one beginning, but a multiplicity of vantage points from which to explore the condition of being African-American in the United States. Historically speaking, therefore, we must also never forget that the blues is a modern aesthetic, one brought about by the

pressures and realities of global modernity. There is no way to separate, therefore, the social formation and coming of the blues as aesthetic from modernity in general and Modernism in particular. As Geoffrey Jacques also formulates, but in relationship to another kind of African-American music: "my argument [is] that too little attention has been paid to the ways in which the lyrics of ragtime-era songs have influenced modernist poetry" (59). The same, of course, can be said for the blues.

Certain conceptual issues that have broadly come to define aspects of the Black Diaspora are made manifest in the blues and align to some degree with my own concept of what an American vernacular is. For example, the theory of simultaneity as suggested by Du Bois, and Paul Gilroy after him, and the argument for a split, fragmented subject; or Gilroy's description of a subject constantly on the "move," perpetuating itself through the very process of movement.[xxv] For as Baraka also suggests in his study, there is a peripatetic nature to the blues tradition—as there is to many vernaculars—that must be acknowledged and incorporated within any attempt to elucidate how it functions as an aesthetic. The wandering nature of the blues can also be felt in what Nathaniel Mackey calls the form's "dissatisfaction with—if not critique of—the limits of conventionally articulate speech, verbal speech." He goes on, "One of the reasons the music [here both blues and jazz] so often goes over into nonspeech—moaning, humming, shouts, nonsense lyrics, scat—is to say, among other things, that the realm of conventionally articulate speech is not sufficient for saying what needs to be said" (2005, 193). To follow this logic, the blues also examines the limits of identity, or the conventional assumptions we have in relation to art and self, a point that especially needs to be made in relation to the lyric. For if the lyric is meant to suggest a "voice" or the taking of a voice then the articulation of a "nonspeech," of "moaning, humming, shouts" suggests a breakdown in the very thing, the voice, that makes a subject, in part, who she is.

Returning to Gilroy's and Dubois's theories and how they relate to the subject at hand: to some degree, both thinkers suggest that any notion of an essential identity and fully unified subject is an impossibility. The blues as aesthetic, however, performs this irreducible gap, the indeterminate nature between American and African consciousness that Du Bois and Baraka, and Gilroy in other contexts, have recognized. The blues is a dissonance of sorts; it makes apparent the knotty relationship between self and aesthetics, a marker of those nearly impossible places to locate where art and identity coalesce. But it can also "sound" like a noise. It can be, as Mullen writes echoing the depths of the black Atlantic, the noise of "colored hearing colored/sounds darker/back vowels lower/down there deeper" (155), a "plunge into the depths" of self realization that Mackey also writes of in relation to Aime Cesaire's *A Return to My Native Land* and Baraka's poem "The Bridge"(1993, 36); or, in the words of Kerouac from the first chorus of his "Desolation Blues": "at night the shooting starts/Are swimming up to meet us/Yearning from the bottom black" (117).

If there is an aspect of the blues experience that Kerouac's lyrics in particular truly represent, it is the ceaseless energy of movement, an element that also characterizes modernity. His blues lyrics as collected under the title *Book of Blues* represents a manic intensity of travel and dispersal, where no single locality can truly encompass or contain the poet's ceaseless activity and creativity. The blues, therefore, becomes more of a state of mind, or of being, than it does the practice of a specific aesthetic. Gilroy, to give another example, writes of "a tradition in ceaseless motion" (122), and it is this aspect of the blues, this constant motion, the unending possibilities of aesthetic creation that also suggests limitless possibilities for the formation of different subjects. As Mitchum Huehls has argued in his essay on *Muse & Drudge*, Mullen's use of the diaspora tradition[xxvi] brings with it a radical degree of "indeterminacy," one that "offer[s] a picture of black cultures that resist identity-based modes of representation" (23). The lyric subject found in many instances of

blues poetry is a highly performative, self-reflexive one; but this subject position is not necessarily a liberatory or oppressed one. It can take a variety of shapes. Consider, for example, Du Bois's notion of an African-American subject made aware of itself only through the interiorized gaze of the Other, an example of alienation Baraka gets to in the beginning of his poem "An Agony. As Now": "I am inside someone/who hates me. I look/out from his eyes" (1991, 52).

Identity formation as Du Bois articulates it through his notion of double consciousness becomes not a liberating realization but an alienating process. With the blues, however, this process of self-reflection, while drawing on a similar history of abjection and oppression, can become a creative means to challenge such violence. Such a reading implies that the self is never easily or readily locatable, if ever even there *there.*[xxvii] Thus any plunge into the depths of self-knowledge may return the notion that there is no self to really speak of, the reality that language, a vernacular, a music, whatever form representation may take, contains not a single trace of any actual identity, but is rather an empty vessel in which any sense of self can be poured.

As with my own formulation of how an American vernacular can operate— as a possible means of countering or subverting established and restrictive forms of language and identity —readings of the blues as suggested by Baraka, Houston Baker, Huehls and Henry Louis Gates Jr. argue for an aesthetic means of self expression that not only speaks of a particular American subject[xxviii] coming into existence, but also of an aesthetic that seeks to resist traditional economies of representation. My approach to the blues lyrics of Langston Hughes, Harryette Mullen, and, to a lesser extent, Jack Kerouac[xxix]focuses on how these poets use the blues as a form for exploring the intersection between experience,[xxx] the lyric poem, and American identities.

I further define the blues as an American vernacular because it functions as a cultural, historical and social repository of knowledge(s) representative of American subjectivities that have often been marginalized, subjugated and oppressed. We should never forget the political and social contexts through which the form came to be, even while attempting to trace the contours of a shifting tradition, what Baraka calls the "changing same" (1971, 180-211). It is impossible to separate pain and suffering from the reality of the blues and its "origins," a point that Baraka's thesis in *Blues People* is there to impress, a historical fact that should never escape our frame of reference. There is no blues without the pain and suffering that calls it forth, something that Robert Creeley also finds in Kerouac's blues poems: "These poems provide an intensely vivid witness of both writer and time. Much is painful, even at times contemptible—the often violent disposition toward women, the sodden celebrations of drink—but it is nonetheless fact of a world still very much our own. Kerouac speaks its painful content, which is not to exempt him from a responsibility therefore. But a world is never simply a choice but a given, and it was not his intent to be brutal if that seems the point" (xii). (It is this world that is "very much our own" that is impossibly difficult to locate for it exists beyond us and is yet intrinsically bound to our own representations of it.) This does not, of course, imply that any poem written with the blues as template or standard automatically becomes an object of ethical merit or value, an accurate or fair mirror to such pain. But it is also pain that brings us back to the personal and private aspects of the lyric, and, perhaps, of poetry in general. Odysseas Elytsis: "Whether you have written poems or not is less important than whether you have suffered, been impassioned or longed for what leads, by hook or by crook, to poetry" (53). John Wieners put it this way: "Do not think of the future; there is none./ But the formula all great art is made of.// Pain and suffering" (1986, 62). Poetry can lead to an understanding of what it means to suffer. It is the how of representation that must be examined in each and every context. We must refuse the easy

route by which any particular stance or position is automatically deemed as progressive or valid. We must constantly challenge the foundations on which our most common notions rest.

As such, we can use the blues as a lens to view how American poets in both the Modernist and Postmodernist traditions have responded to the question of an American identity, poetics and language. If there is one thing that all these poets and poetics have in common is that they can be read as critiques of the notion of an essential identity. All the poets under examination here seek to undermine a variety of assumptions when it comes to the connections between aesthetics, forms and the identities inscribed within. The blues, as I understand it, is not simply a marker of racial difference within the much larger discourse of national identity, even while acknowledging that one cannot speak of a true history of the blues by ignoring the question of race. Any serious consideration of the form needs to remain aware of its complexities and its varied and complicated origins. We should never forget history, needing a "memory," as Mullen would put it, that possesses the "mute eloquence/of taciturn ghosts" that wreak "havoc on the ling" (2006, 69). Regardless of the identity politics that may remain prevalent in such a discussion, I would rather concentrate on the blues as an aesthetic of counter-hegemonic practice, a tool for a progressive politics that binds poetry and theory with praxis. For poets within the blues tradition—Mullen, Hughes, Kerouac—the blues becomes, to use Gates's term, a form of Signifyin(g), a "rhetorical play in the black vernacular" (53), and therefore a democratizing force. It is a democratic aesthetic because it makes injustice and suffering its primary subject matter; it turns a very real aspect of existence—pain and suffering— into something abstract in order to make it universally accessible.

*

As Gates points out, it is impossible to speak of an African-American tradition without, at some point, turning to the vexed question of the vernacular. Gates writes "that the literary discourse that is most consistently 'black' … is the most figurative, and that modes of interpretation most in accord with the vernacular tradition's theory of criticism are those that direct attention to the manner in which language is used" (xxvii). For Gates this figurative language is most apparent through the rhetorical strategy of Signifyin(g) by which different texts echo one another. Signifyin(g) is textual play, a form of parody and pastiche that draws consciously on tradition as a means of both subverting and reifying what has come before. Accordingly, he also raises questions in regards to what the vernacular really is, since it can also be a radically complex rhetorical and figurative language of its own.

There is, of course, an irony here: that a vernacular, language ordinarily conceived as common, direct, conveying an intimate sense of accessibility, would be placed within the same domain of the highly figurative, the complex, the experimental. But such a subtle reading rightly concludes that a vernacular can be just as complex and "stylized" as one that is often recognized as "poetic." We often confer aesthetic value and import to those texts that strike us as ornate and complex, often not paying attention to the ways in which "simpler" or more "accessible" forms are also highly wrought and fashioned. Part of this complexity in regards to vernacular works is located in the "blind-spots" in our readings of such texts; this is true, of course, for all art, as we are prone to see it as a thing divorced from its means of production before we begin to examine the conditions that gave rise to it. However, this is almost doubly true for the notion of the vernacular as it often, as Matthew Hart writes by way of quoting Adorno, is seen as "the untruth of identity, the fact that the concept does not exhaust the thing conceived" (8). In other words the notion of the vernacular can never exhaust the very possibilities of the identities it seeks to constitute. As I argued in my

introduction, there is no singular expression or theoretical outlook that can wholly encompass the complexities of human reality.

As Gates would have it, echoing Gilroy's thoughts, the blues can be said to be part of the "perpetual, or wandering, signification . . . of the process of cultural transmission and translation that recurred with startling frequency when African cultures encountered New World-European cultures and yielded a novel blend" (19), in the same way that one cannot speak of an American language or literature without concurrently being aware of the transnational context of its roots/routes. Vernaculars travel, are linguistic mongrels, and are dangerously promiscuous forms of language. That is what makes them both sites of resistance and sites of control.

*

The Weary Blues (1926), Hughes' first published collection, announced the poet's life-long engagement with the blues. As late as 1961's masterpiece, *Ask Your Mama: 12 Moods for Jazz* and its use of the traditional hesitation blues as a leitmotif and its section "Blues in Stereo," Hughes remained committed to exploring the blues as an American and African American art form;[xxxi] its influence on his poetry is impossible to understate. The blues poems under discussion here are further examples of how poets such as Hughes sought in vernacular and populist art forms ways to champion marginalized communities, and to suggest counter-hegemonic subjecitivties. In the case of Hughes's blues poems, and prefiguring Mullen's work, many of them are written in the voices of heartbroken women, a kind of lyric in drag. Hughes's blues lyrics are an outlet for the expression of suffering for both men and women. The play of different gendered voices suggests a performative degree of self-reflexivity that calls into question any essentialist notions behind genre and gender. We have a lyric that speaks of a self that decidedly does not belong to the poet, but is also of

him, a lyrical piece of him. Such a move further posits non-essentialist readings of identity in connection with the lyric and the blues in particular. Hughes's use of the blues counters many masculinist notions of the art form, turning the muses into the creators. (Consider, for example, the absence of women in Baraka's *Blues People*, a blind spot in the history that Angela Davis tackles in her *Blues Legacies and Black Feminism*.) Here is one of Hughes' blues poems, "Misery," in its entirety:

> Play the blues for me.
> Play the blues for me.
> No other music
> 'LI ease my misery.
>
> Sing a soothin' song.
> Said a soothin' song,
> Cause the man I love's done
> Done me wrong.
>
> Can't you understand,
> O, understand
> A good woman's cryin'
> For a no-good man?
>
> Black gal like me,
> Black gal like me
> 'S got to hear a blues
> For her misery. (77)

To what degree a poem such as "Misery" fully realizes a woman's "voice"[xxxii] can certainly be debated. But to ask such questions, in a sense, also misses the point. What cannot be denied are the implications that arise in writing such a lyric in the voice of a woman, an especially important point to consider in light of the blues's primarily masculinist history, a history that Mullen also confronts and seeks to refashion for her own feminist poetics. We would not be attacking straw men, for example, if we were to critique Hughes's attempt to speak for women in such a way, but we would be reducing the poem's complexities.

In a sense, what Hughes is practicing here is a gendered form of Du Bois's double consciousness, a cleaved voice that articulates a radical alterity. But this examination of the gendered voice is allowed by the "matrix"—to adopt a term from Houston Baker— of the blues itself. How does Baker define the matrix as blues? "Afro-American culture is a complex, reflexive enterprise which finds its proper figuration in blues conceived as a matrix. A matrix is a womb, a network, a fossil-bearing rock, a rocky trace of a gemstone's removal, a principal metal in alloy . . . [it] is a point of ceaseless input and output, a web of intersecting, crisscrossing impulses always in productive transit. Afro-American blues constitute such a vibrant network. They are what . . . Derrida might describe as the 'always already' of Afro-American culture. They are multiplex, enabling script in which Afro-American cultural discourse is inscribed" (3-4). The "always already" nature of all folk traditions is what is being invoked here. A folk tradition belongs to all because it lacks an originary moment; it is a genealogy that allows access to the uninitiated; all that is needed is a sincere attachment to the art itself, a bond that can eclipse claims in terms of birth and blood rights. "Evenin' Air Blues," another of poem by Hughes, makes this point as well:

> But if you was to ask me
> How de blues they come to be,
> Says if you was to ask me

How de blues they come to be—
You wouldn't need to ask me:
Just look at me and see! (225)

The refrain here of "Just look at me and see!" becomes the only justification needed to support the origin of the form, even while such a solipsistic turn can only rest on the foundation of the already existing aesthetic. The blues can only "come to be" through this exchange whereby the singular voice is lost and reconstituted through the practice of music, or poetry in this case. The moment of realization becomes a revelatory one: one must "see" to believe in the power of the form. But what is also most compelling here is the complete and utter anonymity of the voice, an every(wo)man quality to it that suggests not a single identity but a voice of, and representing, many.

The final lines of "Misery" also argue for a much larger, inclusive notion of the blues: "Black gal like me/'S got to hear a blues/for her misery." The ability to express one's own suffering, to voice a grief, can also be a political act, a means by which a subject can make claim to its own sense of being, the intimate yell of proclaiming one's existence, the need for being looked at, seen and accepted to some degree.

The blues, therefore, is a communal source, a folk tradition available to all; a proletariat art form, one that represents the pain of the common person. Kerouac: "I wanta know about the people/ on the street, what they doin?/And what the high art/hark squambling in his quiet temple moonlit gambymoon/writing jingles & jongles for the pretties on the square" (188). It effaces, to an extent, the notion of the singular genius, the notion of the unique voice of the lyricist. Hughes' use of the form simply acknowledges the role of women in it, a role that has often reductively been only one of muse.[xxxiii] What Hughes brings to the surface are the traditionally silenced women that have always existed in the blues.

Furthermore, his poetry can be read as a means for critiquing certain ideological assumptions we make when reading a lyric: that the voice within the poem is automatically that of the poet or, even worse, our own. The lyric, rather than being the reflection of who we are, can also be the moment of radical differentiation, a dissonance that disturbs and challenges our notions of who we are. We must continuously challenge assumptions that the speaker in any lyric conforms to our very own ideological assumptions and positions.[xxxiv]

*

Harryette Mullen's collection *Muse & Drudge* proposes a postmodern take on the blues lyric. Keeping in line with Mullen's other works*, Muse & Drudge* is an experimental text, but one that does not seek to displace the "aesthetic" in lieu of the "socially aware." Instead, Mullen seeks to yoke together avant-garde goals and political ones. Mullen's work, as Aldon Lynn Nielsen has argued, is part of a long standing, but often ignored, tradition of experimental African-American poetics, a poetics that critics have not understood. According to Nielsen, we need to "develop vocabularies and paradigms that will permit us to read and make sense of sound texts, pattern poems, and unpronounceable delineations" of such poetics (35)[xxxv]. I find this particular quote telling because it brings into consideration the sound or music of poetry, while also making mention of the fact that we still lack the means by which to critically address what such poetry has to offer. Again, there is something always just out of our reach in such poetics, something that struggles for recognition but fails to make itself clearly present. Nielsen's reading of Mullen's work is helpful because it addresses the binary that separates the oral and the written, and the non-experimental with the experimental. This arbitrary division is a particularly important one in the African-American tradition, since many critiques of African-American writers and poets focus on the false idea that such writers are working strictly within an "oral," or "vernacular" tradition, traditions which are viewed as simplistic or of little aesthetic merit. This is often seen as a detriment to the work, a

lack of a certain kind of "sophistication." Such reductive readings, besides being tinged with a certain kind of racism, ignore a rich textual and written tradition (experimental, in other words) that is long standing. Mullen's *Muse & Drudge* is meant to do away with such simplistic binaries, and to engage directly with them. As Mullen herself said in an interview:

> I was interested in concentrating, distilling and condensing aspects of orality and literacy. Because when you have an oral tradition and you also have writing, you don't have to put the oral tradition on the page as transcription. I think that maybe in Sterling Brown, Langston Hughes, Dunbar, there's a way in which the oral tradition is- though this is not completely true, because there's obviously transformation in what they're doing-but they're closer to a practice of transcribing the oral onto the page. I am more interested in a transformation of the oral into something that draws together different allusive possibilities in one utterance, which is something that writing can do better than speech. I'm interested in taking a speech-based tradition and transforming it through the techniques that are available to me in writing. (1996, 656)

But again, we need to consider that the vernacular can also be radical and progressive as easily as the experimental can be dull and conservative. In bringing together these two aesthetic notions—and, again, traditions that have been traditionally separated in terms of an aesthetic color line—Mullen's project is, fundamentally, a political one, and one that interrogates the imaginative possibilities of language itself. It is a "rumba with the chains" of oppression "removed" (107), as she writes in one of the untitled blues lyrics in the collection. Furthermore, the act of weaving together what are supposed to be disparate aesthetics brings to our attention the fact that such a distinction even exists in the first place. Mullen notes in her introduction to the collection, *Recyclopedia*,

> When I wrote *Muse & Drudge*, I imagined a chorus of women singing verses that are sad and hilarious at the same time. Among the voices are Sappho, the lyric poet, and Sapphire, an iconic black woman who refuses to be silenced. Diane Rayor had translated the surviving fragments of Sappho's ancient Greek poetry into an American idiom that sounded to my ear like a woman singing the blues. So *Muse & Drudge*, in a sense, is a crossroads where the blues intersects with the tradition of lyric poetry, as well as a text for collaborative reading and on occasion to unite audiences often

> divided by racial and cultural differences . . . While many readers perceive *Muse & Drudge* as a more insistently "black" text than the other two [*Trimmings*, *S*P*eRM**K*T*], I have written all of these works from my perspective as a black woman, which I believe is no less representative of humanity than any other point of view. (xi)

For Mullen, the blues lyric becomes a tangled nexus of traditions and contexts. Paul Hoover suggests that such a text "achieves epic range of reference," by which "[Mullen] also creates a coaxial relation between oral and written and black and white cultures" (76), an articulation of Mullen's desire to show that "American culture is … miscegenated, how it is a product of a mixing and mingling of diverse races and cultures and languages, and I would . . . say that, yes, my text is deliberately a multi-voiced text, a text that tries to express the actual diversity of my own experience living here, exposed to different cultures. 'Mongrel' comes from 'among.' Among others. We are among; we are not alone. We are all mongrels" (652). It is a multi-contextual aesthetic,[xxxvi] and one that allows Mullen to combine a multiplicity of voices and registers[xxxvii]

> They [the poems] do come from the blues tradition. The [text] reflects the full range of that tradition: sexual relationships, but also relationships with community, spirits, tradition, circumstances in one's life. It's the individual confronting all the circumstances that may open or close down the chances for that person to thrive and develop. I tried to suggest this multiplicity of experience in my book. There's the blues on the one hand and lyric poetry on the other hand, and where they intersect or overlap. Thinking of this poem as the place where Sappho meets the blues at the crossroads, I imagined Sappho becoming Sapphire [writer, poet, activist] and singing the blues. There's that range of possible ways of the self being spoken in the blues and in the lyric. The writing of the poem is influenced by compositional strategies of the blues, because blues verses are actually shuffled and rearranged by the performer, so new blues can be composed on the spot essentially by using different material in different orders. Quatrains can be free standing and shuffled in and out of the work in the way that blues verses are shuffled in and out in any particular performance-that is one way that the echo of the blues enters the structure of the poem. (654)

But to extend this argument further, Mullen's blues poems, as they continually point back to their own performative nature, constantly deconstruct the very foundations upon which they stand: the voice speaking the poems, and the tradition that is meant to inform that speaker. The poems in *Muse & Drudge* critique the problematic logic by which readers often conflate the poet's identity with that of the lyric "I." Mullen herself suggested a position to the lyric "I" that brings to mind poststructuralist notions of the death of the author:

> The making of the voice in the poem is the recycling of tradition. So these things are not independent of each other. One feeds the other. Any time "I" is used in this poem, it's practically always quotation: it comes from a blues song, or it comes from a line of Sappho; it comes from-wherever it comes from. The "I" in the poem is almost always someone other than myself, and often it's an anonymous "I," a generic "I," a traditional "I," the "I" of the blues, that person who in reference to any individual experience also speaks for the tradition, speaks for the community, and the community recognizes the individuality of the speaker and also claims something in common.[xxxviii] (653)

Or, as she writes in one of the poems, the voice becomes "a name determined by other names/prescribed meditation/unblushingly on display/to one man or all" (100). Mullen's poetry performs its very instability, constantly calling into question the very idea of what a blues poetics is and the subjects that would perform it. The lyric subject as constituted in *Muse & Drudge* is simply a link in a never-ending chain of signification in the "already made" of the blues.

As such, Mullen is challenging the ways in which subjects are called into being through traditions and language itself but also illustrating that such traditions are not in any way essential to one's identity as a subject. Huehls: "Mullen tends to pack her text with representations of subjectivity that are usually allusive, de-essentialized and fragmented. Mullen's work argues that a fully self-conscious black subject can be textually constituted through a rapid-fire presentation of a diverse spectrum of African American consciousnesses"

(36). Mullen's concerns in terms of subjectivity are not limited to issues of race, for example, but also to gender and class.[xxxix]

Cleavage (from *Spring and All*)

For William Carlos Williams there is no cleaving made possible without the use of the imagination. Cleavage, or radical separation, is what arises after the imagination's agency has crystallized itself in the form of a poem:

> The cleavage goes through all the phases of experience. It is the jump from prose to the process of imagination that is the next great leap of the intelligence—from the simulations of present experience to the facts of the imagination … (219)

Cleavage is the marker of separation, it inaugurates a shift, what Williams terms a "jump," from the world of "simulations" to the realm of "the facts of the imagination." Reality, tenable, lucid, tangible, is the goal here. It is only during this radical separation, the bringing forth of an alterity, that the facts of existence can be brought about, that reality itself can be seen. Cleavage, however, is a presence that announces itself only through absence; it is the haunting remains of the process of the imagination. It means many things for Williams; in the section above it also suggests the move from prose to poetry, a dialectical back-and-forth that is an essential aspect of *Spring and All* (but more on this below). Williams goes on to argue that the imagination is intricately linked to poetry, even if it cannot be entirely understood or named:

> poetry: new form dealt with as a reality in itself.
>
> The form of prose is the accuracy of its subject matter—how best to expose the multiform phase of its material
>
> the form of poetry is related to the movements of the imagination revealed in words—or whatever it may be—
>
> the cleavage is complete … (219)

Michel Foucault once said that knowledge is a tool used for cutting. The same can be said of the imagination, in that it produces both demarcations and divisions that give rise to categories and, therefore, "knowledge." To imagine, therefore, is to mark reality with a new form, cleaving, cutting, separating, regardless of the form—in this case, poetry—it may take. The imagination has no singular form, despite the fact that Williams prioritizes poetry above all other forms. (No one ever said that poets were not biased.) Poetry and the imagination, therefore, are not simply abstract fields, but rather tangible extensions of reality itself. However, these new fields of thought are remnants of the imaginative process, and, therefore, not easily digestible rational ideas. They resist easy incorporation into anything as reductive as a world-view or system of thought. They, therefore, also resist application. And it is ironic that for a poet such as Williams, one who often proceeds in his work with the goals of clarity and revelation to traffic in terms and ideas that—thankfully—still retain something of the abstract behind them. This dancing amongst terms—prose, poetry—suggests that Williams has no real definition for either, seeking, instead universal tenets that could stand in the place of particular works:

> Poetry must be defined not by its superficial features but by its character as an effect related to science and the other categories. As knowledge in a certain form. Poems must be—and this partakes of technique—considered as documents of men. Thus, without seeking a pungent example for the moment—new works must be based—or their criticism—on an increase of knowledge, and will be accepted or rejected solely upon that score. But it is their bodies as poems, as with men, that is their destiny, differing from all writing which has not writing itself as its substance. (1974, 74)

*

As mentioned above, this separation, this cleavage, can also represent the arbitrary divide that exists between prose and poetry. One of most prevalent themes in *Spring and All* is the ongoing dialogue between the two forms:

> Of course there is nothing to do but to differentiate prose from verse by the only effective means at hand, the external, surface appearance.
>
> Of course it may be said that if the difference is felt and is not discoverable to the eye and ear then what about it anyway? Or it may be argued, that since there is according to my proposal no discoverable difference between prose and verse that in all probability none exists and that both are phases of the same thing.
>
> Yet, quite plainly, there is a very marked difference between the two, prose and poetry which may arise in the fact of a separate origin for each, each using similar modes for dis-similar purposes, verse falling most commonly into meter but not always, and prose going forward most often without meter but not always. (230)

The simple fact that Williams seeks to develop a genealogy, a source of origin for both poetry and prose, suggests an allusiveness to both categories. Williams struggles to make both modes similar because they are not at all similar. I stress this aspect of Williams' work because his Romantic idealism will always manifest itself in attempts to reconcile radical differences that cannot be reconciled.

The step to take, the one Williams hesitates to take, is to examine the notion that the only difference between prose and verse is the separation that marks both as radically opposed to one another, keeping in mind that such an opposition is rather arbitrary. But this distance, marked as it is by radical separation, by the act of cleaving, is what makes both of these forms possible as one another's *Other*. I stress this point only to illustrate the following: that Williams's insistence on a completely separate, free-from-European-conventions break is based on the faulty premise that a complete and utter separation is possible.

*

But specifically, the act of cleaving, and the cleavage that remains, is that which engenders the possibility for an American-English as well. Cleaving, therefore, is a linguistic move, a metaphor for marking aesthetic boundaries and borders, establishing a divide between two

forms of English and two forms of poetry—a bifurcation that American Postmodernists such as Olga Broumas, Harryette Mullen, Gloria Anzaldúa and Cathy Park Hong will examine through a multiplicity of Englishes, or idioms. (Even Stein and Pound, to certain degrees, were aware of the impossibility of fully divorcing English-language traditions). Williams' poems, therefore, are meant, in part, to be read as markers of separation from the much larger body of English itself, poems that announce a new American-English as autonomous from any other form of English[xl]. But what does it mean to have left behind a poem that has been cleaved away from the linguistic body of English?

For Williams, the necessity to cleave represents the need to found an American poetics freed from the ongoing presence of Europe, a separation from the burden of the old world and its language(s) and its poetics. (I will expand on this argument in the imagination entry.) But the cleave always leaves a mark, a wound or void, and it is this gap that drives much of Williams' poetics. If there is one general theme that runs through most of Williams' work it is this need to constitute an ongoing cleavage, or gap, within the English language; but it cannot cohere. The Englishes multiply, and all traditions are mongrel traditions. There is in *Spring and All* no attempt to reconcile the European and American traditions, whereas much contemporary poetry argues that it is impossible to speak of American poetry without looking at the stratified linguistic history of this country.

Hence the phantasmagoric opening to *Spring and All* with the laying to waste of much of European history and civilization through the imaginative process of the imagination. But to be aware of this distance is what Williams is striving for, and where problems arise. If one is aware of the "distance" that exists between poetry and prose, and the "distance" between a European and American aesthetic, then a difference must exist, even if it only exists in our naming of it; those things that are closest to us need never be named. But there is no way to completely differentiate the one from the Other, for they always exist in relation to one

another. To cleave always marks the presence of the Other on the new body, on the new form, a gap that always declares its very presence through its very absence. Historically speaking, this division is a necessary one for Williams and his project, for it constantly announces the very possibility of an American-English and, therefore, an American poetics.

Commerce

Etymologically speaking, commerce does not only suggest economic exchange but communion and community. It presumes the prospect of social organization that allows for such procedures. The word derives from the Latin word for trade and trafficking, *commercium*, a meaning I emphasize to help us move away from the idea that the word simply implies crass and commercial concerns. Pound's aesthetic agon, to use a very Bloomian term,[xli] with Whitman is a compelling node of Modernist American history, a "relationship" that can help us come to terms with the Modernist poet's relationship to American romanticism. The juxtaposition between the two poets could not be more stark, especially when one considers how both approached the question of national identity. Whitman, on the one hand, viewed America as the most poetical of nations to the extent that he viewed it *as* a poem. For Whitman, belonging to the nation, even to a nation that held troubling politics in the form of slavery, for instance, was always a direct source of poetic inspiration and creativity. Pound, on the other hand, only wanted to flee[xlii], trying to leave behind what he saw as a decaying and dying culture. Pound's poem to Whitman, "A Pact," represents, on the surface at least, the conventional story of a young poet accepting and acknowledging a debt to an older poet:

> I make a pact with you, Walt Whitman -
> I have detested you long enough.
> I come to you as a grown child
> Who has had a pig-headed father;
> I am old enough now to make friends.

It was you that broke the new wood,
Now is a time for carving.
We have one sap and one root -
Let there be commerce between us. (1957, 27)

The Oedipal dynamics at play here are impossible to ignore, although lingering on them for too long will not get us far, and will reduce what is an incredibly complex poem to a few psychoanalytical banalities. Needless to say, Pound saw Whitman as the father he needed to confront, but also as the American tradition and nation that he needed to move beyond in order to achieve his "world citizenship" (1973, 145), a cosmopolitan identity that can transcend the limitations of the nation. In his 1909 essay, "What I Feel About Walt Whitman," Pound very clearly states what he thinks of Whitman and of the American tradition:

> He is America. His crudity is an exceeding great stench, but it is America. He is the hollow place in the rock that echoes with his time. He does 'chant the crucial stage' and he is the 'voice triumphant.' He is disgusting. He is an exceedingly nauseating pill, but he accomplishes his mission. (145)

Despite Pound's acerbic and caustic take on Whitman, he does come to accept Whitman's poetic success: "And yet if a man has written lines like Whitman's to the Sunset Breeze one has to love him" (146). But, again, this is not simply the personal acceptance of a poetic precursor, but the fact of a national identity. What Pound is addressing through his dealings with Whitman is his relationship with America, and with its language.

But what truly interests me is the notion of commerce, the economy of exchange, what I read as an attempt at creating an equal relationship between an uneven aesthetic relationship. In that sense, a poetic agon such as the one performed in "A Pact" could also be

viewed in an egalitarian light, as an attempt to correct an imbalance that a younger poet views as problematic. Hence, my earlier emphasis on the "communal" notion of exchange in the very origins of the word commerce; it is the hinge on which the entire poem turns. Pound's poem, therefore, is an attempt to engage in an economy of aesthetic give-and-take, an attempt to isolate and demarcate the limits and demands of aesthetic appropriation and tradition. The entire poem can be read as a series of measures and balances, an attempt to arrive at the perfect aesthetic "economy" of exchange. Consider, for example, the way in which age itself becomes a measurement through which one can come to terms with tradition. The younger poet, the one who is now "old enough to make friends," must reach an age of poetic maturity before it can be time for the "carving," the molding of the new poetic tradition. The poem wonderfully articulates Modernism's anxieties about the creation of something new, something vibrant to battle the stodgy and dreary vestiges of Romanticism. What Pound takes from Whitman—and all the other Romantics—is the urge to rebel against the Victorian tradition.

This exchange, therefore, between youthful poet—"I am young and impatient" (1973, 146)—and older precursor can be also be understood as metaphor for one of the 20th century's greater antagonisms: that between romanticism and modernism, and even postmodernism. As Alain Badiou has stated, the "quarrel with Romanticism … is one of the century's central motifs" (2008, 48). This antagonism is one that has been so central to the 20th century's aesthetic and cultural movements that many have argued, as Don Byrd has in his magisterial study, *The Poetics of the Common Knowledge* (1994), that those epochs we have come to recognize as Modernism and Postmodernism are simply extensions of Romanticism. While I do not fully agree with Byrd's position, in part because it does not consider the momentous breaks with traditions that Modernism and Postmodernism have inaugurated, I do agree with him that one cannot understand 20th century aesthetics without

recognizing the acknowledged and unacknowledged debts of the 19th century. In other words, the economy of commerce from one age to another, a traversing across historical epochs as a communal exchange, is one means through which we can begin to engage in a serious (re)appraisal of where American poets and their poetics rest within a much larger history of a communal aesthetics. However, it is not the only means, and there is always something lacking, always something that escapes and cannot be contained in any economy.

Conceptual Poetry *(Constraint-Based Poetics)*

A note on this entry's title: not all conceptual poetry is constructed through constraint-based methods. Constraint-based poetics are simply one smaller sub-category within a much larger field of contemporary, experimental practices.[xliii] Broadly understood, what conceptual poetry has in common with the art movement of the same name is the notion that the "idea" behind the aesthetic work rules the form. As poet and artist Kenneth Goldsmith has written, "Conceptual writing is more interested in a thinkership rather than a readership. Readability is the last thing on this poetry's mind. Conceptual writing is good only when the idea is good; often, the idea is much more interesting than the resultant texts" (Goldsmith, *Poetry* blog). I would like to focus on one of the stranger and more compelling forms of conceptual poetics: constraint based forms.[xliv]What does such an aesthetic stance suggest for the current state of American poetics in general? What do such constraint-based procedures suggest about the place of the "imagination" in contemporary poetry? And what might such a poetics also suggest about the political climate we live in, and, in particular, what might it augur in regards to the general question of liberalism?

While such a leap from the aesthetic to the political may seem, at the very least, a faulty assumption to make, as Vanessa Place and Robert Fitterman have argued in their *Notes on Conceptualism* "Conceptual writing is allegorical writing" (13). An "allegorical" reading of conceptual poetry, therefore, can allow us to place it squarely within the context of current American politics and aesthetics, and to suggest that it can provide us with a point of reference for such a milieu. The marriage of allegory and politics is nothing new. As Angus Fletcher makes clear, there is in allegory a "familiar propagandist function," one that challenges traditional notions and hierarchies of meaning. "Allegories are far less often the

dull systems that they are reputed to be than they are symbolic power struggles. If they are often rigid, muscle-bound structures, that follows from their involvement with authoritarian conflict … When a people is being lulled into inaction by the routine of daily life, so as to forget all higher aspirations, an author perhaps does well to present behavior in a grotesque, abstract caricature" (1964, 23). We only need to look to Dante and his grand work to understand how allegory can be used as a means for political action.

But how do the allegorical and the conceptual come together? Place and Fitterman locate conceptual poetry's allegorical "features" in rhetorical devices such as "extended metaphor, personification, parallel meanings, and narrative . . . allegories use simple parallelism, complex ones more profound." And, more provocatively, "Allegorical writing is a writing of its time, saying slant what cannot be said directly, usually because of overtly repressive political regimes or the sacred nature of the message. In this sense, the allegory is dependent on its reader for completion (though it usually has a transparent or literal surface)" (13). Although to what degree this "surface" is in fact transparent or easily locatable is a highly problematic assumption. As Place and Fitterman conceive of allegory, as opposed to traditional notions of the concept, there is no direct one-to-one equivalent between text and message, symbol and idea. This is an important point to make because the idea of the transparent or clear allegorical connection is most assuredly not what categorizes conceptual poetry or its allegorical traits. Again, Place and Fitterman: "Note the potential for excess in allegory. Note the premise of failure, of exhaustion before one's begun . . . In this sense, allegory implicates Godel's First Incompleteness Theorem: if it consistent, it is incomplete, if complete, inconsistent" (15). For the two poets, the allegorical seeds of the conceptual movement allow for a much wider dispersal of meanings and readings, an excess of possibilities, implying that a multiplicity of interpretations is the goal.

As such, I would like to consider a reading of constraint-based poetry as an allegorical engagement with the current political landscape, and, in particular, with the limits of liberalism and the limits of the political imagination. Although written during the height of the Cold War, Lionel Trilling's thoughts in *The Liberal Imagination* on the intersection of politics, liberalism and literature resonate today more than ever. Trilling writes "Unless we insist that politics is imagination and mind, we will learn that imagination and mind are politics, and of a kind that we will not like" (2008, 100). To further ground the reality of such a claim, consider the following, taken from the *9/11 Commission Report*: "Imagination is not a gift usually associated with bureaucracies . . . It is therefore crucial to find a way of routinizing, even bureaucratizing the exercise of imagination" (344).[xlv] The imagination, as I have argued in my entry for *Spring and All*, and as Trilling and the writers of the 9/11 Report are also aware of, is not only an aesthetic tool for representation but also a process that can radically change and shape the world. (To paraphrase Marx's claim that communism is the end of philosophy: the imagination can be the end of politics itself, since any radical reimagining of the political process can result in a system that is totally unrecognizable as politics. Hence the anxiety on the part of the 9/11 Commission to control and bureaucratize the imagination.) Juan Goytisolo, in quoting the writer and ex-criminal Andrei Siniavski, posits the claim that any real art, therefore, is a crime because it challenges the deadening conventions of reality (231). To quote him at length:

> The question is most à propos: tearing ourselves away from the abstractions of art for art's sake and from writing as a game, we are forced to reflect on a series of problems that go beyond the framework of purely aesthetic considerations. Even if the gratuitous element, the ludic factor have always been essential ingredients of the literary work, the concept of literature as a crime in the greater part of today's world belies the claim of certain individuals that it is possible to create an ethereal, self-sufficient art, completely apart from social life … Poetic purity, if carried to its ultimate consequences, can also assume, depending on the circumstances and the regime, the characteristics of a statutory crime." (231)

Conceptual poetry, at least within the American context, performs this illicit, criminal element that literature has lost for us. This does not mean, however, that it is distant or apolitical. Far from it. It is a poetry of its time because it seeks to make clear these obfuscations within contemporary discourses. It brings to mind a definition of the contemporary as articulated by Agamben. For Agamben the contemporary is the one who "firmly hold[s] his gaze on his own time" and who can "write by dipping his pen in the obscurity of the present" (2010, 13).

In the same sense, any lyric poem can only be understood as describing and relating the experiences of a particular subject at a specific juncture in history, and not as an abstract category that transcends its specificity. For this reason it is impossible to speak of any lyric poem, or any aesthetic project really, without keeping in mind its relation to the contemporary.

A constraint-based poetics as practiced by a poet such as Harryette Mullen, for example, can be read as a reflection of questions in regards to what our age of consensus, to appropriate a conceptual term from Jacques Rancière, allows and does not allow. For Rancière "consensus means that the givens and solutions of problems simply require people to find that they leave no room for discussion, and that the governments can foresee this finding which, being obvious, no longer even needs doing" (2010, 1). Consensus, therefore, is a silencing, a muting of those voices that seek to undermine and challenge the status quo. Rancière's theories of the political are a productive stepping stone from which to leap, suggesting, as he does on numerous occasions, that the political is not the exercise of the state's powers but rather the practice of dissensus, which he defines as a "demonstration that makes visible that which had no reason to be seen" or heard from (2010, 38). The "political," therefore, is the possibility of making those who are underrepresented in society visible and heard. The truly political project can only exist as an imaginary one because they both dare to

imagine a different world, a different state of relations. As I have also suggested in other entries, the very notion of who can and cannot speak is a particularly compelling question to ask of the lyric poem itself, since the very question of "who" or "what," in a truly political sense, is articulating itself in the lyric is a question that is usually neglected.

But if we agree with such a reading of the political, then what does it mean when we have poets who are, in a sense, censoring or placing constraints on what they write and say? Perhaps poets are finally heeding Plato's call to silence? But why this silence, and why now? Perhaps a Lacanian reading, one supplied by Slavoj Žižek, may be of some use here, if only to further ground the contemporary nature of conceptual poetics. According to Žižek, we live in an age of permissiveness where the injunction to enjoy is the new Law. The policing superego no longer argues for restraint and prudence, but rather impels us that to not obey the injunction to enjoy is the worst possible solution: "How do we account for this paradox that the absence of Law universalizes Prohibition? There is only one possible explanation: enjoyment itself , which we experience as 'transgression,' is in its innermost status something imposed, ordered—when we enjoy, we never do it 'spontaneously,' we always follow a certain injunction" (1991, 9). Žižek locates such injunctions to enjoy (and to consume and to produce) squarely within a capitalist framework, one that permeates every aspect of society. I would also like to suggest that such a demand to enjoy can also be viewed as an injunction to write, further aligning the written word with Roland Barthes's notion of *jouissance*. To retreat, to withhold, therefore, can be a means to interrogate, if not overtly challenge, the ongoing drive and surge of late capitalism.[xlvi] It can also provide a means by which to critique the unexamined relationships between writing, desire, aesthetics and the drives that lead to such forms. If this is the case, then what better way to subvert such a command to obedience than to disobey by enlisting self-disciplining practices against one's self? The unstated irony is that constraint becomes a sign of freedom: if one is "free" to constrain and control, it

implies that there is a self with enough agency to do as such. This is what makes constraint-based procedures so compelling when brought into relation with the political realities that exist parallel to them. Constraint, therefore, is not simply something that is out *there* but also something that exists and is palpable *within* the author-subject as well, a further dismantling of the notion that there is a division between self and outside world, between politics and aesthetic realities.

However, we also need to be a bit more rigorous in our appraisals and readings. Not all conceptual poetry suggests such a bridging of the gulf between the political and the aesthetic. Rather, each and every project must be dealt with on its own terms. Let us, therefore, turn our attention to one such poetic text and see how the poet brings into contact the political and the poetic.

Harryette Mullen's *Sleeping with the Dictionary* is a text that uses a variety of compositional procedures, not all constraint based, and many adopted from the Oulipo school of writing. Constraint based procedures are felt in a variety of ways in Mullen's poems. The collection itself, for example, is organized alphabetically as any dictionary would be. A poem such as "O, 'Tis William" is in the form of a dialogue that was composed using only the letters that appear in the title:

—Is it Otis?

—I'm…

—Otis, so it is.

—Am I?

—'Tis Otis.

—I am…

—So, it's Otis.

—I am William. (2002, 54)

At the center of what sounds like a comedic routine rests a serious question in regards to who gets to speak and represent the Other. Here the first voice, the one that continually seeks to speak for William and to literally name him, can be said to articulate the concerns of any apparatus of control that seeks to determine and define who or what the Other is. At the very end of the poem, "William Otis" finally breaks down during the "interrogation" and declares who/what he is: "—O, I am William! William is Otis! Otis is William! I am Will! Otis too! O, William Otis, it is! I am!" (55). To what degree 'William Otis" is declaring his radical sense of self, his specific differences, or further interpolating himself within a system of control and subjugation is unclear. The important question that Mullen is asking is one more of representation, and, as she examines in other poems, the intersection between representation, poetry and politics.

A poem like "Bilingual Instructions," while not itself apparently composed through a constraint based procedure, does argue, however, for the limits and constraints imposed by political ideology on language and subjects. We should also consider such a poetics not only in the sense of actual aesthetic procedures but also as a form that attempts to articulate the limits of expressive language itself, and the reality that not everyone has an equal right to speak who they are. In this sense, a poem like "Bilingual Instructions" can be said to be a poem that critiques the limits of constraint based language itself by engaging in those very constraints. Here is the poem, quoted in full:

Californians say No
to bilingual instructions in schools

Californians say No
to bilingual instructions on ballots

Californians say Yes
to bilingual instructions on curbside waste receptacles:

Coloque el recipiente con las flechas hacia la calle
Place container with arrow facing street

No ruede el recipiente con la tapa abierta
Do not tilt or roll container with lid open

Recortes de jardin solamente
Yard clippings only (10)

Mullen presents us with a state apparatus that actively seeks to exclude Spanish speakers from active political participation through policies of linguistic exclusion. The poem wonderfully performs and flaunts the very prohibitions it enacts: Spanish is to be spoken and understood only within the context of the capitalist paradigm of work. Mullen internalizes and recycles the (literal) commands seen on waste receptacles, turning exclusionary public discourse into an aesthetic enterprise. By following the commands of the law, Mullen shows how ludicrous—and racist—such prohibitions are, and articulates the tangible reality of those who are politically disenfranchised and who have no political voice. Mullen's poem, therefore, also suggests the possibility of a different world, politically speaking, one that considers the use of Spanish as valid within a variety of public and political discourses.

Cow (from *The Cow* and "As a Wife Has a Cow: A Love Story")

This entry looks at vernacular bodies in the works of Gertrude Stein and contemporary poet Ariana Reines. My goal in exploring the trope of the cow as it appears in the works of these two poets is to illustrate, as I seek to also do in my entry on William Carlos Williams's "Danse Russe," that it is impossible to separate the social practice of poetry from the bodies that is often seeks to represent. A vernacular body, therefore, can be conceived as any corporeal representation that fits the conventional modes and representations of governing structures such as the nation, gender, sexuality, etc. My work on the issue of transliteration also makes these connections clear.

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Among the texts written during modernism's seminal year of 1922 there comes this, artist Kurt Schwitters's absurdist "The Cow Manifesto," which I quote in full—and in translation—here:

> First, I find it very unnatural to milk different cows into a single pail. You should milk different cows into different pails. Even like that it isn't really ideal, because I think it completely contrary to general human morale for different people to drink milk from the same pail. You could remedy this by milking the same cow into different pails meant for different people. But then it's still very unnatural to milk a cow into a pail, or even (as it happens frequently these days) to bottle the milk. By its nature, milk should be either in the cow or in the veal's or human's stomach, but never in a bottle. On the other hand, given the rhythm of present life, it isn't easy for people living in big cities to run off to the country when they want to drink milk, so that each of them can drink from the udder of his personal cow. On the other hand, because of space, it would be rather difficult to raise enough cows in cities. Consequently, there is only one solution hygienically irreproachable for the modern man, adapted to modern times and worthy of a cow:
>
> Let the cows graze tranquilly and peacefully in their pastures, with flexible rubber tubes attached to their udders and connected at the other end to subterranean conduits leading to the big cities, like those used for gas. It is essential that the

> conduits never communicate and that they be parallel. These conduits can be placed right in the buildings and come out into the room at some practical height. You can put a tasteful faucet there to close off the tube. You can place a nipple on this faucet whenever necessary. That way, whenever an owner of a cow is thirsty, he can milk his nipple. As you see, this is hygienically irreproachable, healthy, worthy of a cow, and harmless for general morals. (391-392)

Fears of contagion, contamination—"You should milk cows into different pails"—litter this brief and profound text, fears that define many of the experiences of the 20th century. In Schwitters's manifesto the cow becomes not simply a symbol for modernity's concerns, but the site that incorporates such anxieties. The binaries invoked in "The Cow Manifesto" are telling and define many of modernity's most persistent obsessions: nature/culture; town/country; human/animal; technological cultivation/agrarian cultivation. Schwitters's text playfully partakes in a wide field of differences, attempting to call to our attention, even if in absurdist fashion, the animals far from human eyes on which a "human's stomach" are filled. Such a distance, the text implies, is good for "general morals" because it, ironically enough, keeps us at a safe remove from those very things that are closest to humans: that which we consume, in this case the life sustaining milk of the animal. We are nurtured by those things that we most willfully reject, a compelling echo of Julia Kristeva's notion of abjection (1982). "The Cow Manifesto" suggests that modern living at the "rhythm of present life" blinds us to the very processes that make such products a reality. Try as we may, we can never fully divorce ourselves form the grip of capitalist exploitation, an exploitation that encompasses nature, humans and the animal. To narcotize us against such a reality, the animal's body must be kept, at all times, as far away from the human body as possible, creating a hierarchy that is situated through the distribution of space: the city is where we live, the pasture is where we import our food products from; the slaughterhouse is completely off the map. We find Schwitters, decades before the cruel realities of contemporary mass farming, touching upon the exploitation of the cow, making explicit the etymological

connections from which the word springs. Etymologically speaking, the disambiguation of the word cow leads us to cattle; the two words are nearly synonyms, and are often used interchangeably. As the *O.E.D* reminds us, the word cattle shares its linguistic roots with the terms chattel, currency and capital. Exploitation of the animal is buried deep, already inscribed in its very name, its very "nature," mirroring the fact that the way in which something is couched in language represents its material reality. Ironically enough, it is the very "natural" process of milk production which turns the cow into a creature beyond nature, a cyborg of sorts, one attached to "tubes" and "conduits" for the dissemination of its life-sustaining liquids, creating a—literally—leaky animal, and one that makes clear the problematic and slippery distinctions that exist between animal and human (Haraway 1991, 152). Bodily borders are crossed and disrupted, calling into question the arbitrary divisions that are meant to separate the human from nature. As Vandana Shiva reminds us, it was a series of "border crossing[s]" that resulted in mad cow disease. For Shiva, these cows are "symbols of a world that perceives no difference between machines and living beings" (72-73)[xlvii]. The cow has been shaped into something to be possessed, living property, another symbol in a long, seemingly unending chain of product-signifiers in our age of late capitalism. But "The Cow Manifesto," through its metaphorical use of this singular animal, seeks to expose the problems of such practices by making clear the "unnatural" aspects of bottling the animal's milk, for instance, or by showing how violence against the animal is best kept hidden in the country-side, away from the cities, far from human eyes, a fact buried deep within the quiet landscapes of our country sides. Rather than read this document as tacitly supporting systems of control and domination, I would prefer to focus on its ironic, detached tone, and suggest that its true fidelity lies in satirizing and subverting such violent and exploitative practices.

I begin with "The Cow Manifesto" to illustrate that the question of the cow is not something that is particular to women writers in the previous century, but a much larger trope for a variety of writers. While Schwitters does not engage directly with the question of femininity in his manifesto, his text can be read as a metaphorical parallel for the place of women in modernity. The connections that Schwitters fails to make between feminine subjectivity and animal life are ones that Gertrude Stein and Ariana Reines will pick up and fully articulate. Where Schwitters "fails," Stein and Reines "succeed" in making concrete what animal life and feminine life have had in common over recent history. Regardless of the manifesto's subversive or reifying ends, it is distinctly a document of modernity and its discontents.

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But again, the question remains: why the cow, and why this animal as token symbol for animal and feminine life in modernity? The argument I'm making is one along the lines of catachresis. As Tani Barlow defines the term, "Conventionally, catachresis refers to a particular misuse of a proper noun, where the term's referent is, theoretically or philosophically speaking, inadequate. A historical catachresis is my way of taking advantage of the ellipsis and making its analytic inadequacy a positive value. When reconsidered as historical catachresis, ubiquitous, descriptive, proper nouns become legible repositories of social experience . . . like Raymond Williams' notion of the key word, historical catachresis stresses the specificity and singularity of people's everyday norms or normalized experience" (1).

While what I am dealing with in this entry is not a proper noun, per se, it is still a singular word that bears with it an incredible degree of ideological weight and power and which beckons to be confronted. The connection of femininity to the image of the cow is a

long and historical one, and has not necessarily been a disparaging one. Female divinities from a diverse range of historical and social contexts have been linked to the image of the cow (although to what degree such divine images simply reproduce patriarchal discourse is justly up for debate). I read the image of the cow, therefore, as a synecdoche of sorts, a place marker for exploring the contours of women's experiences in modernity, especially in the ongoing union between late capitalism and patriarchy, a union that has further sought to reduce the possibilities for women's agency, especially in the realm of bodily control. Furthermore, I do not aim to suggest that this discursive term accounts for the multitude of female subjectivities that the last hundred years have given rise to. Such a reading would be, at best, troublingly reductive and at worst grossly irresponsible. Rather, I suggest that the use of the term cow can speak for certain aspects of women's experiences in modernity. For example, Barbara Creed states, "In the first part of the twentieth century, woman was particularly aligned with nature because of a widely held belief in a pseudo-scientific theory known as the theory of 'devolution.' According to this belief, while man was in general evolving, some men and women all women were in danger of devolving to lower animal forms," and, particularly important for Stein's context, "If women in general were associated with the animal world, the lesbian was an animal" (118). Certain aspects of Modernist ideology have sought to feminize the masses in a gesture of devaluing both popular culture and women, a position elaborated on by Andreas Huyssen (1986) and Rita Felski (1995). Such an ideological position, I would argue, suggests a dehumanizing of such people as well, a logic that led to some of the worst violence of the 20th century. In other words, there is a link to be drawn between the biopolitics that has feminized the masses and the farming and exploitation of animal bodies. Both discourses of exclusion operate in similar ways, even if they are not equivalent. There is no history of modernity that is not also about the exclusion

of both animal life and feminine life, for both have often been stripped, to an extent, of their subjecthood.

A Modernist like Stein seeks to subvert such logic. I consider Stein's specific use of the term cow as an attempt at rehabilitating the term, an attempt to valorize animal life and those feminine subjectivities that have traditionally not had a place in western societies. As Jaime Hovey has argued, such an approach can be understood as Stein's "articulation of [a] lesbian subjectivity and polymorphous sexuality within modernism's self-conscious discursivity," a means of developing a site of resistance, a way to contest modernism's and modernity's misogynistic and homophobic ideologies (548). For Stein, therefore, the cow, that most ubiquitous beast of burden and the site of exploitive practices, becomes a nickname for her lover Alice B. Toklas, amongst other things. The Lover is meant to stand as someone apart from the crowd in their very uniqueness, ironically enough, much like Nietzsche's Overman. But for Stein, of course, this masculinist image of the Overman is replaced with that of the lesbian lover, a playful subversion of a misogynistic position. While this is also a problematic representation of the Lover, and may suggest, on Stein's part, an appropriation and not a subversion of patriarchal politics and discourse, I would like to still suggest that the gesture is a politically progressive one, since it seeks to valorize a lesbian erotics that has long been considered aberrant and disturbing by modernity's heteronormative standards. As such, I see Stein's use of the term cow as an ironic subversion of such homophobic standards, a reappropriation and rehabilitation of a word with troubling resonances.

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Finally, I will turn my attention to a contemporary collection, *The Cow*, a collection by Ariana Reines. For Reines, the cow becomes a symbol of that which is "taboo" (31), forbidden, and strictly off limits when it comes to representations of the female body. That

Reines's text traffics in graphic and shocking language is a means by which to confront directly the misogynistic language through which women have historically been displaced and subjugated by violence.

Historically speaking, it is both amazing and troubling that many of the same issues that Stein picked up on still exist as they do today. Reines's text, therefore, is not so much a summation of the concerns that Stein addressed, but a continuation of many of those same issues. *The Cow* is an act of witnessing, of looking back on a century that that been categorized by its horrific violence. But for Reines, as for Stein, if not in quite the same way, history is inscribed in the body: "Why cannot a body itself be testimony. Why cannot the fact that the witness is bear the witness. Testimony's gesture of veracity used to be the laying of a hand upon the genitals. Why cannot being itself bear anything without a proof. FLESH MADE WORD" (52).

In an interview, Reines described her text as "an attempt to make an organ," making explicit connections that concern the body and embodiment. In the same interview, Reines draws a genealogical history of her text, ascribing its origins, not totally unexpectedly, to her mother:

> The concept for *The Cow* came from my mom's obsession with Creuzfeldt-Jakob [Mad Cow disease]. Her madness is really singular and I have only been able to trace out a tiny corner of what it means or is. Not to mention everything I have in common with her. The book's for her and of her. A person reading it could find: a preoccupation with digestion (have you read Proust's correspondence with his mom?), the question of metaphor (well actually the question doesn't exist anymore, cos [sic] metaphor doesn't exist anymore), cattle cars, the lie of comforting Holocaust literature, schizophrenia, sexual mania, what constitutes a witness, the fundamental horror and disgustingness of birth, mothers, the ruined condition of thought or rumination, the destruction of all interiors, terror, the unspoken but overt links between excressence [sic], the "unnatural", writing, and evil, French modernism, the nastiness of surviving, the violence of all transportation, how love makes people disgusting, nausea, revulsion, not dying of a long affliction. (Thomas Moronic Blogspot)

For Reines, the cow symbolizes many of the horrors of modernity: cattle cars; the Holocaust; man-made diseases; abattoirs; forceful displacement. But it also symbolizes the figure of the mother herself, bringing to mind once again Kristeva's theory of abjection, since one "revolting aspect" of motherly embodiment is the reminder of human corporeality, of what it means to have a body in all its fragility, materiality and weakness (2003). It is no coincidence, therefore, that Reines also mentions the "disgustingness of birth" and its connections to the question of the animal, especially in regards to the fact that women in the age of capitalism have often been treated as nothing more than chattel, the reproductive sites of patriarchy's power. But Reines also asks us to regard such connections carefully, and to not be duped by reductive approaches:

> There is a stupidity in the conflation I am in the act of, cow with cattle car and mother with me, cunt and carcass and book and stomach. But this stupidity, if it belongs to me, is also exterior to me. Humans got brutalized by being packed into cattle cars and dying in them or by them which in turn humanizes, necessarily, the suffering of the beasts for which cattle cars were made. Then what. Signification is incestuous, iterative, autofellating. I am not sure this is living. I am not so sure that there is any. (100)

The Cow, therefore, is a continuation of what I read as Stein's attempt to valorize the animal but is also an attempt to "get to the other side of the animal" (63). This getting to "the other side" is to be understood as a distinctly feminist move in that it seeks to expose the phallogocentric and metaphysical assumptions that separate human from animal and man from woman.

Reines herself makes her debt to Stein explicit by lifting lines directly from Stein's works, *How to Write* and *Tender Buttons*. Where Stein and Reines truly are in dialogue is in their attempt to make cogent the realities of female embodiment. As critics as diverse as Susan Bordo (1995), Judith Butler (1993), and Donna Haraway (1991) have suggested, and in

radically different ways, the problem of female embodiment is a decidedly feminist question, perhaps the one that has always grounded feminist concerns. Bordo writes: "I only wish to point out, contrary to current narratives, that neither Foucault nor any other poststructuralist thinker discovered or invented the 'seminal' idea … that the 'definition and shaping' of the body is 'the focal point for struggles over the shape of power.' That was discovered by feminism, and long before it entered into its recent marriage with poststructuralist thought—as far back, indeed, as Mary Wollstonecraft's 1792 description of the production of the 'docile' body of the domesticated women of privilege…" (248). Feminist criticism, therefore, can be said to be haunted by the very question of the body and embodiment in the same way that the human is haunted by the notion of the animal.

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Cows are important to Stein. They are omnipresent in her work, spotting and fertilizing the pastures of her texts. From *Tender Buttons*—"A canoe is orderly. A period is solemn. A cow is accepted" (336)—to "Lifting Belly"—"Can you sing about a cow" (458)—to *The Making* of *Americans*—"Was it a fish was heard was it a bird was it a cow was stirred . . ." (258)—to this from "Patriarchal Poetry," written in 1923: "Patriarchal in investigation and renewing of an intermediate rectification of the initial boundary between cows and fishes. Both are admittedly not inferior in which case they may be obtained as the result of organization industry concentration assistance and matter of fact and by this this is their chance and to appear and to reunite as to their date and their estate. They have been in no need of stretches of their especial and apart and here now" (1998, 571-572). Yes, of course: any investigation, any attempt to discern, rationalize, differentiate, to draw an "initial boundary" between categories of experience and being has traditionally operated through patriarchal, phallogocentric procedures. Western taxonomies are, as Foucault would have it while channeling Borges, arbitrary categories, conceived by humans, predominately white,

heterosexual men, and often used to promote structures of exclusion and repression (Foucault 2001). Part of Stein's project is to make apparent the phallogocentric foundations of the English language, making her, appropriately enough, the anachronistic feminist poststructuralist of choice. A critic such as Marianne Dekoven (1983), for example, has argued persuasively and correctly for the affinities that Stein's work shares with those of feminist thinkers such as Hélène Cixous and Julia Kristeva. Stein's work, in part, is about critiquing and subverting the gendered politics of language. There is no innocent way to read Stein, for every line, every word initiates, as John Ashbery would put it, a "hymn to possibility" (12) making radical difference a constant and palpable presence in her work. Singular words echo, bringing forth a variety of meanings. There is no singular cow in Stein's work. To paraphrase Hegel, Stein writes during the night in which all cows are not cows. However, the reading of her work in which the word cow is simply a slippery signifier within the never-ending chain of signifiers is also rather reductive, for it does not take into account the very specificity of the word being kicked around. We must, therefore, be willing to accept the very particular resonances of such a term, and deal with its political and social resonances, resonances that reflect animal, bodily and feminine concerns. There is incredible import in Stein's use of such a word.

But what, therefore, is the cow for Stein? What might it represent, even in all of its multiplicities? Why this animal? And how can we account for Stein's use of a term that has in recent history been used to demean and insult women? While true that Stein had a variety of animal-pet names for Alice B. Toklas, Stein's long-time partner, muse, typist and confidant—such as lobster, kitten and pussy—it is the term cow that is most troubling and decidedly worth examining in some detail, especially because it stampedes across the threshold of the boudoir, further dismantling the boundary that exists between human and animal. When it does cross into the bedroom, the cow operates much like Haraway's cyborg

does, appearing "in myth precisely where the boundary between human and animal is transgressed. Far from signaling a walling off of people from other living beings, cyborgs signal disturbingly and pleasurably tight coupling. Bestiality has a new status in this cycle of marriage exchange" (1991, 152). As Ulla D. Dydo has pointed out, cow means many things for Stein, among them sexual activity and excrement (33). It is also a code word for Toklas's orgasms and (50-51), at times, a term for Alice herself. Consider the following selection from "Lifting Belly":

> Lifting belly.
> So high.
> And aiming.
> Exactly.
> And making
> A cow
> Come out. (457)

Regardless of the context, "The references to 'cow' . . . appear in some half a dozen pieces written over a period of at least fours years, but they make the most sense as parts of the body, physical acts . . . Even as she approached her fifties . . . Stein's need to record her passions remained unquenchable" (Bridgman, 152). The body is everywhere in Stein, as the very title of lifting belly makes clear, the very image of which can also be read as representing a body's arching in joy during orgasm. That Stein would have to disguise a woman's pleasure in such a manner is not surprising; we need to only remind ourselves that the female orgasm has only recently been demystified and shown to not be a perversion of some kind, a grotesque aspect of feminine sexuality.

Many critics have argued that one of the reasons for Stein's trademark obliqueness is her sexuality, that the author, therefore, developed a closeted language out of necessity. Some

extension of this argument has been posited by Harriet S. Chessman (1989), Catharine Stimpson (1977) and Elizabeth Fifer (1992), to name a few. The intersection of Stein's sexuality and her writing is a vexed one, and requires a very sensitive critical approach. Historically speaking, it is important to consider, as Rose Weitz has argued, that "Lesbianism became more broadly identified and stigmatized only in the early twentieth century, when women's entry into higher education and the workplace enabled some women to survive economically without marrying, and lesbianism therefore became a threat to male power" (6). And as Eve Sedgwick also demonstrated in *Epistemology of the Closet*, modernity's construction of a heteronormative masculinity and sexuality was concomitant with the formation of other identities that differed greatly from the prevailing hegemonic paradigm and were therefore—and continue to be in many ways—marginalized.

As such, Stein is very much a writer of a lesbian sexuality as situated within a certain historical period, here turn-of-the-century Modernism. I would, however, also like to suggest that such a reading, while certainly tenable, productive and necessary can also be rather reductive. While it would be impossible to say to what degree Stein's sexuality played a role in her development and style as a writer, such a view also reduces her work to simply being an extension of one facet of her truly multi-faceted life.

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As already noted above, the cow is a ubiquitous presence in Stein's work. We could begin this examination nearly anywhere; however, let us focus for now on Stein's wonderfully playful text "A Book Concluding With As a Wife Has a Cow: A Love Story," letting this text act as our "key to a closet that opens the drawer" (495), our guide in examining Stein's relationships to female embodiment and woman as animal-other to man's human. Catharine Stimpson suggests that Stein's works are "attempts - hers and ours - to fix monstrous

qualities of the female body. Like all monstrosities, we despise them, and thus we seek to fix, to repair them. However, like all monstrosities, we also need them, and thus we seek to fix, to stabilize them. We often toil in vain" (67). Or, as Donna Haraway would put it, we can understand the cow in Stein's work as a "boundary creature," an animal that disrupts and disturbs traditional narratives (2) if only because it is so eerily replicates itself in a way that is so decidedly "human." Again, as I already pointed out above, Ulla Dydo and Richard Bridgman have shown how the term cow also represents not only Toklas but certain aspects of their sexual and bodily lives as well. But for Stein the creative act was often equal to the sexual act, suggesting that the cow, therefore, is also that which engenders further artistic work or is that very work. Dydo writes, "Again and again she writes notes to Toklas that describe making love to her in intimate detail and indeed are lovemaking. Always it is Stein, the husband, who makes love to Toklas, the wife, which culminates in her having a cow, or orgasm. Toklas's sexual fulfillment inspires Stein to write … It produces literature or what she at times calls babies. Toklas' cows are equivalent to Stein's babies, but both cows an babies are joint creations (28). The fixing of the monstrous that Stimpson points to is also a creative and poetic fixing; it is an artistic symbol. The cow represents creative and artistic agency. It is Stein's acknowledgment that nature also contains a certain degree of agency. The cow— and all other animals that mirror our ideology— disturbs us not because of its radical otherness but because of its similarities to who and what we are. Animals and Others begin to disturb and subvert prevailing ideologies of control at the moment when agency becomes an issue.

"As a Wife Has a Cow A Love Story" contains many of Stein's trademark repetitions, inversions, coded language, and experimental flourishes. It also possesses a sensuousness that is also a Stein trademark, one that, for this reader at least, is made tangible by the author's use of repetitions, rhymes and rhythms. The most bodily aspects of Stein's work rest in such

aesthetic procedures: Stimpson again: “Her body also enlivens her writings, be they somagrams or not, be they lyrics, meditations, or diary-like notations. For her texts read as if her voice were in them, as if she were speaking and dictating as much as writing. Unlike a Charles Olson, Stein lacks a theory about the relationship of the poetic line to the human breath… [However] Stein's work is liveliest when read and heard; when our own o/aural talents lift her words from the page and animate them in an informal or formal, private or public, theatrical environment” (1985, 72). There is in Stein’s work a happiness, a supple joy that is hidden by what many view as a cold and calculating genius at play. This joy is bodily, it is, a “Feeling or for it, as feeling or for it, came in or come in, or come out of there or feeling as feeling or feeling as for it,” which leads to the next sentence: “As a wife has a cow” (502). The general joy of “feeling” leads to a sexual climax, bodily enjoyment, *jouissance*. In Stein’s cryptic language one sees an attempt to overthrow the hierarchies of bodily experience as well, to suggest that the historically marginalized experiences of lesbian love are as valid and worthy of description as any other. However, we should also hesitate to apply a strictly Queer-theoretical reading of Stein’s language, suggesting that she is writing the way she does because of a closeted need. As I suggested above, while it is impossible to fully divorce Stein’s sexuality from her work, such a move would be highly problematic for a number of reasons. Such an approach, for example, does not take into account the multiplicity of complicated historical and aesthetic conditions that also inform Stein’s work; her relationship to cubism, for example or her association with William James; her literary agon with Henry James; or as Elizabeth Frost (2003) and Deborah M. Mix (2007) have demonstrated, her fidelity to an avant-garde spirit and tradition. Sexuality is just one complex thread that colors Stein’s work, but it is not the prevailing one. In fact, there is no prevailing thread, for all are impossibly bound together.

The animal-Other is one trope through which Stein's many aesthetic, political and social concerns converge. Throughout her writings, Stein explores the possibilities of examining non-human subjectivities. *Tender Buttons* can very well be read as an attempt to understand things as things themselves, a phenomenological study of a kind; her constant appraisal and representation of her Ford car, nicknamed Pauline or Aunt Polly, is yet another. We should place Stein's forays into animal-otherness as attempts to elucidate different modes of subjective experiences. Stein's fusing of cow and woman's orgasm is suggestive of such an uneasy alliance. I say uneasy because as I've intimated before such a term replicates the worst of patriarchal discourse. As Richard Bridgman has written, Stein often used "the conventional designations of husband and wife for [her and Toklas]" (151), suggesting a living arrangement that, in many ways, was remarkably conventional. Many feminist critics have rightly asked to what extent Stein can be said to have practiced a feminist poetics or lived a life that would suggest a progressive politics, since she often found herself replicating traditional aspects of male privilege. In her relationship with Toklas, Stein often, if not all the time, performed the role of artist, genius and working husband. Such a view, while certainly true to some extent also, I feel, eliminates the very real power of historical contingency. Considering the when and where of the Stein-Toklas relationship, the fact that they could live as they did, in an out-of-the-closet lesbian marriage, is incredible in its own right. Also, as scholars such as Ulla Dydo and Janet Malcolm make clear, Toklas's role as Stein's copyist also resulted in edits and changes to her texts, suggesting that the idea of Stein as working totally alone, without the influence of Alice, is false.

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Arianna Reines makes explicit the gendered and bodily politics that Stein only intimates:

> A cow is a name for a heavy woman or a woman with sloe eyes. Cow is a common epithet for a slow woman or clumsy woman; a woman with a foul smell. A thick-

> lipped woman, an unintelligent woman, a woman whose features possess a disturbing combination of ugliness and sensuality. A woman whose desire to fuck exceeds the desire of others to fuck her. (31)

Reines draws our attention to the derogatory and misogynistic discourses that underpin the term cow. It is, after all, "a common epithet," a ubiquitous presence. But Reines also makes the connections between animal and feminine-bodily existence explicit in a way that Stein does not. The body's materiality is of utmost concern in *The Cow*, a body with "sloe eyes," "smell[s]," and one that is "slow," "clumsy." Whereas Stein seeks to illustrate what can be positive in the use of such a derogatory term, Reines's project differs in its use of patriarchy's troubling language in order to illustrate the violence behind such appellations.

That Reines brings it back to the sex act, to fucking, is only to be expected. The economies—both literal and metaphorical—of the feminine body, as currently constituted through heteronormative discourse, often return to the question of sexuality and sex itself, and such questions are, of course, almost always situated exclusively through the issue of reproduction. As has been pointed out by a number of critics, a woman's worth is often in direct proportion to her ability to reproduce, to obtain the mantle of mother. As Suzanne Kessler has shown, a woman who could not bear children was not considered a complete woman (Kessler 1990). Reproduction and sex become aspects of sexuality that are used to police identities. As Lauren Berlant and Michael Warner (2002) argue, sex itself is not the foundation of heteronormative identity—or any sexuality, for that matter—but that the sex act is bound up, complicatedly so, with a variety of other issues that give rise to the practice (and policing) of gender and sexuality. The question of reproduction, therefore, is an extension of such discourse. Susan Bordo once asked "Are Mothers Persons?" (1993, 71). In exploring the contours of legal and philosophical arguments that seek to turn women into mere sites of heteronormative reproduction, Bordo illustrates "the legal double standard concerning bodily integrity of pregnant and nonpregnant bodies, the construction of women

as fetal incubators" and how such policies and politics "over reproductive control emerges as an assault on the personhood of women" (72). Lee Edelman (2004) furthers such an argument in an examination of how the politics of reproduction and sexuality lead to the exclusion of men and women—particularly gays and lesbians— who do not fit into a restrictive and limited heteronormative model of social belonging. The connection between reproduction and sexuality has acted as a means to define, categorize, foreclose and marginalize identities, whether gay or straight, that do not typical belong.

The cow for Reines, as for Schwitters and Stein before her, becomes the body on which a multitude of political and social concerns are inscribed, in particular for how women have been mistreated, a trope of exclusion. The term continuously points back to its inclusion within a seemingly unending chain of patriarchal and heteronormative language. The cow is the intersection of a variety of reproductions and consumptions.

Reines's text traffics in the languages of such consumption and reproduction, but such discourse is always channeled through the bottleneck of the body. Her text, her "organ," is an attempt at a bodily writing. Not only an écriture féminine, appropriating the writings of a poststructuralist feminist theorist such as Cixous, but also an attempt to explore the violent and arbitrary divisions and marriages of animal-life to female-life. Rather, Reines seeks to interrogate and draw our attention to those usually neglected moments of connectivity that bring writing and body together. Or, as the poet would put it, "My whole body writes" (38).

The bodies that Reines presents us with are meant to be grotesque and overflowing, the logical extensions of ideologies that seek to degrade subjects that do not quite belong. They are monstrous in every possible use of the phrase, blurring and upsetting boundaries between a variety of taxonomies and categories of control. Tellingly, these bodies are leaky—"Anyway the solid girl was not going to hold water (23); "An animal secretes a lot of

cortisol if you harass her too much in killing her and this ruins the meat you are trying to turn her into" (82); "A milking machine is a machine attached to the valve of a body that is living" (93).

Reines lets the shit overflow, creating a poetic logorrhea that is meant to illustrate the impossibility of containment and making viscerally real the facts and fears of contamination: "Here is what happens when a cow is slaughtered. She has shit caked on her, she is led down a gently-curved ramp, hundreds, thousands of cows are led down such ramps every day" (33); "I shit with the door open because there's nobody here and because there's nobody here I can taste my GO GO shit," (15) and "I'll let the night dissolve in runny shit" (53). However, Reines also reminds herself that she must "not train" herself to "love this shit" (43), an acknowledgment that one must at all times be aware of the excesses of production and of consumption, and how we are all implicated in politics and procedures we would rather not think about. For Reines, the shit represents what Lacan would call the "Real," the visible and indivisible remainder of signification, as the excrescences of the body are meant to stand in stark juxtaposition to the sustaining and nurturing milk found in the cow's body.

But as for Stein, Reines finds in these moments of disturbing and troubling excess nodes of creative and poetic possibilities: "This is real poetry because it's a vat of signification. What is made to pass through. It's language, it looks and sounds like language. Dissolve me" (56). That which sustains us is also that which dissolves us. We are only that which we are fed on.

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It would be foolish to insist, considering the contemporary nature of Reines's vision, that we no longer live in the world that Schwitters described. In bringing together these three writers

we have come full circle, returning in many ways to the very place from which we began. In the same way that Schwitters reminds us that we install our animal others in the countryside, we in the west still do not hesitate to export suffering and pain that we would rather not confront directly, both at home and abroad. As an academic living and writing within the borders of the United States, I hope to be critical of those practices—whether imperialistic, patriarchal, racist or homophobic—that spread suffering, while also acknowledging my very own participation in such troubling structures. We should never insist on an uneasy separation between us and the world at large. In short, what Reines confronts us with are the horrors of our age, and the very "shit" we ourselves are implicated in. In the end, what Stein and Reines share is a concern for the discourses of power, and how such languages exclude and marginalize. In the end, such works are subversive if only because they suggest that another world can be possible, another way can be had. They are not naively utopic, but naïve enough to imply that something productive can arise, if only poetry, from active engagement with and against the discourses of power.

Dim Lady (from Mullen's *Sleeping With the Dictionary*)

"Dim Lady," much like Mullen's "Variation on a Theme Park," is, in part, an interrogation and critique of many of the cultural standards and aesthetic codes that underline the Western canon. It is a poem of and against the conventions that many vernaculars bring with them. As such, the poem is also an extension of Mullen's ongoing examination of the ways in which language is a socially and politically loaded category that constructs many of our most omnipresent —and supposedly neutral—realities. Mullen is critiquing ideology and the hegemonic forces of control that are often taken for granted, regardless of where they might appear or what form they may take. As Deborah Mix states, "All [of Mullen's] works are linked by a focus on the politics of race, language, dialects, history, and popular culture" (62). "Dim Lady" finds Mullen (re)writing what appears, at first, to be a rather straight-forward homage to Shakespeare's Sonnet 130, but with a contemporary twist to the proceedings. All of the familiar Shakespearean conceits, for example, are replaced with common, everyday commodities, the mad products of American capitalistic production. A simple juxtaposition of the two poems will illustrate this:

> My mistress' eyes are nothing like the sun;
> Coral is far more red than her lips' red;
> If snow be white, why then her breasts are dun;
> If hairs be wires, black wires grow on her head.
> I have seen roses damask'd, red and white,
> But no such roses see I in her cheeks;
> And in some perfumes is there more delight
> Than in the breath that from my mistress reeks.

> I love to hear her speak, yet well I know
> That music hath a far more pleasing sound;
> I grant I never saw a goddess go;
> My mistress, when she walks, treads on the ground:
> And yet, by heaven, I think my love as rare
> As any she belied with false compare.

And here is Mullen's contemporary take, in prose-poem form:

> My honeybunch's peepers are nothing like neon. Today's special at Red Lobster is redder than her kisser. If Liquid Paper is white, her racks are institutional beige. If her mop were Slinky's, dishwater Slinky's would grow on her noggin. I have seen tablecloths at Shakey's Pizza Parlors, red and white, but no such picnic colors do I see in her mug. And in some minty-fresh mouthwashes there is more sweetness than in her garlic breeze my main squeeze wheezes. I love to hear her rap, yet I'm aware that Muzak has a hipper beat. I don't know any Marilyn Monroes. My ball and chain is plain from head to toe. And yet, by gosh, my scrumptious Twinkie has as much sex appeal for me as any lanky model or platinum movie idol who's hyped beyond belief. (20)

A first reading of the poem may give the impression of a work that is nothing more than an ironic, satirical, Postmodern take on a canonical work. Mullen's poem, however, beyond its ironic distancing from the original, is a strident critique of many of the political and subjective standards, standards taken as objective, that canonize texts such as Shakespeare's. Much of the poem's success, actually, arises from this "metacritique" of the original, giving us a poem that exists as much as it does off the page as it does on the page; in other words, there is no way to "understand" the subversion at work here without being familiar with the original. The social and historical realities that inform the poem, those things which normally reside "beyond" the page, are as much a part of the text as the actual text itself.

To grasp how Mullen begins deconstructing the Shakespearean "original,"[xlviii] we can first look at the shift from images of natural beauty—"coral" that is "far more red," or the

purity of "snow" and the beauty of "roses"—to the most common and ubiquitous of products—"Liquid Paper," "slinkys," "Twinkie." Such a shift, I would argue, proclaims a reversal of conventional values in regards to what is often valued aesthetically, what has become, by now, a traditionally Postmodern move: the valorization of popular culture. (My entry on Mullen's "Variation on a Theme Park" will further explore the poet's critique and use of popular culture.) One can trace Mullen's interest in the intersection between language, poetry and consumerism back to two of her earlier collections: *Trimmings* and *S*PeRM**K*T*. Mullen says of her writing "I'm also interested in the collision of contemporary poetry with the language of advertising and marketing, the clash of fine art aesthetics with mass consumption and globalization, and the interaction of literacy and identity" (2006, ix-x).

Much like those two collections, "Dim Lady" is a rather complicated work when one begins to unravel its approach to the consumerist culture that underpins its conceits. For what Mullen is examining is how the marketplace constructs femininity and feminine subjects. And while her approach is generally one of subversion and critique, she is also very much taken aback by the sublime, transcendent aspects of late capitalist logic, the logic that makes people objects and objects people. And much as in "Variation on a Theme Park," Mullen asks her readers to approach and accept both readings at the same time: in other words, there is a progressive and anti-patriarchal, anti-consumerist bent to the proceedings, but there is also a certain amount of distance and acceptance of the ways of the world. The apathy in the opening poem of *Sleeping with the Dictionary*, "All She Wrote," suggests as much:

> Forgive me, I'm no good at this. I can't write back. I never read your letter. I can't say I got your note. I haven't had the strength to open the envelope. The mail stacks up by the door. Your hand's illegible. Your postcards were defaced. "Wash your wet hair"? Any document you mean to send has yet to reach me. The untied parcel service never delivered. I regret to say I'm unable to reply to your unexpressed desires. (3)

"Unexpressed desires" is an apt description of ideology itself, those thoughts, instincts and pressures we almost never think about but always reproduce. Of course here Mullen offers a sense of passive resistance to such operations, even if it means not writing by writing about how one has checked out. "I would prefer not to," as Melville's scrivener would say.

Mullen further complicates the question of consumerism and its connection to beauty and femininity by bringing race into the equation as well, for the love object at the center of "Dim Lady" may be an African-American woman, possessing a type of beauty that has, traditionally in the United States, been marginalized and dismissed. (Of course the double-bind here is the valorizing of one type of beauty over another, and yet still finding oneself within the confines of a patriarchal system that often only values women based on their looks; therefore, what we still have are women as objects rather than women as "people," however problematic that term may be as well. But more on this below.) But Mullen's use of popular culture and common consumer products, the use of a pop-art ethos, makes poetry of the most prosaic and conventional stuff, the detritus of contemporary living, and suggests, furthermore, that the division between high and low culture is an arbitrary construct with no objective standards behind it.

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What to make of the historical distance that separates Ur-text and "Dim Lady"? Mullen seeks to show that gaps and fissures that exist between ages, to historicize through the themes of the poem, contra Pound's famous dictum that all ages are contemporaneous. For Pound appears to be arguing that the social and historical fields that give rise to aesthetics are flat, equal throughout time, an arena where one age's standards could simply be traced above another's. But Mullen opposes such an approach, and in place practices a poetics that constantly questions the politics behind language. In this sense, Mullen's work fits squarely

in the tradition of late twentieth-century American poetry that seeks to problematize and subvert many of the conventions that arose from the advent of the New Criticism. In particular, a poetics as practiced by Mullen seeks to challenge the view held by the New Critics that championed a literature that erased the political realities that reify the supposedly objective standards behind canonicity, a practice of politics that has often excluded women of color such as Mullen. Mullen attempts her subversion of such an approach through a kind of transcultural translation, whereby an aesthetic work is "translated," for lack of a better term, into the idiom of a specific time and place, what the poet herself has described as composing through "a splicing together of different lexicons." While this is clearly not what Walter Benjamin had in mind when he spoke of translation's ability to estrange our everyday language in "The Task of the Translator" it could be productive to consider the ways in which Mullen "translates" different forms, idioms, and vernaculars in her exploration of American culture and identity. A collection like *Sleeping with the Dictionary*, for example, vacillates between a vertiginous array of dialects, languages, slangs, idioms and aesthetic practices. A single poem, to give but one example, can contain an Oulipian structure—a nod to a (French in origin) avant-garde tradition—use a non-English language—such as Spanish—and traffic in elements of African-American vernacular. The juxtapositions are telling. I would like to further suggest that this notion of the transcultural does not simply imply the shift between one cultural or historical period to another, but rather something far more complicated. In the context of Mullen's poetry, this transcultural shift also represents the use of an object—such as "Sonnet 130"—in a manner in which it was not initially meant to be used; a chiasmatic move by which the original can only be viewed after the fact of the new arrival. But Mullen is also constructing a literary space by turning the structure of oppression into structures of imaginative release and productivity, a negotiation that is has been important for many African-American artists.

Transculturation, therefore, creates new aesthetics through a dialectical exchange between "original" and "copy," calling into question almost all the ideas we normally associate with art and imaginative capabilities. Perry Meisel has written, "The African-American reversal of the Romantic paradigm makes clear what is at work within the Romantic paradigm all along: the undoing of its own presumptions to truth, the denaturing of all assumption, a reminder for all presumably natural communities to be cautious about how easy it is to seek in nature a cause and justification for anything" (10). In a similar way, Mullen's denaturalizing of ideological vernaculars—what bodies are beautiful, what art is of value, the separation between high and low—allows for a means by which to critique those assumptions we hold closest to us, but never actively challenge.

This shift allows Mullen to deconstruct the values we place on language, and highlights the very fact, therefore, that language is a politically and socially charged *thing*, rather than something passive or neutral; but such a position also seeks to value languages and discourses that have been traditionally excluded. Deborah M. Mix writes that Mullen "intervenes not only into a feminist literary tradition but also into an experimentalist tradition that has frequently excluded the voices of women and writers of color, whose work is generally valued more for its experiential dimensions than its experimental ones" (38). Mullen's work, following in line with that of High Modernism, is to bind life together with art, to illustrate that there is no way to extricate the one from the other. The side-by-side existence of a poem such as Mullen's with that of Shakespeare's is meant to cast doubt on the "power" of the original, but is also meant to suggest that our common everyday vernaculars can be just as worthy and valuable as that of Shakespeare's. Today's vernaculars will be tomorrow's classical languages. "Dim Lady" provides us with a means by which to critique assumptions of aesthetic standards that we may hold.

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But back to the ideological assumptions at play. “Dim Lady” can be read as a critique of certain white, patriarchal values. For one, the heteronormative aspects of the Shakespearean sonnet are turned on their heads: what we have here is a poem that, at the very least, suggests that it can be read as a lesbian love-lyric, although we should always be careful in automatically assuming that a poem’s personal pronouns automatically point back to the author of the work. Regardless, the uncertainty of who the poem’s speaker is makes valid such a reading. Finally, Mullen’s description of the love object at the center of the poem suggest a woman who is traditionally not seen as beautiful—the juxtaposition with images such as that of “Marilyn Monroe,” or a “lanky model” or a “platinum movie idol,” suggests a further reversal of many conventional cultural modes and codes. We have a poem that “mortifies ideology, laying it open to critical analysis” (Scully 67).

The Dozens

A linguistic and verbose game of insult hurling, the dozens is a vernacular art form of the highest order. According to Henry Louis Gates, Jr.: "The dozens are an especially compelling subset of Signifyin(g), and its name quite probably derives from an eighteenth-century meaning of the verb dozen, 'to stun, stupefy, daze,' in the black sense, through language" (71). One usually "plays" the dozens, but I would also like to suggest that the dozens also plays us, as any (rhetorical, social) language does. The dozens operates on the articulation and repetition of certain specific figures and tropes[xlix]—almost all centered on the rhetorical move of insulting another's family members, usually one's mother. It is steeped in the vernacular tradition, and it implies, as Wittgenstein knew, that language can be a game (even while maintaining the hidden seriousness of it all). Gates states that the dozens has no better literary representation than that found in Langston Hughes's *Ask Your Mama: 12 Moods for Jazz*, a cross-genre text that seeks to make clear the connections between poetic language, history and music. It is a text that, in part by its use of the dozens, illustrates the importance of vernacular languages within the African-American tradition. According to R. Baxter Miller, "*Ask Your Mama* . . . encapsulates one of the most significantly artistic fusions in African American life. Though the verbal script . . . discloses the voice of the personal narrator who retells history, the musical marginalia (the outer frames) provide the sonorous complement of a communal narrative. Hence, the personal writing on the page speaks to the cultural language literally at its borders and figuratively in its depths. This compulsion to fuse the individual and collective or mythic selves, at once so subjective and objective, is at the root of realism and modernism as well" (4). For Hughes the dozens acts as a verbal means through which African-American history can be examined, considered, written about. It

foregrounds, like any vernacular does, the threads that bind the personal and the collective. Furthermore, the dozens becomes a means by which to critique racist and oppressive ideological structures. It makes clear what anyone should know: that language can be a weapon and that it can empower through critique and attack: "They asked me at Thanksgiving/Did I vote for Nixon?/I said, voted for your Mama" (516). This simple line, while at first seemingly only playful and glib, acts, I would argue, as a Melvillesque "I would prefer not to," an opting out of a political system that simply perpetuates the ideology that supports oppression and racism in an "IBM land" of capitalist concerns, as Hughes puts it, "that pays more attention to Moscow than to Mississippi" (527).

*

Harry G. Lefever has pointed out that the dozens is an arena usually reserved only for men, but also one that enacts a provincial kind of checks and balances, a game that enacts a certain amount of social control, as any language does. But for Hughes, this self-regulating aspect is used as a critique of racist ideologies: "Oppression by any other name is just about the same, casts a long shadow, adds a dash of bitters to each song, makes of almost every answer a question, and of men of every race or religion questioners," or "some persons in high places in Washington consider it subversive for ordinary people to be concerned with problems such as back doors anywhere —even suspecting those citizens of color who legitimately use the ballot in the North to elect representatives to front doors. But in spite of all, some Negroes occasionally do manage—for a moment—to get a brief ride in some-body's American chariot" (528). In other words, "self-regulation" as member of a community, a citizen within a nation. For Hughes, therefore, the vernacular is not only a performance of communal bonds, a consensus, but also a dissensus as Jacques Rancière would have it. A dissensus "is a political process that resists juridical litigation and creates a fissure in the sensible order by confronting the established framework of perception, thought, and action with the

'inadmissible'" (2010, 85). It is this disruption of the sensible that is articulated in a vernacular game like the dozens, a moment where we are left dazed, confounded, confused; a moment when the linguistic game has left us outside the ubiquitous domain of the common, the "sensible order." The dozens, through vulgarity, through insults, turns language into a game, making us aware of its synthetic nature: language, in other words, as *language*. It is these fissures that are most compelling, since they present us with moments of possibility, moments where the connections that bind together the political and the lingustic become apparent. Hughes's moment of Bartleby-like resignation through the dozens creates such fissures.

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Moving on to a contemporary master of the Dozens, Amiri Baraka uses the form as a kind of agitprop, a means through which to shake and jolt his readers out of complacency. In this sense, he uses the verbose nature of the game much like Hughes does. His collection *Who Blew Up America?* contains a number of poems that, to some extent, use the Dozens as a structural motif, the poem "Jungle Jim Flunks His Screen Test" being the most obvious. The poem, meant to be accompanied by Dizzy Gillespie's *Night in Tunisia*, is a vitriolic listing of insults against "James," a figure never identified but who represents, like Moloch did for Ginsberg, the most insidious and corrupt aspects of society. It begins:

James, you shd know
How the world
Makes you ugly. You is, you know, James
Veddy ugly. You-gly, we used to say
Back in the playground, just touching
The surface of the thing,
Not understanding that there's ugly, there's You-gly

Then various deeper degrees. Like
Dirt ugly, sick ugly, devil ugly, death ugly
Right on till you get to the bottom of the beginning
Of some shit too ugly to be dug, by mere you man. (24).

The poem quickly moves on from these somewhat general attacks to castigating particular political and historical figures: "You uglier than Agnew. When you get yr Ph.D. in ugly/You will be Hitler's last meal. You uglier than/Churchill/And Bush, the father, hideous wife" (25). Baraka's work reminds one of political poems going as far back as Dante's *Inferno* or, to give a more recent example, Robert Duncan's "Up-Rising," works that specifically target political figures for indictment and ridicule. The poem's playful—and rather funny— tone belies its serious political nature: it is an indictment against society's avarice—"You ugly because that's how you got rich/But you got more ugly than you got money/With all that money you still ugly" (25)— and its cruelty and racism.

What Baraka illustrates is the double-sided nature of language. On the one hand, language is the tool of the oppressor; but it can also be the tool of the oppressed. That which punishes can also be used to dole out punishment. As Kwame Dawes makes clear in his introduction to the collection, "Jungle Jim" is "a cussing poem about ugliness. It is funny, but only if you are willing to become a part of an attack that might implicate you in something vitriolic." Furthermore, Baraka, much like Mullen in "Dim Lady," is attempting to "foreground the western iconography of positioning Blackness as evil and whiteness as good by reversing it" (xviii-xiv), something that has been inherent in his projects for years. The insults, therefore, in "Jungle Jim" are meant to disturb and provoke since they are not only reversing racist and problematic stereotypes, but also illustrating the ideology that makes such thinking a reality. This is an important point to make since Baraka's attacks on "whites"

and “whiteness” should not be read as attacks against whites *as* whites at they often are; no, what Baraka is attacking is the racist ideology that posits the existence of racial categories in the first place: “Finally I understood that to characterize my ideology as hate whitey is accurate since the only white is system and ideology, that whitey is a class and the devil do what is evil” (2000, xiii). And that is a system that has posited the illusory category of white or whiteness in a hierarchical position of power and dominance.

Experience

As preamble, a few words from Agamben: "The question of experience can be approached nowadays only with an acknowledgement that it is no longer available to us" (2007, 15). The question of experience and lyric poetry's attempt to provide answers to that question, broadly speaking, may be the crisis of the modern lyric itself. Agamben's claim follows, historically and argumentatively, Walter Benjamin's notion that modernity ushered in an age that could be categorized by a "poverty of experience." Benjamin's reading of the beginning of the end of the lyric is famously situated around Baudelaire, a poet Benjamin claims was the last—and first—of his kind: a poet of the modern world who spoke of modernity's inability to represent experience. It would be fruitful to consider some of the practices of the American poets under discussion here[l] as attempting to write against the poverty of modern life and experience and the lyric's ability to represent the world. This, of course, was part of Olson's project as well: to move thinking away from language as discourse, away from pure representation, to return it to the world itself.

But what exactly occurred in the epoch of modernity that made Baudelaire the last lyric poet? And what do we mean by the word "experience"? Benjamin's considerations in terms of the poverty of experience are wide and disparate, and Baudelaire simply functioned as a means through which to examine such an idea. One can briefly consider, to give but one example from Benjamin, his take on the union of art and mechanical reproduction, the notion that we are now living in an age where anything like an original "aura" to an object of art has been lost, a further symptom of the fact that anything like an authentic experience is impossible.[li]

Experience, reductively put, is the symptom of existing in the world, of being tangibly aware of existing as a subject within a never-ending chain of social relations. Poets simply represent these relations through language, the very medium of exchange with the world. Furthermore, the notion of experience operates under a rather important assumption, and one that cannot be overlooked: the assumption that the world can be represented through language, that something can be said of it. I am not suggesting here a mimetic or realist position[lii], nor the idea that the world and the environs that surround us can be "accurately" and "completely" represented through language in a simplistic sense of direct equivalencies; but simply that the poet can speak in a language that reflects the world, even if the reflection is flawed, far from perfect, aware of its cracks and fissures. (True: this definition sounds vague and uncertain; but as both Agamben and Lacoue-Labarthe have stipulated, experience is not something easily spoken of or represented. Agamben on Kant: "the most rigorous formulation of the problem of experience concludes by positing it in terms of the inexperiencible (2007, 36)." Lacoue-Labarthe reminds us of the etymological roots of the term experience, and speaks of it as a "crossing" over, as a moving from one place to another. To speak of experience in absolute terms, therefore, is to not speak of experience.)

Nonetheless, there is in the modern American lyric an ongoing agon with the attempt to reconcile practice with theory, poetry with the everyday tangibility of experience. Drawing inspiration from the theoretical approaches of Krzysztof Ziarek and Phillipe Lacoue-Labarthe, the American poets under examination here are constructing subjects and subjectivities that seek to critique modernity through the category of experience, or the very lack of that term. For Ziarek, aesthetics and poetry in particular become a means by which one can begin to critique modernity and experience. Ziarek reads the avant-garde and poetry "not only as a contestation of the humanistic concept of experience and of its mediating function between body and history, the personal and the cultural, but also as a radical

redefinition of experience in the context of everydayness" (4). It is this everydayness that is felt through language itself, and which cannot be underestimated. This is the very means through which the world is spoken of and represented. Lacoue-Labarthe's etymological reading of experience as a crossing, a move, a transport, and as a contestation of a singular mode of experience itself is essential to my reading. Representation, as we have come to know, is a fraught enterprise, one that should not be taken lightly. (Here I do not seek to collapse the irreducible gap between experience and representation, or to suggest that representation and experience are synonyms. I do not mean to construct a simple binary between the "world-at-large" and the language that comes to represent that world; such a move, I fear, would suggest, in a truly reductive manner, that all could be said of everything, that language is the be-all and end-all of representation, and that the world could, as Mallarmé suggested, simply be put in a book. As Ziarek has also argued, such a reduction could lead to a false "alliance of the lived moment— an isolated instant with no apparent connection to other 'experiences'— with an aesthetic totality conceived as a myth or an archaic plentitude [that] can assume the dangerous form of a totalitarian ideology, whose embodiment Benjamin saw in the practices of fascism. Promising redemption from the fragmenting and destabilizing effects of modern shock experience by taking recourse to a collective, mythical, ''reality,'' fascism proffers in place of historical experience a perverse *Gesamtkunstwerk*, a living artwork of a nation or a state" (43). Such thinking, as exhibited by Mallarmé, reduces experience to nothing more than language itself, and that is not what I, nor the poets I am examining, would suggest. Again, experience cannot, I would argue, be fully represented and spoken of.

The idea that connections exist between representation and political valence is not a new one: representation—and, by extension, language— is never devoid of politics. However, this connection has only recently been actively considered and been a subject of

criticism when it comes to the lyric form. In the words of Jacques Ranciere: “The question that interests us here is the following: what essential necessity links the modern stance of poetic utterance with that of political subjectivity? Let us start with a simple example, borrowed from the most famous poem in the English language, William Wordsworth's "Daffodils": what does the 'I' that is present in it, the "I" of "I wandered lonely as a cloud," have to do with the history of revolutionary subjectivity, whatever the well-attested versatility of the poet's political opinions and the equally attested political indifference of the daffodils may be?” (2004, 9). The Lyric “I,” in other words, always represents a subject, and every subject, as Judith Butler and Althusser remind us, already exists within an ideological system. There is no lyric “I” that does not already belong to an ideological system of “everyday” living. To be a subject means to answer the call, whether willingly or unwillingly, as a citizen, a gendered being, a classed person, a racialized-being, etc. The call is never answered in one manner, in other words. To exist as a subject means to exist in a multiplicity of ways and manners.

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These questions are particularly compelling within an American context if one considers the decades long strangle-hold that the New Critics and their criticism held over poetry and the academy. These questions, therefore, as Jed Rasula reminds us in his *American Poetry Wax Musuem*, are loaded with implications beyond those of aesthetic judgments; these are questions that when answered have also lead to canon formations, and what is considered valuable for study. To what degree the New Criticism posited a positivist, empirical and scientific study of literature has been up for debate. Critics are divided over the issue. On one side, critics like Jed Rasula, Terry Eagleton, and John Feteke have argued that the New Critics’ form of criticism sought to isolate the text and do away with questions of historical and social context that inform the production of said text. Other critics, such as Mark

Janovich and Gerald Graff, have provided compelling counter arguments to claim that the New Critics have been misrepresented, and that they did not, in fact, read literature in such a manner. Despite such different readings, it is impossible to deny the institutionalization of the New Criticism in the academy following the Second World War, and the hegemonic hold its ideology held over poetry and poetics for decades. Despite what critics such as Janovich and Graff would claim, even if misinterpreted, the New Criticism was primarily used as a tool by which to make objective value claims over what was and was not of value as far as study went, instilling a reactionary culture of values. The New Criticism, therefore, has, rightly or wrongly, been viewed as a school of positivist criticism; it claims to be a scientific approach to reading (this is certainly true of a critic like I. A. Richards, i.e. *Principles of Literary Criticism*.) As such, to repurpose Agamben, the New Criticism expropriated experience from modern American poetry. For Agamben, the rise of positivism and rational thinking lead to a separation of experience and everyday life. The connections between modern American poetry and the New Criticism are eerily similar, in the sense that the rise of a "scientific discipline" does away with the everydayness of experience.

With this notion of experience in mind—of the attempt to reconcile theory and praxis—and with Ranciere's thoughts on Wordsworth never far from mind, I would like to briefly write on Langston Hughes's "Café 3 A.M."[liii] collection *Montage of a Dream Deferred*, here quoted in its entirety:

> Detectives from the vice squad
> with weary sadistic eyes
> spotting fairies.
>
> Degenerates, some folks say.
>
> But God, Nature,

or somebody

made them that way.

Police lady or Lesbian

over there?

Where? (406)

As an example of what a Modernist poem "should" be, this text presents us with a number of familiar traits that are readily prevalent in the tradition: the abrupt, disorienting beginning that does not readily situate us in the scene; a voice—voices?—that are never named nor clearly defined; it is written in free verse; it is written in a vernacular, using austere language that echoes its concerns with the everyday; and there is no resolution to the "action" that unfolds, leaving us with an "open" text. We are left to wonder and consider what the implications of the poem may be, and that is where the most interesting aspect of the poem arise: in the manner in which it retains its dense, lyrical nature, and yet also acts as an insightful and powerful critique of the intersections of language, power and sexuality.

"Café 3 A.M.," I would like to suggest, uses the conventional modes of the Modernist-lyric poem as a means to launch a critique on the poverty of experience found in modernity. The poem retains a remarkable amount of everydayness, for lack of a better word: the cityscape, the police, even the language through which the poem unfolds: all are saturated with an almost mundane, banal, conventional feel. The urban landscape that the poem speaks of is far from alien for modern readers. The poem is a primer in how power informs the rise of subjects, and in particular, the ways in which power shapes sexuality. The poem begins with the very gaze of power, the "eyes" of the state apparatus as symbolized by the police, that cast and shape the subjects they view—in this case, the "fairies" and

"degenerates" that do not conform to the heteronormative standards that the state is meant to maintain and control. The poem takes its most interesting turn in the very last stanza, when the very power that constructs such subjects is turned against itself, reminding us of both Foucault's and Butler's claims that power and its influences are not simply "negative" but can be positively formative and "positive" as well. The "police lady's" identity is a confused and troubling one, since it also carries with it the implication of a certain kind of sexuality; the poem equates power—as symbolized by the police—with masculinity, therefore, any woman in a position of authority may or may not also be "masculine." But the voice never fully locates this slippery figure, ending as it does with "Where?" The police lady—if in fact she is the police—escapes signification, and naming. She is, if only for a moment, beyond interpellation and escapes the call into subjectivization (even if, of course, one is clearly a subject before the call; one is never not a subject, but one can, at times, upset and challenge those moments which constitute and construct us. We are not totally passive, in other words, when it comes to the ways in which the world constructs us. This is, in fact, what the second stanza is about: the how of how we are constructed as subjects in the world: "But God, Nature,/ or somebody/ made them that way").

I bring up the question of subjectivity to argue that there is an explicit binding of experience to the construction of any subject, and that "Café 3 A.M," while arguing for such a connection, also argues for the elusive nature of that very experience which is essential for the construction of such a subject. For Hughes and other poets who write in American vernaculars, there is always the attempt to reconcile the "poverty of experience" with the "wealth"[liv] of living the American experience, even if such a gap can never truly be reconciled.

Flarf

When considering the question of what kind of language belongs under the rubric of an American vernacular the Flarf movement of the past decade is an example that would be near impossible to exclude. If an American Vernacular, to briefly consider it reductively, is a linguistic space where questions of language and politics come together then Flarf is an especially telling example. Defining Flarf is rather difficult. Its origins are complicated: it began as an elaborate joke, an attempt at some kind of belated justice. What is agreed upon is that Flarf was pretty much launched by Gary Sullivan, and under the conditions described below:

> A couple of years ago … on the Women's Poetry list, a number of people began posting in horror at finding their names, with poems they hadn't written, on poetry.com. I remember going to the site and realizing immediately it was one of those "poetry contest" scams. A year or so before that I had spoken on the phone with my grandfather, not many days before he died, and he had told me then how proud he was that he had won some sort of poetry contest, and that he had ordered the book, etc. I had always felt bad about that, and once I was on the poetry.com site, I wrote what I thought would be the most offensive poem I could manage, and submitted it to the "contest." (The Flarf Files Blog)

The “poem” that Sullivan submitted, “Mm-hmm,” is quoted here in its entirety:

> Yeah, mm-hmm, it's true
> big birds make
> big doo! I got fire inside
> my "huppa"-chimp(TM)
> gonna be agreessive, greasy aw yeah god
> wanna DOOT! DOOT!

Pfffffffffffffffffffffffft! hey!
oooh yeah baby gonna shake & bake then take
AWWWWWL your monee, honee (tee hee)
uggah duggah buggah biggah buggah muggah
hey! hey! you stoopid Mick! get
off the paddy field and git
me some chocolate Quik
put a Q-tip in it and stir it up sick
pocka-mocka-chocka-locka-DING DONG
fuck! shit! piss! oh it's so sad that
syndrome what's it called tourette's
make me HAI-EE! shout out loud
Cuz I love thee. Thank you God, for listening! (The Flarf Files Blog)

This quickly led to other poets experimenting in constructing intentionally bad poems through a technique that has come to be known as Google-sculpting, the primary tool for the construction of Flarf poetry. Mike Magee, an early Flarfist, describes the process as follows: "you search Google for 2 disparate terms, like "anarchy + tuna melt" - using only the quotes captured by Google (never the actual websites themselves) you stitch words, phrases, clauses, sentences together to create poems. To me, it's interesting for a number of reasons—its collaborative texture, its anthropological implications (the sampling of an enormous variety of public speech based on a single word or phrase shared in common), its comic (not to say unserious) frame. Gradually people got more ambitious both in their use of the technology (somewhat) and in the poems themselves" (Magee, Flarf Files). Katie Degentesh, not necessarily a Flarfist but a poet who has been influenced by their techniques, used Minnesota's Multiphasic Personality Inventory test and Googled the test's language to construct the poems in her 2007 collection *The Anger Scale*. Through Googling absurd

juxtapositions and using the search results that come up to construct poems, the Flarfists, in many respects, are running with aesthetic trends that have been around at least as early as the Surrealists, and even a tinge of Futurist optimism in the use of technology rears its head in Flarf poetry. It is an Avant Garde poetics even if it uses the most common and easily accessible language around. It is impossible to divorce the use of Google from the construction of Flarf poetics, even though, it should be made clear, different Flarfists use Google by different means.

However, what we also need to consider are the very pertinent and important questions of what it means to use Google to construct poems. Flarf, for better or worse, and despite what many of its detractors say about it, does ask serious and important questions in regards to contemporary language usage. It shares this very important distinction with many of the most important and prominent American poetry movements of the last few decades, the L=A=N=G=U=A=G=E school especially comes to mind, since, to some degree, Flarf is also interrogating the question of what language usage means today in the era of late capitalism. Flarf has actively sought to engage with questions of a political nature, especially after 9/11. What began as an inside joke, as an attempt at a new form of Dadaist nonsense, quickly evolved into an attempt to critique and subvert the very kind of languages and politics that a search engine such as Google represents, and that have become prevalent in post-9/11 America. As the Flarfists have noted, if the discourse in American politics had continued its downward spiral towards mendacity and stupidity, a poetry that reflects such an unfortunate turn needs to represent such discourse accurately and truthfully. Flarf, in other words, has become, according to its practitioners, an ironic weapon in an age where irony was supposedly dead. Magee again: “The state has always attempted to co-opt the language of dissent and so de-fang it, and the democratic-capitalist state (yes, I know) does it better than any other because it can couch the very act of co-optation as either "dialogue" or as the

marketing of a revolutionary new product (cool). Or, worst of all, can simply adopt the symbols of dissent and none of its politics: hence Nixon's flashing of the 'peace' sign. Peace or victory? No matter, the collapse is/was precisely the point" (Flarf Files Blog). And it is this collapse, this blurring the lines between what can be politically progressive and what is conservatively stultifying that Flarf tries to make apparent. It is yet another disjunctive poetics.

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Consider the following poem by Drew Gardner, "Chicks Dig War," from his collection *Petroleum Hat*:

> Story time: Trojan Oil War (part 2)
> The Trojan War, chicks dig it
> and such hits as "Chicks Dig War,"
> "Wizards Have landed on my Face,"
> "God Made Girls Who Like War,"
> and "Colin Powell's the Lay of the Land." (20)

The poem goes on to make explicit the connections between violent, war-mongering masculinity and feminitity: "Phallocentric chicks:/they dig guys with big wars" (20). Considering how heavy handed the irony in the poem is, it is rather surprising that it caused as much of an uproar as it did across a variety of poetry blogs and sites. What Gardner is clearly critiquing, in perhaps too obvious of a manner, is the military industrial complex's appropriation of feminist principles and discourse, a critique of the uneasy marriage between such seemingly incompatible strands of thought. Considering that the Conservative Right in this country has also managed to lay claim to certain aspects of Feminist discourse, it is difficult to see how Gardner's poem could even elicit the controversy it did.

As Magee said above, one of capitalism's greatest strengths lies in its ability to appropriate just about everything, even discourses that are, at least in theory, supposed to be completely incompatible with it. Gardner's poem intentionally traffics in uncomfortable, "un-PC" language in order to expose the limitations of liberal discourse. In fact, this is one of the true merits of Flarf: it makes apparent and clear those illiberal discourses we normally pretend do not exist: racism, misogyny, homophobia, jingoism, etc. It is these discourses that Google makes visible with the dynamics of a simple search. Flarf can be said to be the returned of those repressed languages we long thought dead; it is the open sewer of American language.

*

However, the troubling reliance (and often lack of critical engagement with this very fact) on a corporate entity as large as Google must be examined. As Dan Hoy has argued, such work by the Flarfists misses the point, especially in regards to their appropriation of Google. According to Hoy, the use of Google is not, in fact, an ironic and subversive attack against the status-quo, a complete reversal of hierarchies. As Hoy points out, Google is not as democratizing a tool as many think it to be and is really composed of restrictive and limiting hierarchies:

> The Internet may be rhizomatic — but search engines are not. They're selectively hierarchical. That poets are employing these hierarchies as poetic tools without questioning the implications of doing so (whether in pre- or post-production) exposes a lack of rigor in their process, as well as a tacit disregard for their own cultural complicity as something maybe worth exploring, or at least being aware of. And that many of them go on to talk in venerating tones about search engine collage (often referred to as 'flarf' or 'Google-sculpting') as a catalyst for poetic enlightenment as well as a revolution in poetic technique suggests a quotidian misreading of recent artopoetic history, most prominently embodied in John Cage and the various members of Oulipo. (Jacket Magazine)

Interestingly enough, Hoy also makes the claim that Flarfists have little or no understanding of the avant-garde history they claim to belong to. Whether this is a fair criticism or not is up for debate. But what Hoy does get to, and what does need to be examined, is the question of co-optation that the Flarfists are also aware of, but may not be overtly concerned with. Hoy locates Flarf's attempts at a scathing irony as being the most damning evidence of its ineptness in saying something politically relevant, since irony, far from being a stance that can enact any progressive politics, reflects a malaise that conserves rather than alters. Such a critique brings to mind Jameson's now famous declaration against the political viability of Postmodernist aesthetics.

Again, I'm not so sure that this is a completely fair conclusion. From what Magee and Sullivan have said above, and from what other Flarfists have also argued one can conclude that there is a fair amount of self-criticism within the movement, even if that criticism is one that takes shape in the poetry in regards to the "authenticity" or "value" of the voice being presented.

The Guide (from Cathy Park Hong's *Dance Dance Revolution*)

Cathy Park Hong's Guide from the poet's 2007 collection, *Dance Dance Revolution*, stands at the intersection of an unnerving number of social, historical, linguistic points; Hong's Guide retells her tale of migration and displacement in a radical pidgin, "an amalgam of some three hundred languages and dialects … a rapidly evolving lingua franca. The language, while borrowing the inner structures of English grammar, also borrows from existing and extinct English dialects. [In The Desert], new faces pour in and civilian accents morph so quickly that their accents betray who they talked to that day rather tan their cultural roots. Fluency is also a matter of opinion" (19).[lv] So while Hong's Guide speaks a tongue that uses as its grounding principle—grammar—the English language, a further acknowledgment of English's dominance on the global scale, English's supposed hegemony is undermined by the number of languages that have come to warp and change it, an instance of intense deterritorialization whereby the "original" language is decentered to the point of no longer resembling itself[lvi].

The Guide practices her craft—a Virgil-like figure to the rational minded Historian, the other central protagonist in *Dance Dance Revolution*—in a city called The Desert, a "planned city of renewed wonders, city of state-of-the-art hotels modeled after the world's greatest cities, city whose decree is there is only difference in degree. This city, its name betraying its vibrant reality, is the center of elsewhere but perhaps this is not accurate. As the world shrinks, elsewhere begins to disappear" (20). And as the world shrinks so too do the degrees to which languages differ. (Hong's Desert and its hotels which echo famous cities throughout the world—the Guide has worked in the Paris hotel, the Belgrade Inn and the St.

Petersburg hotel—cuts through the ideological haze that obscures the singular truth of living in today's modern city: that we are not meant to feel at home, at ease, in place; displacement is the way of modern living, and we are simply transients on the way out.

Where the Guide's playful pidgin articulates itself into full-blown politically symbolic act is in her account of her own personal history, a history that is impossible to divorce from that of the Korean peninsula, for Hong's Guide is a dissident and participant in the Kwangju uprising of the 1980. The uprising against the dictatorial coup resulted in a massacre in May of 1980. The Guide narrates her experiences to the Historian[lvii] who is there to record and document the tale, reliving the violence in her own language:

> …ghouls,
> chewas o corpse en gear…. See dis?
> Scar from paratroopa pistol whip
> me 'til I saw mine dead madder wave from putti pink
> skies… (108)

And of the violence of the state against the general population at Kwangju,

> … Centipede o batons irrigated de crowd,
> leaving blood marsh…volt shields pool…mine
> arm flat de floor de feet…tied back wit wire…
> me fes down smelling jellied fuild…Dam bladdabags
> blew …
>
> De blood marsh spread . . . 'tho we faitim
> … de blood marsh spread . . . (109)

What Hong's text narrates with crystal lucidity is the new global age of state oppression and terror, and the implications for people caught beneath the gears of such political machinery. Rather than distance us from such horror, the Guide's language draws us closer and forces us to listen carefully, in ways we would normally not consider, to such a narrative, for this is the subaltern's story, a story that is normally so much background noise for those living in the First World. The intersection that Hong is exploring is one that brings together language and history, the underlying notion at play being that the Guide's English is our English, as her history is our history; a point further brought home by the fact that the dictatorial coup that massacred the citizens of Kwangju in 1980 was U.S. supported. This manifests itself metaphorically in the text through the figure of the Historian, a woman practicing a "rational," "positivist" Western-centric discipline, and all in standard English to further suggest where the differences between the two women really lie. In fact, we are never sure where the Guide ends and the Historian begins. The Historian says,

> I've had difficulty deciding whether to transcribe her words exactly as said or to translate it to a more "standard" English. I decided on a compromise—preserving her diction in certain sections while translating her words to a proper English when I felt clarification was needed. I must also admit that some of her stories may be inexact due to technical glitches. During one unfortunate day, I left my cassette tapes out in my patio during a rainstorm. It has not caused irreparable damage but the static has obscured parts of the recording so there may be some lapses in her testimonials. I have marked such lapses with ellipses. (20)

Hong further cements the relationship between the two protagonists through a plot twist of sorts: the Historian's father and the Guide were lovers. The Historian's "objective" project of recording and documenting this story is troubled by the "subjective" and personal dynamics of the project.

There is no local history that does not contain traces of the global; there is no local language that does not contain traces of global languages as well. We are no longer subjects

of easily situated contexts and spaces, but beings stretched over the vast canvas that is the new global order.

Idiom

My discussion of the idiomatic nature of the American language begins with Stein and ends with Anzaldúa. Stein, a writer geographically removed for most of her life from English and yet always engaged with the question of American identity, provides the theoretical[lviii] lens from which to begin. Consider, for example, that Stein's magnum opus, *The Making of Americans*, a "history" or social tableau of American life and citizenry, was primarily written after Stein moved to Paris in 1903, almost as if the distance of Europe was what she needed to approach the subject.

Much later in her life, Stein wrote an incredible essay titled "What is English Literature" as part of her Lectures in America series. The essay discusses the historical and social forces that have shaped the English language and, most importantly, the differences between English and American literature. The essay, tellingly enough, begins with the following: "One cannot come back too often to the question what is knowledge and to the answer knowledge is what one knows" (195), an articulation of Stein's attempt to bind knowledge and language together.[lix] But more so than that, Stein's text is an attempt to come to terms with how "we are still under . . . the shadow" of English literature. Fredric Jameson in an essay titled "Modernism and Imperialism" does not dwell on Stein's essay for long, but does draw on it in order to illustrate the ways in which Stein was interested in "the representation of inner or metropolitan space itself, for the national daily life which must remain its primary raw material" (58). The relevant passage in "What is English Literature" for Jameson is the following one:

> If you live a daily life and it is all yours, and you come to own everything outside your daily life besides and it is all yours, you naturally begin to explain. You naturally continue describing your daily life which is all yours, and you naturally begin to

> explain how you own everything besides. You naturally begin to explain that to yourself and you naturally begin to explain it to those living your daily life who own it with you, everything outside, and you naturally explain it in a kind of way to some of those whom you own. (214)

He goes on to write "The traces of imperialism can therefore be detected in Western modernism, and are indeed constitutive of it; but we must not look for them in the obvious places, in content or in representation … they will be detected spatially, as formal symptoms, within the structure of First World modernist texts themselves (64). This small detour through Jameson is important, if only because I share with him, and Stein, an interest in locating the social and political symptoms that manifest aesthetics, but which cannot be found within "content" or "representation." Stein is a perfect theorist of such a social poetics, because so much of her work is grounded in the relationship between space and language. *Tender Buttons*, for example, famously has a section titled "Rooms; her play, *The Geographical History of America* is subtitled *The Relation of Human Nature to The Human Mind*; her essay of 1924 titled "The Difference Between the Inhabitants of France and the Inhabitants of the United States of America" is just that: "five examples" used to illustrate national difference; an essay written the previous year, simply titled "Geography," has Stein writing that "Geography includes inhabitants and vessels," suggesting, again, that there is no geography, no recognition of spatial reality without the inhabitants that make of it what they will. Geography can be understood as Stein's generic catchall for national space, or a space that is constructed through a politically and socially charged dialectical between language and space. However, as I have argued throughout, there can be no language, and no national language, without the specter of non-belonging, without the possibility of the uncanny, *Das Unheimliche*, belonging only to the degree to which we do not belong. In the words of Derrida:

> one never inhabits what one is in the habit of calling inhabiting. There is no possible habitat without the difference of this exile and this nostalgia . . . For there is a twist to this truth. This a prior universal truth of an essential alienation in language—which is always the other—and, by the same token, in all culture. This necessity is here re-marked, therefore marked, and revealed one more time, still one more first time, in an incomparable setting. A setting called historical and singular, one which appears idiomatic … (58)

One of the goals of "What is English Literature" is to explain how the American mind is still colonized by English literature, culture and language. Stein, rather than attempting a simplistic reconciliation between the two languages, seeks to retain the historical and social differences that exist between the two Englishes. There is, in other words, an idiomatic nature to American English, as there is to any vernacular discourse. Let me briefly define what I mean by idiom and how it relates to my conception of American English. The Oxford English Dictionary defines the term as "The specific character or individuality of a language; the manner of expression considered natural to or distinctive of a language; a language's distinctive phraseology." To suggest that American English is an idiomatic form of English is an attempt to retain its historical and social uniqueness, and to declare its radical difference from other forms of the language. (The same, of course, can be said of vernaculars or dialects, but within the contours of specific arguments or contexts, as I have illustrated in other sections of this dissertation. What is of further value to me in the definition of the idiom is the creative dimension often associated with the term: the notion that an idiomatic expression, for example, is an inventive turn of phrase that acts almost like a metaphor would. Idioms are inherently creative.) While all Englishes are similar, they cannot be said to be the same. There always remains, as Derrida would have it, a monolingual aspect to any language, even those that are closest to us. This holds especially true for idiomatic expressions. As Derrida puts it, there is a "poetic economy of the idiom," an "'untranslatable'" (57) core to each and every language.

The existence of an idiom makes the particular not simply distinct or unique, but also calls attention to the fact that it exists in relation to a much larger language.

Writing decades after Stein, Gloria Anzaldúa comes to similar conclusions, if not by similar routes. This is something that Anzaldúa also locates within her own usage of both Spanish and English, developing a sensitivity to the number of different languages she traffics in within any given moment:

> Chicano Spanish sprang out of the Chicanos' need to identify ourselves as a distinct people. We needed a language with which we could communicate with ourselves, a secret language. For some of us, language is a homeland closer than the Southwest—for many Chicanos today live in the Midwest and the East. And because we are a complex, heterogeneous people, we speak many languages. Some of the languages we speak are:
>
> 1. Standard English
> 2. Working class and slang English
> 3. Standard Spanish
> 4. Standard Mexican Spanish
> 5. North Mexican Spanish
> 6. Chicano Spanish (Texas, New Mexico, Arizona and California have regional variations)
> 7. Tex-Mex
> 8. Pachuco (called calo)
>
> My "home" tongues are the languages I speak with my sister and brothers, with my friends. They are the last five listed, with 6 and 7 being closest to my heart. (77-78)

What Anzaldúa is articulating here, as I also argued with her use of the term Nosotras, is the way in which languages shape not only personal identities but also national ones as well. While Stein's essay raises the question of national language and identity, it is in Anzaldúa that one finds, in a sense, the fulfillment of Stein's earlier claims. By placing these two

seemingly very different authors side-by-side, I hope to highlight not only their differences but also their affinities, especially in relation to how they both approached the vexed question of what an idiomatic language is.

Following the arguments made above, Anzaldúa posits that there is no single American identity and no single American language; the ideological "wholeness" or "purity" behind any national language is brought under critique, what Derrida says is the "calling into question the motif of 'purity' in all its forms" (46). Here we find Anzaldúa very much in line with Stein. What radically differentiates the two, however, is in how stratified Anzaldúa's national landscape is, how riven her "English" is. We have, thus, not a simple binary as Stein posited it, but rather a multiplicity of national identities, each one defined by its own language. But most importantly, Anzaldúa's project is a political one; it seeks to make visible and provide voice to a Mexican and Mexican American population that has long existed on the margins. There is a politics of resistance here and one that posits language as a means for enacting that resistance.

What Anzaldúa is resisting is the war against her own idioms, against her languages and the identities that she recognizes within her community. As Derrida reminds us "Today, on this earth of humans, certain people must yield to the homo-hegemony of dominant languages. They must learn the language of the masters, of capital and machines; they must lose their idiom in order to survive or live better. A tragic economy, an impossible counsel" (30). Anzaldúa, and other poets and writers, resist by writing in those languages that are normally excluded—and rather violently, at times—in the nation. Such writers, it needs to be noted, also counter the current hegemonic notions in regards to language being beyond the scope of human agency. Anzaldúa, much like Olson, sees language as a tool, as something that need not control us but which we can bend to our own wills. Language need not be the

locus of failure, of the impossibility of communication, for example, but the site of belief and hope.

Imagination (from William Carlos Williams *Spring and All*)

When writing of the imagination I trace the idea only as far back as the Romantics. One can write an entire treatise on the political, ideological, social and historical sediment beneath the word. What I will attempt here, for better or worse, is not a full archeological process, an impossible tangent considering the limits of time and space, but only a scratching of the surface. In particular, I will be focusing on the use of the term in *Spring and All*, a singular poem that I consider fundamental for understanding Williams's relation to American and European literature and culture, let alone his relationship to Modernism in general.

*

For William Wordsworth, writing in the "Preface" to his *Lyrical Ballads* (1800), the imagination is that which allows "ordinary things" to be "presented to the mind in an unusual aspect; and, further, and above all, to make these incidents and situations interesting by tracing in them, truly though not ostentatiously, the primary laws of our nature: chiefly, as far as regards the manner in which we associate ideas in a state of excitement" (2007, 307). Wordsworth's conception of the imagination is of the utmost importance for our discussion, because it also speaks directly to his theory of poetry. For Wordsworth, as for the American Romantics and Modernists who follow in his lead like Whitman and Williams, the imagination is a force, an actual presence, a real and felt link between reality and poetry. Emerson, following in the steps of Wordsworth, also wrote of the connection between poetry and the imagination in his 1772 essay, "Poetry and the Imagination": "Whilst common sense looks at things or visible Nature as real and final facts, poetry, or the imagination which dictates it, is a second sight, looking through these, and using them as types or words for thoughts which they signify." The word "dictates" is of the greatest importance here, as it implies that, for Emerson and the Romanticist ethos, the imagination comes prior to poetry

itself, it is what propels poetry forward, what brings it into existence. There is a degree of causality and agency at play here. The imagination speaks poetry, bringing to mind a logocentric practice as critiqued by Derrida in his *Of Grammatology*, whereby the supposed presence and tangibility of a spoken language—the dictation of the imagination—is privileged over the absence of the written word. Therefore, poetry becomes an art that is one step removed from the "truth" of the imagination's voice. Poetry, like any aesthetic, is simply a vessel, a vehicle for the imagination. Taking a historical step back, Coleridge's notion of the secondary imagination echoes Emerson's. From chapter 13 of the *Biographia Literaria*:

> The Imagination then, I consider either as primary, or secondary. The primary Imagination I hold to be the living power and prime agent of all human perception, and as a repetition in the finite mind of the eternal act of creation in the infinite I AM. The secondary Imagination I consider as an echo of the former, co-existing with the conscious will, yet still as identical with the primary in the kind of its agency, and differing only in degree, and in the mode of its operation. It dissolves, diffuses, dissipates, in order to recreate: or where this process is rendered impossible, yet still at all events it struggles to idealize and to unify. It is essentially vital, even as all objects (as objects) are essentially fixed and dead. (325)

The phenomenal world, to use Kantian language, is a product of the imagination in the same way that art is. But for Coleridge, it is this secondary imagination, an echo of the first, from which art springs. The nearly Platonic echoes here are important, and worth some consideration. The secondary imagination, that which gives life to art, is also that which stands as removed from the primary imagination. It is, again, an echo, a mere semblance of the original, clearly lacking despite its vitality. The degree of agency that Coleridge imparts—or refuses to impart—to the imagination is a knotty problem. To what degree do we have "actual" control over the imagination, or is it something transcendent, a human practice but one beyond human control?

This all-too brief, and admittedly reductive, view of the imagination and its connection to poetry leads us to William Carlos Williams' use of the term. One finds in *Spring and All* a use of the term "imagination" that is radically different from that supplied to us by Wordsworth, Coleridge and Emerson, but still also very much sprung from a Romantic idealism of the highest order. I find Williams' use of the term fascinating for the very reason that it further complicates the notion of poetic agency, questioning the notion of causality in poetic composition. If there is one other poet who, in this study, proposes as complex and problematic vision of poetic creativity it is Jack Spicer, whom I will return to, if only briefly, later. But I mention Spicer here because he too was intensely committed to developing a poetic theory of composition that would both challenge and retain a semblance of creative agency for both poet and poem. For Williams, there may be no single word of more importance in 1923's *Spring and All* than "imagination." Williams's poetry practices no distance between the imagination and reality, for the former does not lead to the latter, as it would for Emerson, but they are intimately connected to begin with. They are, therefore, one and the same, opposite sides of the same coin:

> It is the imagination on which reality rides—It is the imagination—It is a cleavage through everything by a force that does not exist in mass and therefore can never be discovered by its anatomization (225)

The imagination is everywhere, and refuses "anatomization." It cannot be diluted or done away with, for it leads to truth, the exposing of the object as it is. It is that which radically coheres everything. What is interesting in the quote above is how quickly Williams clarifies his first statement—"It is the imagination on which reality rides." The implication being that first comes the imagination and then follows reality, very much in line with Coleridge. However, things are further complicated by a certain vague turn that seems to move us away from any definition. Here Williams is at his most Romantic, speaking of those

fictions and imaginations that most concretely construct our reality. But regardless of such a move, there is still a certain amount of inescapable vagueness to the proceedings because of the very fact that the imagination, however defined, can never be located. It refuses "anatomization." Williams, therefore, must make tangible how the imagination operates even if he, at the same time, wishes to refuse such a move. How does he go about doing this? He turns to language itself, and the notion of an American language, to make visible the ideology he both wishes to withhold and display.

*

The imagination in *Spring and All* is a power that can make its presence felt in the world at large:

> That is, the imagination if an actual force comparable to electricity or steam, it is not a plaything but a power that has been used from the first to raise the understanding of— (207)

But we need to further contextualize and historicize Williams's use of the term. It is impossible to separate Williams's "imagination" from the Modernist ethos that underlines it, an ethos that can best be described by Pound's most famous dictum of "make it new." There is, therefore, in Williams's unbridled passion in regards to the creative faculties the belief that literary and artistic creation can truly speak of a new experience, that we too, as Emerson would have it, can develop a unique relationship to the universe. And here we have a fundamental connection between the Romantics and the Modernists: the belief in art's transformative powers. There is in *Spring and All* an amazing sense of optimism that can be understood as high modernism's general optimism in regards to art's revolutionary capabilities.

*

As Emerson intimated, the imagination is diametrically opposed to the rational. In the same manner that surrealism posited the unconsciousness as the means to liberate the Western world from the clutches of its own rationalism, so too does Williams seek to liberate us through the imagination. But this liberation is a national liberation, away from the dependency of European traditions and manners. There are moments in *Spring and All* that read like a surrealist manifesto, an attempt to undue the rational fetters that limit the mind and keep us enslaved to traditional ideas of history and tradition. Consider the following: "There is a constant barrier between the reader and his consciousness of immediate contact with the world. If there is an ocean it is here" (177). What needs to be done away with are the barriers that prevent us from experiencing the world as it is, in its entirety and in its naked (another favorite Williams word; see my entry on it) reality; but to get there, we must be guided by the generative power of the imagination, and to a new beginning. *Spring and All*, therefore, begins with a whimsical orgy of destruction:

> Tomorrow we the people of the United States are going to Europe armed to kill every man, woman and child in the area west of the Carpathian Mountains (also east) sparing none. Imagine the sensation it will cause.
>
> The imagination, intoxicated by prohibitions, rises to drunken heights to destroy the world. Let it rage, let it kill. The imagination is supreme. To it all our works forever, from the remotest past to the farthest future, have been, are and will be dedicated. To it alone we show our wit by having raised in its honor as monument not the least pebble. To it now we come to dedicate our secret project: the annihilation of every human creature on the face of the earth. (179)

This is the logical end result of Pound's "make it new" aphorism: only with the end of civilization, with a return to the beginning, can we truly bring forth something different, something new, a spring for our time: "It is spring. That is to say, it is approaching THE BEGINNING."

We should also keep in mind that in 1923, only five years after the end of the first World War, this vision that Williams brings forth is steeped in what must have felt like a tangible historical possibility; the actual death of Europe was not a far-fetched claim. (In his 1941 essay, "Midas: A Proposal for a Magazine," while considering another World War, Williams argues that with all the death and destruction unfolding in Europe, new literature, more literature, is needed to counteract the horrors of warfare, further proof of the sincere connection Williams sought between art and life (1954, 241-249.) Within the American context, therefore, the cry of "make it new" it not simply a reference to the possibilities offered by a Modernist aesthetic, but a call to arms for writers and artists to establish an American tradition all its own, wholly distinct from a decadent, decaying and dying European sensibility, a continuation of the program started by Whitman and Emerson. It is of great importance to consider this antagonistic relationship between Europe and America in the poetry of Williams and Pound as an essential aspect of American modernism. That is, that one essential component of Modernism is the rise of a new kind of global subjectivity that could no longer consider itself as being singularly situated in any one part of the world. While also true, to an extent, of the social and political context that gave rise to Romanticism, Modernism went hand in hand with the emergence of a new global outlook, one held together by the logic of late capital.

*

Imagination and art are not separate from nature but are it. There is no distance between the terms nature, art, reality, imagination for Williams. They exist in a complicated knot that can never be undone. What they do imply is familiarity, proximity and urgency:

> Nature is the hint to composition not because it is familiar to us and therefore the terms we apply to it have a least common denominator quality which gives them currency—but because it possesses the quality of independent existence, of reality which we feel in ourselves. It is not opposed to art but apposed to it. (208)

There is no nature devoid from us naming it as such. To use language, Williams is implying, is to be steeped in the very creation of nature itself, for what is language but an extension of the natural? This does not imply that nature exists outside of language, but that language is simply an extension of it.

But where Williams runs into trouble, I feel, is in his belief that things can be seen as they are, and not as how we perceive them, as things divorced from the faults of human perception. Paradoxically, Williams believes in the power of the imagination to lead us to new art and, therefore, to new truths, but fails to consider how the imagination itself is a "fallen" and "flawed" human category itself. The imagination, in other words, is never locatable outside of human perception or experience: it is a part of human perception and experience, and, therefore, any truth claims made in the imagination's name must also be viewed in such a way: as subjective projections of the human mind. In a similar manner, Williams sought to deconstruct the authority of the European tradition in the United States, but did so with the use of an experimental modernism that owed much to this very same European tradition.

Imagism

What is imagism? AWestern aesthetic in non-Western garb. That is what imagism wishes to be, and not what it truly is, for an aesthetic can never escape its place in history. It was in the summer of 1912 that Pound, H.D. and Richard Aldington agreed upon the three tenets that would be ground the movement: "1. Direct treatment of the 'thing' whether subjective or objective. 2. To use absolutely no word that does not contribute to the presentation. 3. As regarding rhythm: to compose in the sequence of the musical phrase, not in the sequence of the metronome" (Kenner 1971, 178). Imagism, for its very brief moment in history, left a rather lasting impact; consider, for example, its influence on the Objectivists or Concrete poets. One can even feel, in the Language school a vestige of Imagism's concerns with the direct treatment of the thing and the material possibilities of poetry. Appropriately enough, most of its practitioners were American ex-pats. In terms of a being an American vernacular, Imagism encapsulates many of the cosmopolitan dynamics at play within much American poetry. Its aesthetic seeds can be found in Japanese haiku, or, even more so, in Tanka or Waka, poems of even more compression and economy than that of haiku. And beyond the Japanese influence, there is also the Chinese ideogram, or Pound's somewhat abstract notion of how an ideogram operates. As David Hinton states in the introduction to his anthology of classical Chinese poetry "at the beginning of the Modernist revolution, classical Chinese poetry made a surprising appearance in translation far from home when Ezra Pound saw in its concrete language and imagistic clarity a way to clear away the formalistic rhetoric and abstraction that dominated English poetry at the time. And its contemporary voice and sage insight have made it an influential strain of American poetry ever since" (xix).

The story of Pound's "A Station of the Metro," one of the very "first" imagist poem, is now well known, and not worth restating here in detail. What is important to that story was Pound's search for clarity, lucidity, the single image that would grasp in its simplistic entirety the confounding complexity of an experience: the beauty of a woman's face. Of course what is truly ironic is that while searching for a form to represent clarity a poem of the most abstract quality appeared. But this is what I wrote about in my introduction as the need for an abstract element to all poetry that allows a space for thinking to arise in. There is a real and concrete kernel to be found in a poem as abstract as "In the Station of a Metro," even if the thing itself does not seem to speak of such. That thing is the truth of an experience, a truth that can only be spoken of through the acknowledgment of the details of social reality: the notion of beauty, the locality of the metro, the form of the poem, etc. Imagism's ideals are not too far removed from Romanticism's aesthetic goals of representing nature as it may truly be.

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A poem such as "Metro" is meant to literally leave room for the mind to wander. It is not much of a landscape, but it is one nonetheless. Its bizarre spacing makes this clear, a typographical tic that has been lost over time. As Hugh Kenner points out, Pound's explicit instructions to Harriet Monroe in 1913 asked her to retain a certain degree of space on the page between the observations made in the poem. It was meant to look like this:

> The apparition of these faces in the crowd:
> Petals on a wet, black bough. (197)

Why the spacing? Hinton, again, provides an answer, and suggests what may have been so compelling to Pound about the classical tradition of poetry in China:

> [A] remarkable characteristic of the language is that its grammatical elements are minimal in the extreme, allowing a remarkable openness and ambiguity that leaves a

> great deal unstated: prepositions and conjunctions are rarely used, leaving relationships between lines, phrases, ideas, and images unclear; the distinction between singular and plural is only rarely and indirectly made; there are not verb tenses, so temporal location and sequence are vague; very often the subjects, verbs, and objects of verbal action are absent. In addition, words tend to have a broad range of possible connotation. This openness is dramatically emphasized in the poetic language, which is far more spare even than prose. (xxi)

But as Hinton goes on to further argue, what we may take for ambiguity or looseness of expression, is representative of a concrete reality: "At the level of deep structure, words in the poetic language function in the same way as presence … and the emptiness that surrounds words functions as absence. Hence, the language doesn't simply replicate but actually participates in the deep structure of the cosmos and its dynamic process; it is in fact an organic part of the process" (xxii). While it would not be until a year or two after the founding of Imagism that Pound would read and promote the work of Ernesto Fenollosa, Pound was a Sinophile from as early as 1903 (Qian 2003, 4-6), and would have surely understood something of how the Chinese language operates. Pound saw Imagism as a mimetic art even if it may have taken him far afield from that initial goal, creating, perhaps, yet another "Platonic poetry" that sought to transcend time and place (Nadel 47); an impossible project, to be sure, and one that brings him ideologically and aesthetically in close contact with Williams's strain of lapsed Romanticism.

The spacing that Pound originally urged for Monroe to include in her publishing of the poems suggests the very absence and space that Hinton locates in Chinese poetry. But more so than that, it also suggests a historical and particular marker, a very concrete example of how a poem and writing in general is really a social practice. What I have in mind here is something along the lines of what James Scully would suggest about line breaks, that they have not been "rationalized or bureaucratized," and that this is an example of how poetry is a social practice, one with very specific historical claims: "Line breaks, as poetic practice,

threaten to rupture the ideological prophylaxis imposed on all production or potential production by routine behavior, routine 'perceptions' and routine 'truth.' Such line breaks are not boundaries but areas of engagement, of interaction between work and reader. They further enlist the reader as joint producer of the poem—not only the reader who exists after the fact, the historical reader, but the one inscribed in the text. So the reader is not an object of the text but a subject along with it (a socialized subject, not the liberally mandated 'decentered' subject that has been assumed, bodily, into academic heaven)" (144-145). Of course in subsequent and anthologized versions the original space between the words "petals" and "on" has vanished, leaving us with a far more normalized, domesticated poem, one lacking, typographically speaking, the space in which to move through and around the poem. But I stress the importance of this missing space, this present absence, because as Scully implies, it speaks volumes in regards to the poem's historical specificity: this is not a poem that can transcend time and place; its punctuation calls to mind Modernist free verse, but also attempts to "read" as a classical, Chinese poem would. But we can never read it as such, only as a poem that is situated within a very specific historical moment. The spacing, therefore, is a signature of sorts, one that references the poem's particularity, but also the poet as well. This is a Modernist poem that strives to be understood as an homage, a calling forth, of principles that have long existed in other times and places. It is an example of how an American vernacular operates: as social practice, and as a language of cross-culturality.

Martians

Jack Spicer's poetic vistas are littered with the detritus of American culture, fragments used to shore against his own ruin. Spicer's voice is not only idiosyncratically his own, but it is also a distinctly American one. My reading of Spicer's work seeks to place him squarely within the national context from which he arose, and to suggest that no full reading of his work can separate him from this context. This is not to suggest, however, that this is the only way to read Spicer, or that I even wish to read him as a 'national poet' in any reductive sense. Rather, I wish to foreground his poetry as being one that speaks in an American tongue, and in a manner that is strictly vernacular, and to also suggest that this is a reading that not many others have sought to conduct. For example, in an essay by Michael Snediker titled "Jack Spicer's Billy the Kid: Beyond the Singular Personal," found in the recently published collection of critical essays, *After Spicer*, the author writes of the serial poem's indebtedness to "the Western genre it cribs" (185), but does not explore the poem's Americaness. Snediker, rather, focuses on the poem's serial nature, and develops an argument, and a rather persuasive and compelling one, that focuses on its erotics. He does, however, miss a golden opportunity to elucidate the very nature of the Western genre and to illustrate its fundamentally American character; Norman Finkelstein, in the very same collection, in an essay titled "Spicer's Reason to 'Be-/ Leave,'" makes mention of Spicer's theological obsessions—"One would be hard-pressed to find a more God-haunted poet in the second half of the twentieth century than Jack Spicer" (157)—and correctly points out, via Robin Blaser, that Spicer's outlook on the world owes much to his "Puritanism" and "Calvinism" (161), but, again, fails to make much beyond these connections in suggesting that Spicer's voice and poetics are wholly and completely of an American tradition. It is almost as if Spicer is such

an American poet, or so deeply influenced by all things American, that the very fact has become a critical purloined letter of sorts, hidden in such plain sight that is have become conspicuous. But it can also be Spicer's fluency in such a myriad of poetic practices that throws critics off the trail. A Spicer poem can become the staging ground for any number of excursions into a multiplicity of non-poetic discourses, what Peter Gizzi describes as his "primary vocabularies—radio, Martians, and baseball— [that] introduce a multiplicity and an alterity into the traditional concept of poetic voice" (1998, 187). Spicer puts it this way: "Most of my friends like words too well . . . Others pick up words from the street, from their bars, from their offices and display them proudly in their poems as if they were shouting, 'See what I have collected from the American language. Look at my butterflies, my stamps, my old shoes!' What does one do with all this crap? (2008, 123). An honest question: what does one do with all the crap, with all those wasteful remnants of culture that become so much mental furniture? The answer for Spicer is easy: one makes poems out of them; but what is most important are not the words themselves, but the ability to make something real out of it all: "I yell 'Shit' down a cliff at an ocean. Even in my lifetime the immediacy of that word will fade. It will be dead as 'Alas.' But put the real cliff and the real ocean into the poem, the word 'Shit' will ride along with them, travel the time-machine until cliffs and oceans disappear" (122-123). The crap, in other words, is simply crap if it is not of the real, if it is not vested with a certain degree of urgency to transcend the limits of the poem. The poem must simply be made of an "infinitely small vocabulary," with words that "stick to the real" (123). This is what vernaculars do: they speak of the immediacy of the moment, and of experience. They make apparent and clear the essential connections between language and reality. For Spicer, however, poetic language was also a means by which he could explore his alterity, an otherness that invaded the self and gave life to the poem, a "practice of the Outside" to use Robin Blaser's term. Such a poetics necessitated the radical division of poem

from poet, an idea that also echoes with the demands made by Eliot for a poetics of depersonalization. Poetry could be alienating, unforgiving, even if it was a necessary calling. "At his first public lecture in 1949 . . . Spicer (then twenty-four) was one of five poets, including Robert Duncan and William Everson, participating in a symposium . . . When it was his turn to speak, Spicer began by saying, 'I can only ask an embarrassing question—why is nobody here? Who is listening to us?'" (1998, 174). The poet is terribly isolated, almost always alone. As Spicer puts it in his collection of faux translations of *After Lorca*: "loneliness is necessary for pure poetry" (2008, 150). But this is not an emotional loneliness, a crude romantic melancholy, a simple loss. What has been lost cannot truly be named, and most assuredly not reclaimed. Tradition and the ability to represent the real appear to be two of those things that will never be found again. In one of his letters to Lorca, Spicer says of tradition: "The fools that read these letters will think by this we mean what tradition seems to have meant lately—an historical patchwork . . . which is used to cover up the nakedness of the bare word. Tradition means much more than that. It means generations of poets in different countries patiently telling the same story, writing the same poem, gaining and losing something with each transformation—but, of course, never really losing anything." And further down, "Prose invents—poetry discloses" (111). Poetry discloses, but it also makes one aware of heartbreak, distances, loneliness, degradation: "I would like to make poems out of real objects. The lemon to be a lemon the reader could cut or squeeze or taste …" But reality intervenes, and "things decay, reason argues. Real things become garbage" (133). It all escapes our tenous grasp: "Summer is over. Almost every trace of the months that produced these poems has been obliterated. Only explanations are possible, only regrets" (153).

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Spicer's poetry is categorized by radical alterity, a language that constantly eats away at itself, an example of, as Gizzi puts it, a "termite art," a term coined by Manny Farber for an "art that eats its own borders" (2008, xxiii).

I would like to suggest that it is this radical alterity that marks Spicer's poetics as being a fundamentally American one, and how this alterity is marked by tropes, imagery and metaphors that are consistent with a Cold War milieu that is impossible to separate from the work. It is this alterity, these marks of division and rupture, which bring to mind Williams's concerns with the divisions that exist within the American language as well. Spicer, however, seems ambivalent about such gaps, at least when it comes to attempting to construct an "American tradition." Spicer's concerns with language and place are far more local, provincial. This is not to suggest a lacking element in his work, only to make apparent what is already there: for Spicer the local was what mattered the most, whatever form it might take. The figure of the Martian, which Spicer uses often as a possible origin for his messages from the "outside" is a trope worth looking at. As Gizzi himself notes, the idea of using an extraterrestrial figure as muse was far from accidental, or lacking in portent:

> As a gay anarchist poet son of a Wobbly, Spicer was less likely to embrace the popular imagery of his time than to employ it as a kind of armor. He uses vocabulary of Martians hypothetically and duplicitously, pushing it to reveal its own contradictions. In many ways, the notion of Martians dictating poems from the Outside, the sense of a poet as a dead man, and poetry as an (underground) community of the dead are all literalist manifestations of McCarthyism's ultimate paranoid fantasy: its underlying fear that the enemy has already invaded from elsewhere and that innocent-looking American citizens are the unwitting hosts to a parasitical alien culture. Spicer extends and distorts the deep-seated distrust of his time through an elaborate mirroring designed to expose the poem's reader. (191)

Gizzi, however, does not take this argument to its fullest in the sense of what it represents in terms of a social historical critique. Much like Jazz musician Sun-Ra who constructed an extraterresital identity as a means to critique the actual alienation and marginalization that

African Americans were subjected to, so too does Spicer adopt a language that is alien, foreign, duplicitous and tricky in order to suggest that his identity as an open gay man doomed him to the margins of American society.

Naked (from "Danse Russe")

First, we must locate Williams' conception of nudity and the naked body within its specific historical context. "Danse Russe" was written in 1916, around the same time that Diaghilev's and Nijinsky's Ballet Russe was touring the United States. That Williams's muse was the ballet company is without question: the title of the poem makes that clear enough. I would like to suggest, however, another aesthetic parallel to this poem, and one that has seemingly been ignored: the Armory show of 1913, and the Duchamp painting that shocked the American art world at the time, "Nude Descending a Staircase No. 2." And although there is some controversy over whether or not Williams actually attended the show, his biographer, Paul Mariani, reminds us the exhibition was an omnipresent topic of discussion in a variety of cultural outlets (106) and Williams was an admirer of Duchamp's work (125-126). So even if Williams did not attend the show, its works and art would have still held a tangible presence in the poet's life. In both aesthetic forms—the radical deconstructions of the dancing body by Nijinsky and the transgressive and the faux-Futurist force of Duchamp's painting—we can see a Modernist approach in regards to conceptualizations of the human form and its corporeality.[lx] For Modernists such as Nijinsky, Duchamp and Williams, the body's very materiality and essence is called into question through a radical departure from notions of mimetic representation. The body, like any other medium, these Modernists are suggesting, should be prone to the same "abstract" and "impressionistic" approaches as any other object of aesthetic inquiry. The body becomes yet another object to be represented as a representation.[lxi]

I stress such aesthetic points of intersection in order to illustrate that Williams' representations of nudity and the naked form are grounded as historically specific terms, and

can be understood as metaphors for certain Modernist trends in aesthetics. (The revelation of the naked form, for example, can be seen as a corollary of Pound's "Make it New." Both are steeped in the language of the revelatory and imply ideological, philosophical and aesthetic parallels to Romanticist thought. Romanticism is the specter that haunts almost all of modernism, and this is especially true of the works of Williams and Pound.[lxii] Williams explores the idea of nudity in *Spring and All* as well.) For Williams, much like Agamben (2010, 55-90), nudity is not simply the literal and corporeal reality of an exposed body, but carries with it a certain degree of metaphysical weight. Unlike Agamben, Williams' notion of nudity and the naked is not tinged by any theological notions, but is more of a sublime transport through aesthetics.[lxiii] It is the stark reality of a mind coming into contact with the sublime possibilities of art, and of art's ability to suggest a radically different world. In a poem like "Danse Russe," quoted in full below, this leads to a transformative confrontation with the self in a mirror through the "grotesque" dance of revelation:

If when my wife is sleeping
and the baby and Kathleen
are sleeping
and the sun is a flame-white disc
in silken mists
above shining trees,—
if I in my north room
dance naked, grotesquely
before my mirror
waving my shirt round my head
and singing softly to myself:
"I am lonely, lonely.
I was born to be lonely,
I am best so!"
If I admire my arms, my face,
my shoulders, flanks, buttocks
against the yellow drawn shades,—

> Who shall say I am not
> the happy genius of my household? (1986, 86)

While some critics have focused on the implications of the term "genius,"[lxiv] I consider the nude dance that leads to the poem's solipsistic conclusion as the work's most compelling moment, a moment on which the entire poem truly turns. There are a variety of ways to approach such a turn, one of which, as I suggested above, is as broader metaphor for Williams' aesthetic stance; but I would also like to politicize this work, and to, therefore, consider it as a critique of conventional standards of everyday living, despite its apparent reification of masculinist categories. For example, the rejection of the household and of the family unit is telling, as is the retreat towards a self that attempts to transcend such bonds: "'I am lonely, lonely./ I was born to be lonely,/I am best so!'" The implication being, of course, that one cannot be an artist (if even an absurd and grotesque dancer) if inhibited and restrained by the demands of the family. One can only be a genius[lxv] if one does away with such shackles. (Of course the retreat to the traditional, romantic notion of the isolated artistic genius should also be open to critique, since it too is as an extension of very problematic ideological positions.) Further, the subject in the poem, who shares many biographical affinities with Williams, establishes his genius through the naked appraisal of the self in the mirror, a moment in which the poet recognizes not a blank tabula rasa, but rather the ideological reality of a gendered genius. The dance provides Williams with an answer to one of his most pressing questions, as articulated in his poem "The Wanderer": "How shall I be a mirror to this modernity?" Williams' dancer engages in a solipsistic and masturbatory act of self-recognition, one that, appropriately enough, could be said to mirror Nijinsky's faun dance. This nude dance, like any striptease as Baudrillard would argue (107-110), is, ironically, more a dressing up than a dressing down, as it leaves much shrouded in mystery

and actually reveals little. The poem's paradoxes are many: for one, it perpetuates the idea that genius is a strictly masculinist realm of mastery and control, while also implying that the ideological positions that make one a man (the titles of husband, employer and father) must also be shed as so many clothes to reveal the "naked" subject and artist who is divorced form such reductive positions. The poem is asking,Where and how does a man stand (as a "man") in relation to his art and his family if he is not a man in the traditional sense? Masculinity as a position of power and privilege within the family dynamic, but not indicative of anything essential.

Williams is articulating what Eric Haralson has called a "queer modernity," a subject that stands outside of conventional masculine notions of affiliation and belonging as a "disaffiliated aesthete." But as Haralson further posits, this does not necessarily suggest a concrete connection to the historical and "emergent sense of 'homosexuality'" but, rather, a reconfiguration of what "manhood" is or could be (3). As has always been the case, by the time terms such as "heterosexual" or "homosexual" attain a certain degree of ideological currency, static perceptions set in that freeze any possible further conceptualizations of sexuality. The works of Modernist artists such as Williams, Duchamp and Nijinsky are attempting to critique such static notions, and to illustrate the limits, and future possibilities, of categories as ubiquitous as genius, artist, man/woman.

***Nosotras** (from Borderlands)*[lxvi]

The first time I heard two women, a Puerto Rican and a Cuban, say the word "nosotras," I was shocked. I had not known the word existed. Chicanas use nosotros whether we're male or female. We are robbed of our female being by the masculine plural. Language is a male discourse. (76)

What are personal pronouns if not the repositories of being, the living strata of social experience(s)? The personal pronoun "nosotras"—the feminine version of the phallocentric "nosotros," the generally accepted we pronoun in Spanish— announces for Gloria Anzaldúa a new state of being, a mode of existence that was previously tucked away and hidden in the realm of masculine discourse. We often do not consider the lacunae that linguistic terms conceal, ignoring the shadowy negatives that arise from "positive" words. (And this, of course, is the power of any lacuna: it is never obviously there, never an obvious component of the ideological system at work).

The terms nosotras functions, to appropriate a term from Tani E. Barlow, as a historical catachresis: "Conventionally, catachresis refers to a particular misuse of a proper noun, where the term's referent is, theoretically or philosophically speaking, inadequate. A historical catachresis is my way of taking advantage of the ellipsis and making its analytic inadequacy a positive value. When reconsidered as historical catachresis, ubiquitous, descriptive, proper nouns become legible repositories of social experience . . . like Raymond Williams' notion of the key word, historical catachresis stresses the specificity and singularity of people's everyday norms or normalized experience" (1).

Language as the Name of the Father. It ushers us into the social order, and enacts prohibitions and can police us, even without our consent. The prohibition in fostering

different modes of subjectivity is invisibly inscribed in a word like nosotros, a term that is clearly gendered and yet so ubiquitous, an insivible part of everyday experience—within the Spanish language—that some of its implications are ignored; but we are made aware of such power dynamics—and to the ideological lacunae that such words often efface; only when an "oppositional" term is invoked, providing a clinamen, a radical shift or swerve that brings us to a new coordinate, can something new be fostered.

Through a dialectical reversal, we begin with the "negative" value of the term—the simple fact that "nosotras" is a derivation, a "negation" of sorts, from the masculine, acceptable "nosotros": "I had not known the word existed." The shift, as Barlow emphasis, can be a positive one, fostering the acknowledgment of a new sense of self and of being: "We are robbed of our female being by the masculine plural." In Anzaldúa's reappropriation of the term, identity is refashioned as an attack on phallogocentric constructions of subjectivity. Anzaldúa's critique of hegemonic modes of subject construction, however, does not end there, but goes on to include heteronormative constructions of sexuality also:[lxvii] "For the lesbian of color, the ultimate rebellion she can make against her native culture is through her sexual behavior. She goes against two moral prohibitions: sexuality and homosexuality. Being lesbian and raised Catholic, indoctrinated as straight, I made the choice to be queer (for some it is genetically inherent)" (41).

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Rebellion begins in the realm of language. Identity is fashioned and affixed through the use of one word in particular: queer,[lxviii] and of how indoctrination exists in and through the process of language as well. To be queer is a choice, but it is also a term, a label, and one that speaks of a particular identity in relation to certain modes of experience (although Anzaldúa protects herself from certain critiques by also acknowledging that sexuality can also be

biologically determined). To extend Anzaldúa's critique, we can say that in phallocentric language one can also be robbed of one's sexuality as well, since the discourse of such a language would only seek to constitute—and reconstitute—heteronormative practices.

Transliteration

I am a woman committed to
a politics
of transliteration …
—Olga Broumas, "Artemis"

While much has been written about translation and the politics therewith, very little attention has been paid to the political and poetic dimensions of transliteration. This lacunae in critical discussions of poets and writers who transliterate is particularly compelling, if only for the reason that transliteration makes tangible in a way translation does not the source language's absent presence and therefore suggests a much more disconcerting, almost alienating feel, to the language produced. Transliteration, I would like to suggest, makes tangible what Gayatri Spivak has called "the irreducible hybridity of all language" (1999, 165) in a way that translation does not, haunting the target language with the source language from which it traveled. Within the American context such a blind spot in critical readings is particularly frustrating, considering the nation's (suppressed) polyglot history, although some recent critical texts suggest that the veil is being slowly lifted[lxix].

But what are these politics that my title, and Olga Broumas's poem, suggest? How are they felt through the process of transliteration? It would be false to suggest that all transliteration leads to "politics." And, for that matter, what do we mean by politics? Or by transliteration?

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Heeding Broumas's call for a commitment to a new politics/poetics, I would like to consider transliteration within the context of this argument in both a literal and metaphorical sense. On the literal level, transliteration is simply the representation of one language's letters/sounds in another. However, Michael C. Onwuemene, writing of the Anglophone novel in Nigeria, suggests that transliteration can also be "the act of thinking and conceiving in one's first language but expressing the substance thought or conceived in one's second language such that the second-language expressions used contain some salient linguistic and rhetorical implants from the first language. Transliteration in this sense amounts to what is known in modern translation theory as 'semantic' translation in contradistinction to 'communicative' translation. " (1058)[lxx]. Furthermore, Onwuemene never disassociates the concept of "aesthetics"—here the novels he is discussing—from the historical, political and social realities that find African writers attempting to negotiate between writing in indigenous languages and that of their colonial oppressors, primarily English. I stress this connection between the aesthetic and the political because it will also ground my own reading of transliteration within the works of two Greek-American poets. While this "postcolonial" context is not directly applicable to the Greek American one under discussion here, it can, at the very least, be a helpful theoretical foundation to ground this examination.[lxxi] As critics such as Amy Kaplan (2005) and Paul Giles (2002) have illustrated, reading American literature through the lens of postcolonial theory can lead to staggeringly different conceptualization of the field.[lxxii] In following the leads of such scholars, I have attempted to bring in questions of language, translation and nation-hood that are normally only associated in with texts, contexts and theories that are readily established parts of the postcolonial tradition of literary theory.

Going back to Onwuemen's suggestive line of thinking, I will consider how transliteration can lead us locating the rise of different modes of thinking and different subjectivities, even if only considering the subject and subjectivity under the politico-judicial rubric of belonging as a member to a nation state, as this entry will. Transliteration is not simply a multilingual approach to how thought and conceptions of self-hood express themselves, but a means by which the poetic process allows for the construction of a space in which ideas, notions, concepts readily excluded from a particularly national discourse become suddenly available.

Karen Van Dyck has argued a similar point, but with translation as her leading metaphor for such a process. Van Dyck states that "the epithet "Greek American" is as much a kind of translation as it is an ethnic identity.[lxxiii] However, while this view is certainly a fruitful one, I also find the application of translation as a metaphor for such a process to be rather problematic. Translation can place us in quite a bind, as we bemoan its limitations while also celebrating its ability in crossing over cultural limits and borders. Consider the following from an article by Lawrence Venuti entitled "Translation, Community, Utopia":

> Translation never communicates in an untroubled fashion because the translator negotiates the linguistic and cultural differences of the foreign text by reducing them and supplying another set of differences, basically domestic, drawn from the receiving language and culture to enable the foreign to be received there. The foreign text, then, is not so much communicated as inscribed with domestic intelligibilities and interests. The inscription begins with the very choice of a text for translation, always a very selective, densely motivated choice, and continues in the development of discursive strategies to translate it, always a choice of certain domestic discourses over others. Hence, the domesticating process is totalizing, even if never total, never seamless or final. (467)

Transliteration, I would like to argue, while not acting as a pure panacea for such problems can, at the very least, allow us to reconceptualize and challenge preconceived notions of language and national belonging; it supply us with a different view of many well-established

problems and issues. Transliteration, to follow Venuti's lead, is a way to make apparent the ethical problems that are frequently invisible in the process of translation, and that the process can act as an intervention in what I view as a reductive rendering of the stratified experiences of the migrant Other through the process of translation. As Spivak writes, one of the central problems with translation is that it "remains dependent upon the language skill of the majority" (406) and, therefore, suggests an easy alliance with hegemonic and nationalist—what Venuti calls "domestic community" (468-488)— forms of control and identity, installing a fantasy that is easily betrayed by brute reality.[lxxiv] Following Spivak's logic, translation almost always has the majority speaking for the minority; a particularly troubling issue to consider within the American context where so little literature in translation exists,[lxxv] and where there is a disproportionate relationship, it seems, between the "importing" of other national literatures and the "exporting" of its own.[lxxvi] Minoratarian experiences are translated and homogenized to fit into the narrative demands of the nation.[lxxvii] In such a reading there is no problematizing of the notion of translation. (The notion of politics, in such a context, can be viewed as an active and ongoing critique of any blindly optimistic notions of cultural assimilation.)

I would also stress that to use such academic terms—transliteration, translation—to describe harsh realities is not an attempt to reduce the pain and suffering of migrants, victims of actual oppression and those who generally have little or no recourse to equal rights. Such terms should be acknowledged as categorically faulty, and are only meant to reflect rhetorical practices found in literature, and are not to be naively read as emancipatory / libratory proclamations. An important point to consider, especially in our current historical state that finds, as Marco Martiniello suggests, an ongoing divide between the liberal traditions of the academy and the ongoing issues "among the general public and within the political field [of] illiberal stands on ethnicity, nationalism, citizenship, and multiculturalism," all "find[ing] a

channel of expression in extreme right-wing and conservative politics" (115). As such, we need to be especially careful of the ways in which language can be injurious and violent against others and, in particular, those without a voice in the political sense of active participation.

To borrow another idea from Spivak: translation brings with it the potential of violation, and we should not assume it to be an egalitarian process without examining its usage.[lxxviii] It is this potential of violation that we should always be aware of, even if this means simply acknowledging that such violations may never be avoidable, and that to speak of any political or social reality will by necessity give rise to gaps and fissures in the very process of representation that will suggest the very boundaries of any such process.

Such issues come together at the intersection of language and the ethnic body. As an extension of Van Dyck's argument, I would like to consider ethnic identity more as a process of transliteration through which the ethnic body resists full assimilation—linguistically, bodily, politically— into that of the nation state. Transliteration, as I posit it here, allows for an awareness of its faulty nature in representing the multifaceted, fractured experiences of the modern subject in a way that translation does not. Transliteration suggests a genealogical approach, in the Foucaldian sense of the word, of cracks and faults, rather than any concrete, systematized approach that fully encapsulates any body of knowledge.

My notion of the political echoes that of Jacques Rancière's. For Rancière, the political is "not the exercise of [state] power," (2010, 27) but is rather categorized by the "struggle to have one's voice heard and oneself recognized as a legitimate partner in debate. Conversely, the most elementary gesture of depoliticization is always to disqualify the political quality of the speech of those who argue to demonstrate their equality" (9)[lxxix]. Transliteration makes apparent the multiplicity of voices inherent within any supposedly

monological national (and lyric) voice, and makes visible the antagonistic and hegemonic nature of national discourse.lxxxTransliteration is political because it disrupts what Rancière calls the "sensible" fabric of society, the prevailing hegemonic notions that blanket all aspects of life. A poem can, like any true artwork, act as a disruption in the sensible, in the same way that the only truly political project is one that posits the possibility of a real and actual change. As such, we need to also consider the lyric in such terms, as an aesthetic object of political valence for the very reason that it can suggest a different way, a new world.

What the lyric implies, regardless of its form, style or content is a subject speaking, and speaking as a particular kind of subject. Althusser's notion of interpellation may be of some help here if we consider the lyric as the voice which hails itself and makes clear the ideological underpinnings of its own existence. In extension of Althusser's argument, it is not only the state apparatus that announces us or hails us as subjects under its dominion, but we who also perform such a procedure every single time we articulate ourselves through language. Every lyric voice suggests its own subjectivity, and should be read as a possible answer to the following question posed by Rancière: "what essential necessity links the modern stance of poetic utterance with that of political subjectivity?" (2004, 9). It is such contours that we must seek to discover and trace.

Therefore, we need to consider the political possibilities of transliteration within the context of the nation and how language is used by the nation as an apparatus of subjectivization. Who we are as citizens of a nation is articulated through a variety of discourses, language being just one of many, even if it may be the most important one. Benedict Anderson's notion of the imagined community, to give but one of the most prominent examples, rests on the notion of a national consciousness based on the simultaneity produced by print capitalism. A shared language brings forth a shared community.

I will be focusing on how transliteration can act as a counter-hegemonic strategy in subverting national discourse. In other words, the nation translates while the subject transliterates. But for the poets under discussion here, language is also a bodily practice, one that defines one's identity beyond the discourse of the linguistic. A poet like Broumas suggests that the gendered body that can be used as a locus for an active resistance to many such traditional notions of subject construction. This is not to privilege the bodily over the textual, but only to suggest that they can be read differently if read together. A poem like "Leda and Her Swan," interrogates the intersection between sexuality, bodily existence and patriarchal authority:

> You have red toenails, chestnut
> hair on your calves, oh let
> me love you, the fathers
> are lingering in the background
> nodding assent . . .
>
> The father are nodding like
> overdosed lechers, the fathers approve
> with authority: Persian emperors, ordering
> that the sun shall rise
> every dawn, set
> each dusk (17).

Broumas's poem suggests that without the power of the fathers that "approve[s]/with authority," there is no subject, and, therefore, no subversive identity possible as well. Later on in the poem this subversion of patriarchal authority becomes far more apparent: "The

fathers" become "Dresden figurines/vestigial, anecdotal/small sculptures shaped/by the [feminine] hands of nuns" (17). The poem ends with a startling series of "naturalistic" images, suggesting the contours of an ethnic body that seeks to be given voice, but can never truly be articulated:

> liturgies shake our room, amaryllis blooms
> in your upper thighs, water lily
> on mine, fervent delta
>
> the bed afloat, sheer
> line billowing
> on the wind: Nile, Amazon, Mississippi. (18)

What this failure to fully represent such a body hints at is compelling for many reasons, suggesting that structural modes such as the lyric, patriarchy and modernity fail to account for all its subjects. "Leda and Her Swan," is just one of many examples of Broumas's commitment to a politics of the body and of language.

To be in a language is to be in a body, and to practice transliteration marks one's identity in the very same way that an accent can mark identity, a point made even more obvious when one considers the Greek term for transliteration, metaglotissmos: literally, a movement of tongues. As Broumas put it once in an interview: "metaglottismos [as a] kind of transport, but through the body, and it's almost like a French kiss. You take the tongue and you put it in another mouth" (unpublished interview). The poems in "Beginning with O" can be read, as Van Dyck has illustrated, as an immigration narrative through the process of language, constantly return to bodily realities. The poem "Artemis" from which Broumas calls for a politics of transliteration, for example, begins with an examination of the historical and personal excavations of bodily experience:

Let's not have tea. White wine
eases the mind along
the slopes
of the faithful body, helps
any memory once engraved
on the twin
chromosome ribbons, emerge, tentative
from the archeology of an excised past. (35)

It is interesting to consider the language that Broumas uses here as the very same language that grounds any national, historical project: that the archeology of an "excised past" begins with the body, and with the very material fact of gender: "the twin/ chromosome ribbons." Any memory, whether historical or personal, operates on the very same paths of remembering and forgetting, an idea that the notion of archeology here makes apparent. And if we read Broumas's first collection of poetry, and many of her other poems as well, as migration narratives, then the instance on the body suggests the articulations of a body in motion through cultures, time, and space.

Transliteration therefore functions as the linguistic practice that most tellingly frames such questions of movement and displacements. It enacts a simultaneous existence between cultures, languages, spaces, that fractures any notion of a pure national or a fully experiential and singular language.[lxxxi]

The physical and bodily aspects of transliteration act as a metaphor for political exclusion and inclusion, constantly reminding us that what is at stake are also ethnic bodies that often do not fit within the national contexts they find themselves placed in. That is, that the very process of movement and travel further extenuates and marks the migrants body as

strange, different, alien even. Ioanna Laliotou: “The bodily effects that migration had on the subject have already become what the subject’s body was: different” (4). Language is but one means in which such ethnic differences can be manifested and seen. Broumas’s poetry further complicates questions of the body and belonging by raising the question of gender. It is no coincidence that Broumas genders her project: “I am a woman committed to . . .” And historically speaking, it is important to place Broumas’s claim to such a commitment into the much wider context of a feminist poetics and literary theory that saw its peak in the mid-to-late seventies, and which was categorized by écriture féminine and the central role of the body in the process of language. *Beginning with O*, the collection from which the poem “Artemis” is from, was published in 1977, riding the crest of the theoretical wave began by feminist theorists such as Julia Kristeva and Hélène Cixous.

The political scope of this project therefore begins with two very different representations of the ethnic body as situated and presented through the metaphor of transliteration. Furthermore, I suggest that such representations are meant to interrogate the role of such bodies and the subjects they contain within the much larger context of transnational identities, cultures, migrations in order to answer Judith Butler’s wonderfully punning question: “What kind of state are we in when we start to think about the state?” A rather pertinent question to ask with what many have called the ongoing deterioration of the nation state.

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Let us begin by considering the very title of George Economou’s long poem, *Ameriki*. The title is transliterated from the Greek and is meant to jar and confuse by its proximity to the readily familiar signifier in English. The subversion of such an ubiquitous term suggests Economou’s challenge to the words and ideas that that ideologically ground national(istic)

discourse. To appropriate a term from Ernesto Laclau, the term "America" can be better understood as an empty signifier.[lxxxii] According to Laclau an empty signifier emerges "only if there is a structural impossibility in the signification as such, and only if this impossibility can signify itself as an interruption (subversion, distortion, etcetera) of the structure of the sign… the limits of signification can only announce themselves as the impossibility of realizing what is within those limits—if the limits could be signified in a direct way, they would be internal to signification and, ergo, would not be limits at all" (37). The interruption/subversion/distortion that Laclau speaks of allows the possibility of realizing the limits of the signifier at hand—here "America," suggesting that such terms are loaded with meaning, certainly, but also empty because they are up for contestation by different groups within the nation that seek to define and redefine what such terms mean for their particular communities. One example of such "limits" is the juridical powers of the state in relation to its citizens, but also the limits of representation.

I would argue that what is exceptionally political about transliteration is that it challenges and calls into question the hegemonic hold over historical, imaginative and literary production that translation, for example, doe not enact. Transliteration, at times, can lead to what Evelyn Nien-Ming Ch'ien's has called "Weird English." For Ch'ien, a "Weird English" is in itself a highly political act for it disrupts and effaces, while calling attention to, the hegemonic power that language holds over the production of literature, thinking and politics[lxxxiii]. This is especially interesting to keep in mind when considering how many critics reduce bilingual, or multilingual, writers strictly to an American context, rarely discussing the global currents and dynamics that inform such works.[lxxxiv]For Ch'ien a weird English "deprives English of its dominance and allows other languages to enjoy the same status . . . expresses aesthetic adventurousnesslxxxv at the price of sacrificing rules . . . is derived from

nonnative English . . . [and] The rhythms and structure of orthodox English alone are not enough to express the diasporic cultures that speak it" (11).

The Gringlish that grounds the poetics of Broumas and Economou follows the above criteria for Weird English in that it is a politically provocative stance to take in relation to the dominant language of English within the context of American literature; in other words, we cannot even conceive of an American literature that is not written in English, although the foundation for such an essential link between the nation and its literature is, as is well known, built on shaky ground. If translation, for example, is the process of bringing a source language completely into another in order to efface the differences between the two languages, transliteration, by its very nature, seeks to draw attention to the very differences, gaps, lacuna, areas of spillage that exist between all languages.[lxxxvi] It is appropriate to think of translation, therefore, as the project of any national endeavor or discourse, in that it seeks to consume the differences of its citizens within the larger rubric of the nation, while transliteration counters such a project.

The renaming of immigrants on Ellis Island can help to further suggest a tangible political reality to such a situation, and is a familiar scene from American history that also arises in Economou's *Ameriki*—a scene I will discuss in further detail below. Foreign names are changed to fit—usually rather awkwardly— the conventions of American-English. The possibility of retaining a name in transliteration is almost inconceivable. A new national identity, and the possibility of American citizenship, becomes possible only after this new baptism.[lxxxvii]

Broumas and Economou, I would argue, do not translate their experiences into English, but rather transliterate from Greek into English and from English into Greek, creating a form of Gringlish that is made to challenge conventional notions belonging.

*

In his preface to the 1855 edition of *Leaves of Grass*, Walt Whitman famously gave his poetic call to arms. Regarding the role that poetry can play in the representation of the nation and its people, Whitman wrote: "The Americans of all nations at any time upon the earth have probably the fullest poetical nature. The United States themselves are essentially the greatest poem" (3). In other words, the connection between poetics and the national consciousness is not an incongruity, but rather the essential way in which the nation represents itself. We should keep in mind that Whitman's call for a national poetics comes in the wake of a much broader one initiated by Ralph Waldo Emerson and Henry David Thoreau to establish an authentic American literature that differentiate itself from its European precursor.[lxxxviii] Whitman is attempting to establish a poetics that is distinctly of its time and place, apart from the overwhelming presence of European influence, a project that will even be picked up by Modernists such as William Carlos Williams.

But for all of Whitman's calls for inclusion within a poetics of the nation, it is also important to keep in mind the exclusionary nature of any such national project. What does such a poetics of the nation leave out? What becomes of the voices that find themselves on the margins?[lxxxix] Who is there to represent those who have no voice, no means of self representation? Any attempt to establish any national discourse, by its very definition, seeks to elide, exclude and efface differences that would give rise to oppositional discourses and voices. A nation, by definition, must be homogeneous rather than heterogeneous in order to establish an agreed upon history, culture, identity. Its languages must be vernaculars.

I mention Whitman here to simply illustrate that long before Economou there were already questions of how poetry and poetics were meant to represent questions of belonging

and nationhood, a question examined by many American Modernists and Postmodernist poets[xc] in attempting to, as Alice Notley put it, to place history back into the poetic line.[xci]

In a lecture Economou once gave on the formative influences that made him a poet entitled "Janus Witness: Testament of a Greek-American Poet," he began with two compelling epigraphs, one from the Greek poet Angelos Sikelianos and the other by Bruce Springsteen from his song "Born in the U.S.A": "Born in the U.S.A./Born in the U.S.A./Born in the U.S.A./I'm a cool rockin' daddy in the U.S.A." Economou goes on to explain the compelling juxtaposition:

> Reading these passages in this juxtaposition, the one from a poem in Greek, the language in which I first heard and recited poetry, the other in the language in which I write and into which I translate, from ancient and modern Greek among other, presages what underlies the autobiographical and linguistic complexity of the compound "Greek-American" of my subtitle…Both of these epigraphs, then, provide the emblem of my predicament as the "Janus Witness" of the title. As maker of this testamentary text and the poetic texts interspersing it, I cannot, nor would wish to, escape from the condition of having been "born in the U.S.A." At the same time, I find myself promised by my destiny to the continuity of that simple, true line Sikelianos swears upon, born to it, though not of it. So, like many other Americans, I am really singing what should be a duet, but as it gains a voice can come out only as a solo, a bearing of my own witness that I can only hope rocks for you as it does for me. (2000, 1-3)

The two-faced Roman god Janus, symbolizing endings and beginnings as he looks in different directions at the same time, is an appropriate symbol for a poet such as Economou who exists between two very different languages and traditions. This notion of being situated within two traditions, within two languages, is expressed throughout *Ameriki*. My reading of *Ameriki* uses transliteration as a metaphor for many of the concerns and issues that the text is attempting to investigate in relation to questions of inclusion and exclusion in the nation state. Ameriki is told in two-parts, divided by its two main protagonists: Economou's father and mother. "Book One" tells the story of Economou's father's migration, while part two

focuses on his mother, who is "Flung from the rock on Ocean's foam to sail/(aboard the SS Byron)" "direct from Piraeus to New York" (1987, 52). Interspersed throughout both parts of Ameriki are stories of other, marginalized figures, sharing with Economou's parents' plight in attempting to make it in a country that discourages full and equal assimilation. A small section of the poem, to give but one example, focuses on the story of Jones Lazart, "half-/breed ranch-hand," who is "French, the rest of assorted Indian/illiterate." His abject body marked by the fact that he "had lost most of his teeth by 30," left "without the place/we gave him" since "his people/have lost/their world/continuously/to newer and newer/people—" (32-33) *Ameriki*, therefore, is a mini-epic of dispossession, an attack on the common narrative of unbridled immigrant success. Consider the following moment from "Book One" of the poem where Economou, telling the story of his own father, describes the prototypical moment of immigration through the process of transliteration:

> In Ellis Island: 1907
> the Irish immigration officer
> stamps a naked 16 year old male
> on the shoulder. "Omircon
> Kappa, he's put on your back,"
> confides an older naked male.
> Government Inspected, he is
> destined for St. Louis and points
> West, where work
> becomes the new
> religion. (1987, 30)

The body itself becomes the locus of a new and foreign language. The "OK" of the government inspector, the seal of the state's power and sovereignty, is transliterated by the

older man into the Greek letters "Omicron" and "Kappa," a misreading (and subversion of the authority of those letters) that echoes the process of transliteration itself. The juxtaposition between "old world" and "new world" is articulated through an irreducible difference that exists in language. And just as quickly the body is situated within the literal and rhetorical economies of the state, ushered off into the West to find work "the new religion" of capitalism. As Rey Chow has written, this intersection of inclusionary and exclusionary policies rests on a paradoxical aspect of capitalism, whereby the ethnic is allowed access into the workplace but still remains on the lower rungs of almost all social hierarchies, and made a pariah of sorts (33-35). Thus, according to Chow, it is almost impossible to disassociate the ethnic from the protestant work ethic that gave rise to such subjects. The notion, for example, of the "hard-working ethnic" is troubling for a variety of reasons, least of all because of its hidden racist subtext: this "positive" stereotype exists only because it is the reverse of another, more overtly "racist" stereotype that exists: that of the "lazy ethnic" who is a parasitic drain on society. Such stereotypes exist, however, to provide screens against the critique of a capitalist system that actively exploits people. Hence one of the main problems with multiculturalism: We become much more focused on fighting a racism that exists "out there," apart from us, that we fail to see the systematic and structural racism and exploitation that exists within the system, an argument made by both Chow and Slavoj Žižek.[xcii]

The "OK" that marks the body enacts this paradox of inclusion/exclusion. One is "OK" to work, and yet must be labeled as such by the state in order to proceed into the nation's work force. One must be made a visible and viable aspect of the work force, and inclusion can only be granted by the seal of the state.

For the remainder of the poem, it is impossible to read the two letters of "O"[xciii] and "K" as existing primarily in one language, containing as they now do the trace of the foreign.

The travels that Economou's father undertakes throughout the rest of the poem carry with it this notion of existing between two languages, and the stamp of sovereignty becomes his name: "OK, moving with the/railroads, yesteryear's/national seam, come to/Missouri's headwaters," (1987, 31). Or, a little later, "in the spring of '08 OK signed/on a workgang a cousin recruited/& was off for the Hi-Line in Montana," (1987, 39). As the body is marked by this slippage in language, so too is our reading from this point on, as we will always find ourselves situated somewhere between.

The historical lines of connection between Economou's own father and the much larger story of American history intersects within the poem in the historical figure of James Onderdonk. Economou explains that Onderdonk is meant to be "a foil and contrapuntal historical figure from Rockland County, New York who enlisted in the Union army during the Civil War but died of dysentery before he saw action" (2000, 4). Both historical figures come into contact with one another through the process of transliteration. The metonymic "OK" that now labels Economou's father, and the English language for that matter, are the Omicron and Kappa found at the beginning and end of Onderdonk's last name. The two men's stories mirror each other:

> Though hunger
> there had been: 2 loaves/a can
> of sardines for almost 2 weeks
> & no help from a countryman,
>
> terrible solitude of disease:
> dream-sweats through typhoid
> as friends signed on gangs for new lines,

(Onderdonk lying there chilled & cramped
as his outfit moved against rebel lines) (1987, 40)

Histories collide and are reconciled, and the contrast is meant to imply that every nation is built on the backs of men (and women, as *Ameriki*: *Book Two* will argue by telling the story of Economou's mother) like OK and Onderdonk. This is not to suggest a complete equivalence between the two men, but more so, a degree of differences. As Homi Bhabha would have it, such a maneuver on Economou's part "is a demand not for equality but for recognition of difference, a demand that opens up a difference within 'national' culture itself. The disturbing assertion of minority identity is both a present act and an 'untimely' one, in so far as it looks back to a history that it insists on reinserting in the present – the history of uneven and unequal social development for different groups which is a structural feature of the nation's own arrival at liberal modernity. It is this potential power of minority culture to disrupt linear histories and cultural totalities… rather than any programme [sic] of social reconstruction or self-advancement that minorities might undertake toward equalising [sic] their opportunities of access to the 'representational' power of the nation" (9). These two figures, the one a Greek migrant worker traveling through the American landscape, the other a soldier during the American Civil War are juxtaposed and the antagonistic differences that have constructed history in this country are made apparent and reconciled, sutured together. What remains, however, are the historical connections that bind the two figures together as bodies within a much larger national context. Conventional history is challenged, as we are now asked to question what role such marginal figures play within the much larger context of American history. All this is accomplished through the process of examining national history through a poetics of transliteration, binding a national language to a minority language in order to decenter the very idea of a singular, national language.

What better way to illustrate this then to parody or disrupt the significant hold that any national anthem has over a country? Economou does this twice. First, in "Book One," he juxtaposes verse adapted from certain Greek folk songs with words from the Star Spangled Banner:

> Well, once dawn fooled me
> the stars & and moon helped
> so I went up the mountain in the night
> yeah, it was still nighttime
> when I got to the top.
> I could hear the evergreens
> groan & the beeches creak
> & a partridge singing.

…by the dawn's early light (1987, 41).

And "Book Two" ends with a call for an American language that can be inclusive for all:

> Sundowns softly
> across the bay behind
> Provincetown—then Boston
> lights blue a blank of clouds
> that rises like a mountain range
> behind the lower Manhattan skyline
> and washes the gothic towers of Brooklyn Bridge
> pink as the cliffs at Solana Beach.
> In Oklahoma & Montana

it inundates the western sky
with waves of firelight & emberglow
then runs out beyond the great divide & Pacific coast
towards the eastern shores of Earth
and leaves in natural darkness
the continent thought to begin England anew
and end in the dream an island paradise
a pure product of man's work…
In this dark in their beds
as the galaxies recede
Americans wait & hope
in every tongue
not for the bombs or rockets
but for the touch that gives proof through the night (1987, 61).

The nation's hymn becomes something altogether different when it comes into contact with another language or another experience of what it means to be an American. But as Butler and Spivak have asked, "who sings the nation state?" Who gets to sing the hymns that suggest national inclusion and belonging? Such is the question that *Ameriki* engages with in its use of transliteration.

"Variation on a Theme Park" (from Sleeping With the Dictionary)

"Variation on a Theme Park" is a poem from Harryette Mullen's 2002 collection, *Sleeping with the Dictionary*. Here is the poem in its entirety:

> My Mickey Mouse ears are nothing like sonar. Colorado is far less rusty than Walt's lyric riddles. If sorry is wintergreen, well then Walt's breakdancers are dunderheads. If hoecakes are Wonder Bras, blond Wonder Bras grow on Walt's hornytoad. I have seen roadkill damaged, riddled and wintergreen, but no such roadkill see I in Walt's checkbook. And in some purchases there is more deliberation than in the bargains that my Mickey Mouse redeems. I love to herd Walt's sheep, yet well I know that muskrats have a far more platonic sonogram. I grant I never saw a googolplex groan. My Mickey Mouse, when Walt waddles, trips on garbanzos. And yet, by halogen-light, I think my loneliness as reckless as any souvenir bought with free coupons. (75)

One of Mullen's central preoccupations, a preoccupation evident in both the poem above and in much of her work, such as "Dim Lady," is a critique of the arbitrary division that exists between "high" and "low" forms of art. In "Variation on a Theme Park," Mullen directly responds to many of the concerns that Theodor Adorno and Max Horkheimer raised in their seminal essay "The Culture Industry: Enlightenment as Mass Deception." For Adorno and Horkheimer the culture industry is that which "impresses the same stamp on everything." It is a "monopoly" that makes identical all "mass culture." Adorno and Horkheimer locate the culture industry in "Films, radio and magazines" that "make up a system which is uniform as a whole in every part" (1256). The culture industry is the extension of capitalism's concerns and aims, an attempt to place high art under the economic auspices and logic of the market. Art and culture have become commodities, just like everything else, and capitalism's project is to degrade, pacify and control the masses works is now locatable in culture itself. However, as Ross Wilson notes, Adorno and Horkheimer do not imply that "popular art" cannot be art:

"Adorno [and Horkheimer] explicitly separates the culture industry from popular art, which therefore leaves open the possibility that there might be—or, more likely, might have been—art which is popular and which is, indeed, art" (29-30).

While today it may be easy to dismiss such a theory as elitist, or, worse yet, radically reactionary, especially in light of a Postmodernist outlook that values those aesthetic tendencies that have long been marginalized and considered inferior to traditional forms of art, we must be more sensitive readers of Adorno's and Horkheimer's critique. As Ross Wilson points out, Adorno, for one, did not simply view consumers as stupid, passive victims of the culture industry. The reality of the situation is far more complex; it is one where consumers are aware of the machinations of the industry but have little recourse due to the hegemonic pervasiveness of the system. Wilson writes: "it is not that cultural products are bad in themselves. What Adorno objects to in contemporary culture is precisely the failure of cultural products to fulfill their own potential" (42). But the other consideration that we must make is the historical one. As has also been argued elsewhere, Adorno and Horkheimer in their critique of certain trends in mass culture were also responding to the rise of National Socialism in Germany, a movement that saw the use of art as propaganda, especially through the medium of film, as an essential aspect in the shepherding of the masses towards the most heinous of act.

I read Harryette Mullen's "Variation on a Theme Park" as being in dialogue with many of the claims made in "The Culture Industry." "Variation on a Theme Park," for example, traffics in the very "rubbish" that Adorno and Horkheimer decry, but uses such litter, detritus and debris for the sake of confounding the easy distinction between high and low forms of culture. Bu doing as such, Mullen ends up producing a poem that can be called "art." Mullen uses tropes, images and symbols that have become ubiquitous and pedestrian ever since being made famous by Disney. A poem, a form of art that has traditionally been

considered as "anti-populist" or "elitist," becomes a democratic vista—because of easy recognition, and therefore affords some accessibility—filled with the most familiar of landmarks. Mullen is not, of course, the first American poet to use images or themes from popular culture in her poetry. The use of popular culture can be traced as far back as T.S Eliot, a poet whose work is often read, and with good cause, as symptomatic of a Modernist aesthetic that valued a certain degree of "difficulty" and "inscrutability." Eliot's *The Wasteland* contains snippets from a popular song of the day. Ralph Ellison wrote an essay titled "Jazz and The Wasteland" in which he argued for the poem's discursive, allusion laden structure being akin to the movements of Jazz: "The Wasteland seized my mind. I was intrigued by its power to move me while eluding my understanding. Somehow its rhythms were often closer to those of jazz than were those of the Negro poets, and even though I could not understand then, its range of allusion was as mixed and as varied as that of Louis Armstrong." (2001, 166).[xciv] Frank O'Hara's "Having a Coke With You," and John Ashbery's "Daffy Duck in Hollywood" are other examples of poets using forms of popular culture and art in their poetry, even if they are not strident critiques of the capitalist cultures from which they spring, as I will argue Mullen's poem is.

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Mullen's poem, however, behaves rather differently from the other poems mentioned above. In *No Logo*, Naomi Klein makes mention of grassroots actions against the pervasive influence of ads. She calls this "culture jamming" (280-283), a technique in which popular consumer logos or symbols are cast in a slightly different, usually parodic manner in order to provide a subversive critique of said brand names. Keeping in mind the strangle-hold that Disney-themed characters and movies have, to this very day, on the American imagination further illustrates the radical nature of the critique at hand. Mullen's poem is an attack on the very forces that seek to invade and domesticate the most insidious aspects of capitalism.

Disney's characters, as Slavoj Žižek once said, present capitalism with cute, anthropomorphized faces that belie the very nature of their production and consumption.

"Variation on a Theme Park" reads more like an Avant-garde L=A=N=G=U=A=G=E poem, in a sense, than it might a brochure for Disney World. The poem keeps in line with the L=A=N=G=U=A=G=E school's tradition of attempting to critiquing capitalism's hold over culture and language—in this sense, Mullen is completely in line with Adorno and Horkheimer as well; where the two diverge is at the point where Mullen illustrates how the very rubbish of the culture industry can actually be used as a subversive tool to "enlighten" the masses and critique the apparatuses of control.

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The prose poem moves from line to line with little or not discernible logic. It actively resists any close reading, making a New Critical approach that much more frustrating. As with many of Mullen's other poems in *Sleeping with the Dictionary*, "Variation" traffics in the absurd and revels in the sublime aspects of late capitalism; phrases such as "blond Wonder Bras grow on Walt's hornytoad," or "I know that muskrats have a far more platonic sonogram" invite interpretation only to stifle it. Conventionally, most poems would attempt to fall into "meaning" despite their cryptic or opaque nature. Non-meaning, non-signification, in this instance, is not something that is frowned upon, but actively welcomed. Participation means, therefore, allowing the non-logic of the poem to unfold in its own manner, antagonistic to any "simplistic" interpretation we may hazard. We are invited to participate in the irrational, the confusing, the logic of the current world.

The title, however, provides some type of guidance, as the word "Theme" of "Theme Park" has a double-edged meaning. It can pertain to the "description" of the amusement park we are given, a wonderfully bastardized and vulgarized depiction of Disney World/Land, but

it can also be understood in the sense of a "theme" in the "thematic" sense of the term. In other words, the theme of the poem is idea that there is a theme, or lack thereof.

*

"Variation on a Theme Park" is also an homage to an homage: structurally speaking, it follows the movements of Mullen's "Dim Lady," a poem which in turn is an homage to Shakespeare's "Sonnet 130." "Dim Lady" and "Variation" both have ten lines; they are both prose poems; and they both pile up negative conceits until, at the very last line, we get a positive reversal or the equivalent of a Shakespearean couplet that brings the poem to a conclusion. The poem, therefore, is an ironic take on an already ironic "original," a Postmodern hall of textual mirrors by which the poem we are reading is a "copy" of a "copy" of a "copy" (after taking into consideration that Shakespeare's "Sonnet 130" was an attempt to subvert the tradition of the Sonnet tradition as established by Petrarch).

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But beyond its aesthetic concerns, "Variation" is a poem deeply concerned with the commodification of language and culture on all levels. The poem contains constant references to various forms of capital, commodities and the logic of value exchange, no matter how absurd or superficial they may at first appear to be. There are mentions of "Walt's checkbook," and "purchases" that are made with "deliberation," and the poem ends with a (literally) enlightening moment "by halogen-light" where "loneliness" is considered to be "as reckless as any souvenir bought with free coupons." Again, while the issue of capital and commodity exchange is brought to the forefront, we are never given a clear or easy to discern answer on what the poem may actually be saying in regards to these subjects. What we do have, however, is the intimation of something crude, tawdry or debased. But what is important here is not that Mullen is arguing for a hierarchy that would place "high" art above

the tastes of the masses; it is not popular commodities that are crass or debased, but the very system, as Adorno would suggest, that is the real problem. What is being critiqued is how everything, perhaps even loneliness, has turned into a commodity, and how language—the poem we are reading—can act as a site of resistance by questioning, in the words of Frederic Jameson, the structural logic of late capitalism, a system which has turned language itself into yet another commodity. Mullen's poem, therefore, can be read as an antidote to the further commodification of language in America as it stands today.

Some Concluding Notes on the Human and Organic Form

A brief note before beginning: I mean concluding not in the sense of finality or full closure on the issues raised in the previous pages; "concluding" as a provincial terminus, an end, certainly, but one that brings with it no suffocating closures, no restrictions, if such a move is even possible. This last piece is simply the recognition of the beginning of something else.[xcv]

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Let us briefly return to the beginning of this work, to Wieners, but this time with Robert Creeley as guide. In the preface to Wieners' *Cultural Affairs in Boston*, Creeley, in an attempt to make sense of the confounding amalgam of personal and public found in Wieners' work, offers the following:

> The poetry of John Wieners has an exceptionally human beauty—as if there ever were any other. There is in it such a commonness of phrase and term, such a substantial fact of a daily life transformed by the articulateness of his feelings and the intensity of the inexorable world that is forever out there waiting for any one of us. Charles Olson spoke of it as "a poetry of affect," by which I took him to mean a poetry that is in the process of a life being lived, literally, as Keats' was, or Hart Crane's, or Olson's own. In other words, the art becomes the complex act of "making real" all that one is given to live . . . (1998, 11)

It is the phrase, "a poetry of affect," that I wish to unpack, if only because it is this turn of phrase that gets to the crux of the matter I wish to address here. What strikes Creeley about Wieners' work is what attracts me to it as well: it is a poetics that denies the artificial and non-existent barriers between public and private spheres, between social life and aesthetic life. A poetry of affect is one of "human beauty," but it is only made possible by the

"substantial fact of a daily life" and of an "inexorable world that is forever out there waiting for any one of us." (Further below, I will return to the concept of the human or the person, and suggest that a reading of Olson's poetics will help us better make sense of how the New American poets approach the idea of the human in relation to the social.) It is crucial to note that Creeley's reading of Wieners' work, to some degree, denies the novelty of such a poetics. There is, after all, something of the "everyday" or "common" to it. But even now as a write this I sense the need to defend such terms, "everyday" and "common," if only because Creeley does not sling around such words in any pejorative sense. In aesthetic discussions these words typically carry with them certain negative connotations. We tend to praise what we find unique and original, not that which strikes us as being normal, ubiquitous. The Romantic concept of the original genius is still hard to dispel. We must, however, work against such notions and consider how they tend to isolate and restrict our appreciation of any art that resists our limited critical vocabularies. A reading such as the one Creeley provides, in many ways, seeks to naturalize Wieners' work, to make it easier to digest; on the other hand, it also asks of us to work beyond our conventional critical practices. The goal remains the same: we should never be complacent and passive readers, and always sensitive to readings that seek to pacify the recalcitrant and the unruly aspects of poems.

But on what grounds does Creeley stake such a claim in regards to Wieners' work? Where is the line drawn? What makes a human beauty? For Creeley, Wieners and Olson, the human,[xcvi] as complicated and as fraught as that term is, becomes the limit against which all theories, especially those of experience, are tested. Consider Olson's own personal history, one that saw him abandon the theatre of organized national politics in order to pursue the life of the poet. Such a move, as Nick Lawrence also argues in his essay "Olson's Republic," suggests a critique of the division between "interior and exterior worlds" (5). In other words, Olson did not abandon "politics" by moving to poetry; rather the political continues to exist

in the advent of a poetic project that seeks to examine and critique those modes of discourse—such as Western metaphysics—that seek to compartmentalize knowledges and epistemological procedures; the world of discourse, as Olson would put it. As I have stated before, especially in regards to the Wieners' quote that prefaced my introduction, American poets of the last hundred years have sought to critique and examine the intellectual prophylaxis that seeks to compartmentalize knowledges. In discourses as varied as those having to do with gender, aesthetics, sexuality, national languages and bodily being, these poets, perhaps more than others, have shown how our vernacular languages can be both limiting and expansive ways to examine those pressures which create us as humans. But what we must also keep in mind is that such a poetics does not mean to deny the historical or the social, but to bring the two into some kind of impossible union. I make mention of the historical here only to note that recent theories in regards to subject construction tend to value historical contigency over any notion of the self as possessing agency. As I will argue below, a poet such as Olson denies such a view, and seeks to place the human back in the historical field, to make an argument that we can have both contigency and agency. As a brief aside: what I am describing here is not a philosophical ontology. I would rather shy away from such a term or philosophical approach only because it would obfuscate the specificity of what these poets are attempting to acknowledge.[xcvii]

The critical departure I would like to take in relation to Olson's work is to view it more on the level of the "everyday" and the "common," to conceive of Olson's own oeuvre as being a poetry of affect, to suggest that when Olson was speaking of Wieners' work he was also speaking of his own.[xcviii] I stress this difference because most readings of Olson's work focus on its "epic" qualities,[xcix] its almost larger-than-life quarrels with metaphysics, history and discourse. Readings and works by George Butterick, Nick Lawrence, Michael Bernstein, and Miriam Nichols have, for the most part, focused on these grander facets of

Olson's work, giving very little attention to the fact that Olson was very much a poet concerned with representing even the most mundane of human experiences. *The Maximus Poems*, for example, intersperse the most esoteric and grandiose passages with poems that contain the most ordinary moments. A section of *The Maximus Poems* titled "In the Face of a Chinese View of the City," details the inner workings of the City Clerk's office, a place where "dog-licenses, and births and marriages" are all the order of public life and "public office." In fact, the entire work is made of such minutia, evidence of Olson's deep desire to make of Gloucester a new "polis,[c]" "not as localism, not that mu-sick (the trick/of corporations, newspapers, slick magazine, movie houses,/the ships, even the wharves, absentee owned/they whine to my people, these entertainers, sellers/they play upon their bigotries …" (1985, 14), but in order to make real the grounds on which everyday experience, and the human, are formed.

The key term to return to is affect. What exactly is a poetry of affect? Can it be something other than a poetry of human and everyday beauty? And what makes such a poetics, as I will suggest, a political or socially conscious one? As many contemporary theorists have suggested, there is no way to speak of affect or the emotional states of being without also discussing the political and social fields that ground such emotions.[ci] For Wieners, Creeley and Olson the everyday realm of experience is where the poet, and by extension, the human are most thoroughly constituted and brought into being. Echoing Hesiod, it is the works and days that make us who we are, the infinite and incommensurable moments that constitute any given life. These are especially important points to consider in light of Olson's projects. Often viewed strictly as a poet of grand ideas, Olson's poetics and works also contain a great deal of the everyday in them. Here is a poet who is as interested in excavating millennia worth of human history as he is in telling his father's story of working at the post office. In Olson's work the common, everyday experiences of life are the very

firmament of larger, grander systems that he seeks to engage with. As Miriam Nichols writes, in Olson's view, "humanity loses the familiar—itself and its ground—by projecting itself so large that is obscures the ground it stands on with its own shadow" (33).

Affect, therefore, helps us ground our notion of the human and of how we belong to the reality of social life.[cii] But what are the political implications for such a poetics? It is impossible to of the *human* without bringing along with it the question of the political. This is a particularly important question to ask in relation to Olson's poetics because of the politics at play in the poet's work. In fact, in many ways, the political is taken for granted in many readings Olson's work. It is simply assumed to be there, and *there* it is. But rather than look towards history or the polis to locate the political in Olson's work as other critics have, I would like to suggest that for Olson the singular most important locality for the political is the individual, the human, the constitutive element of all political systems. But we are still left with attempting to define what the person is for Olson. While history and polis are all foundational forces for Olson, it is his conception of the human that still lacks concrete theorization. I would also like to suggest that one reason for such a lack is because Olson's work itself resists such an approach. Olson argues that the person as constituted today is cast adrift, lost, as polis and history are no longer categories that can ground an actual sense of being. As he wrote in his essay "The Escaped Cock: Notes on Lawrence and the Real," "we are, all of us, now, essentially guerrillas—maquis, frontier or side-street—EVEN in the intimate, EVEN WHERE, those old essentials (love, etc.) are, where they took root/..." Olson continues, "You are all, all of you, so glib about what is human, so goddamn glib. Take a look. Just open your eyes, as he did, the Man who died[ciii]…"(1997, 140). Glib because we shy away from the truth, the reality of the *thing* itself. For Olson as for Lawrence, the truly lived experience isolates individuals. There can be no other way. One cannot, the argument follows, be a true individual or speak of experience within the dynamics of social life without

also, paradoxically, being someone apart, without becoming a "guerrilla." This is what it means to experience modernity. To be human, to be a person, means to confront the impossible horrors of what humanity is capable of, to see directly, to "take a look" at what is the human. As Olson wrote in "La Preface": "Buchenwald the new Altamira cave" (1986, 46). This is the inexorable world that Creeley spoke of, a world where brutality and horror are the new and only normal. For Olson, as for many other moderns, there is no conception of the human that does not suggest both a startling degree alienation, the human as one apart from society and yet also always a part of it. It is no wonder that Olson would become so engrossed by Melville's *Moby Dick*, a novel that is essentially about the orphans that Ishmael and Ahab, and all of us, are.

Hope remains. Where Olson's view of the human differs from many modern conceptions of it is in the agency that he confers, especially in those realms where agency has long been considered an impossibility, language being the most obvious example. In his essay "Human Universe," Olson continues his attacks on what he views as "'the UNIVERSE of discourse.'" Olson continues, "It is their word, and the refuge of all metaphysicians since—as though language, too, was an absolute, instead of (as even man is) instrument, and not to be extended, however much the urge, to cover what each, man and language, is in the hands: what we share, and which is enough, of power and of beauty, not to need an exaggeration of words, especially that spreading one, 'universe'" (1987, 156). Language becomes a site of resistance against metaphysical abstractions and pieties. Olson does not, of course, end there in attempting to establish a series of sites of resistance against discourse and Western metaphysics. But what I would like to spend the rest of this dissertation discussing is how Olson makes the body itself a site of resistance, and perhaps the last line of defense against an ever-encroaching modernity that seeks to control every aspect of the human. Olson from a short piece titled "The Resistance": "Man came here [the present] by an intolerable

way. When man is reduced to so much fat for soap, superphosphate for soil, fillings and shoes for sale, he has, to begin again, one answer, one point of resistance only to such fragmentation, one organized ground, a ground he comes to by a way the precise contrary of the cross, of spirit in the old sense, in old mouths. It is his own physiology he is forced to arrive at. And the way—the way of the beast, of man and the Beast" (1987, 174). Even in Olson's seminal and hugely influential "Projective Verse" essay we have the establishment of the length of the poetic line with the voice of the poet, but a voice that is grounded deeply and thoroughly in the body of the poet: "And the line comes, (I swear it) from the breath, from the breathing of the man who writes, at the moment when he writes, and thus us, it is here that, the daily work, the WORK, gets in, for only he, the man who writes, can declare, at every moment, the line its metric and its ending—where its breathing, shall come to, termination" (1987, 242).

We can turn to Olson's essay and theory of "Proprioception" to better understand how the poet approaches these ideas. When writing of proprioception, I am not only referencing the essay of the same name also using the term as an inward road towards understanding Olson's theories of the body in general. Proprioception becomes, for me, the metaphor through which to view the some of Olson's theories on the body and bodily experience. Having also said that, I would not suggest that Olson himself has a fully realized theory in regards to the body and how it relates to his poetry. However, it is impossible to deny the overall importance of the body and its relation to Olson's work. In "Proprioception" itself Olson defines the term and its relation to the body as follows: "the data of depth sensibility/the 'body' of us as object which spontaneously or of its own order produces experiences of, 'depth' Viz SENSIBILITY WITHIN THE ORGANISM BY MOVEMENT OF ITS OWN TISSUES" (1987, 181). Olson clearly defines experience as something grounded within the confines of the body. There is no experience that can be spoken of as not

being, in a sense, a product or response to the body living in the world. Experience itself is concomitant with the bodily, and to separate the one from the other is impossible. But, again, as established above, we cannot speak of experience, at least in our age, without speaking of alienation. Experience, therefore, as the denial of experience, if we take experience to simply be the foundational ground of establishing anything that might resemble an identity or sense of the human, of being. As Olson puts it in "As the Dead Prey Upon Us": "they are the dead in ourselves,/awake, my sleeping ones, I cry out to you,/disentangle the nets of being!" (1986, 388). Ontology, being in the world, has become yet another trap, a net that keeps us bound within the false sense of experience. It takes the dead, the absent, to remind us of what has been lost and what can be regained.

Fundamentally, however, Olson's concept of the human, of the atomistic individuals who comprise and construct the larger social realities of history and space, cannot be considered apart from his theories on organicity. While Olson himself came to these notions of organic form and life himself, he was also greatly influenced by Whitehead's theories. But what affinities do the two thinkers actually share? Miriam Nichols elucidates Whitehead's theory of relations and how it applies to Olson's own outlook on creativity:

> Whitehead maintains that every actual entity in the universe has a determinate relationship with every other one … Actual entities take on specific form through their *encounters* … as well as their genetic heritages. The resulting organism is (1) the product of chance (the contigencies of circumstance); (2) genetic determination (physiological and social evolution); and (3) affection (predilection, response to circumstance). Agency lies in the capacity to respond—and notice that the further the entity can extend its prehensive range the greater the chances for complex interaction and hence development. Olson takes this Whiteheadian account of creativity as a model for his poetic method. (27)

For Whitehead as for Olson it is impossible to speak of the human without considering both contingency and agency, two categories of structuring identity that have in recent critical

history been set as diametrically opposed. However there is no disconnect for Olson: one can have both agency and contingency. In the 1951 essay, "Human Universe," Olson suggests as much. Bemoaning the historical moment that got us to where we are today—"We have lived long in a generalizing time, at least since 450 B.C."—he still retains the notion that at any moment history can be taken by the throat, the course of things can alter drastically and suddenly: "There are laws, that is to say, the human universe is as discoverable as that other. And as definable" (1970, 155). So while being products of history, the human is also his own agent: "It is not the Greeks I blame. What it comes to is ourselves, that we do not find ways to hew to experience as it is, in our definition and expression of it, in other words, find ways to stay in the human universe, and not be led to partition reality at any point, in any way" (1970, 157). (Again, as I suggested much earlier in my introduction, one recent trend in American poetry seeks to critique and expose, if not eliminate, prophylactic modes of discourse that would isolate and reduce fields of knowledge to singular categories; such categories, I would suggest, can be anything and everything from genre to gender to politics. We tend to build critical and analytic fences around such terms, always attempting to come to terms with them in the most reductive ways possible.) I would like to further postulate that for Olson, as for this project, the notion of organic form helps to reconcile this divide, even while, at the same time, helping to retain something of the radical separation of the two. How so?

In an essay titled "Some Notes on Organic Form," Denise Levertov speaks of organic form as "the concept that there is form in all things (and in our experience) which the poet can discover and reveal." She goes on to say:

> Suppose there's the sight of the sky through a dusty window, birds and clouds and bits of paper flying through the sky, the *sound* of music from his radio, feelings of anger and love . . . This is only a rough outline of a possible moment in life. But the condition of being a poet is that periodically such a cross section, or constellation, of

> experiences (in which one or another element may predominate) demands, or wakes in him this demand: the poem. The beginning of the fulfillment of this demand is to contemplate, to mediate; words which connote a state in which the heat of the feeling warms the intellect. (67-68)

An experience is always situated in the unnerving complexity of the moment. There is no single moment, and no experience of it, that is not impossibly divided, an infinite amount of contingent and yet selected moments, the cross-sections or constellations that Levertov invokes. However, what is made of those pieces is, for the most part, up to the poet[civ]. Again, those few words I quoted above from "Human Universe" are meant to remind us: man (as concept, as idea) and language (as actuality) are both instruments, tools to be used for the carving, the breaking of the wood, for the fashioning of the world itself. As Miriam Nichols notes, for Olson this is also Olson's attempt to put "form back in the creative process" (59), to get the work to speak for itself as itself. Organic form, therefore, denies the sense of completion of conclusion. What is most important is the process, the constant unfolding of the very thing itself. Process never seeks completion or closure. It is not an ends but a means, and it is impossible to understate how truly important such ideas are for Olson in general. Consider, for example, even the notion of constant movement in "Projective Verse": "ONE PERCEPTION MUST IMMEDIATELY AND DIRECTLY LEAD TO A FURTHER PERCEPTION" (1997, 240), the sense that perception must unfold continuously, that it never ends nor stops, that, therefore, to speak of a singular experience, a moment truly frozen in time is not simply an impossibility but a lie as well. The same, to some extent, grounds this project. That a project that takes form organically as a lexicon can impose its own particular logic to a series of nearly disparate ill-fitting pieces. Furthemore, it suggests that it is false to assume that any critical approach can foreclose or fully make sense of any aesthetic category in any singular way. Such an approach, it is hoped, will do away with the false notion of critical mastery, and replace it with the idea that any aesthetic project is impossible to contain

within any critical vocabulary, because such approaches deny the radical specificity of the object at hand.

But I also conclude on such a note because it not only confirms in part what I have been arguing in regards to American poetry's goals of the last hundred years, but also because it confirms the sense of the human or the person[cv] that is at the heart of such a poetics. When Olson and Creeley, for example, write of an "I " it is never in egoistic terms,"[cvi] for this is a self fully aware of its particular sense of self with the general frame that is pluralistic, "the undecidable border between the generic and particular, between concept and perception" (Nichols, 96). Finally, it is this notion of the political that I find the most compelling and valuable. The political not as pre-established grounds for the formation of identities, languages and histories but as a space for competing and antagonistic voices, a space that is always in the process of becoming; voices that can also occasionally reach a consensus of some kind, the founding of a common ground but a ground that is always shifting, constantly faulty. It is perhaps the impossible task of our age to search for a common ground that has not been spoiled and ruined, that has not been destroyed by greed and avarice and the madness that dictates the course of our days.

[i] As will become apparent later, I refrain from using the word discourse when it may appear applicable. I have tried to posit a difference between language as used by poets and what is now called discourse. We must preserve the distances that exist between these two very loaded terms, affording to each a certain amount of respect and care.

[ii] A note for these notes: I've decided to use end notes rather than footnotes for two primary reasons: the first is to suggest a dialogue on the margins of the primary work, the idea that there is as much value or critical importance to what follows in here as there is in the main portion of the text. I have found that some of my best ideas, certain moments of real insight, must be placed in the end notes because they do not entirely belong to what is being discussed above; It will, of course, be up to my readers to either agree or disagree with me on this point. Secondly, because it allows the entries themselves to stand on their own, to prevent the reader from being distracted from the specific points being made above. This is also why I decided against cross referencing the entries, so as to not suggest affinities, but to simply allow them to come to my readers without coercion.

iii Note: I have rather deliberately stayed away from Heidegger's work on poetry and thought. There are two reasons for such a deliberate lacuna: firstly, because a sincere and honest engagement with Heidegger's thoughts on the subject would require a dissertation in its own right. And secondly, and most importantly, because Heidegger's examination effaces the social and historical conditions that ground such thinking. However, this is not to imply that Heidegger's work itself cannot lend itself to historically conscious or socially aware readings, only that the philosopher himself does not practice such a mode. So while there is great value in a work like "The Thinker and the Poet," a discussion of its value does not work within the contexts and arguments I am trying to articulate here.

iv Miriam Nichols in her book *Radical Affections* argues that the New American Poets—she is primarily interested in Charles Olson, Robert Duncan, Susan Howe, and Jack Spicer, many of the poets I will discussing here—were the last group of poets who produced a poetics that was sincere in believing that poetry could change the world. I would argue, however, that such belief, such sincerity, still exists in some quarters, and that a poet such as Harryette Mullen, for example, practices such a poetics.

v See his *Metahistory* (1974) as a primary example of such.

[vi] There is, to my knowledge, still only one book devoted entirely to this kind of historical reading: Shira Wolosky's *Emily Dickinson: A Voice of War* (1984).

vii The case of Dickinson is rather symptomatic of the larger issues being discussed in this dissertation. There was, up until recently, an urge to depoliticize writers like Dickinson through prophylactic readings that isolated and marginalized her. The same can be said of the ways in which the New Critical way of reading sought to remove reality and experience from the poem. Peter Sloterdjik has also written about this kind of prophylactic attempt to divide and conquer knowledge, to compartmentalize the poetic from the philosphical. He uses the tropes of immunization and prophylaxis to illustrate his point. In an interview with Hans-Jürgen Heinrichs, Sloterdjik says "I will defend myself against the obligation to choose between poetry and philosophy. Philosophy has every reason to look more closely at the virtual rational wealth of poetic languages, and to make the knowledge of poetic discourse fecund for the theoretical constitution of models" (158). While not discussed in this dissertation in detail, something like Charles Olson's *Call Me Ishmael* is a work that bridges

such gaps, bringing together textual analysis, archival research and poetic language to create a critical text that seeks to bridge gaps between discourses.

viii It should be noted that Oren Izenberg (2011, 191) also takes notice of *American Hyrbid* and Swensen's introduction. For Izenberg, however, Swensen is arguing for the ascendancy and the triumph of the avant-garde tradition against that of the more traditional or conservative poetries that currently litter the American literary landscape.

ix I feel this is the closest one can come to a definition of the term without closing off the concept to an open or unfolding consideration. Some kind of ground is, unfortunately, always necessary when attempting to work through terms and ideas, even if we wish to suggest that such terms should always be open to contenstation.

x Poetry, to use a term by Ron Silliman, as non-syllogistic discourse. Silliman uses the term to describe what he terms the "New Sentence, " a recent development in the writing of prose poetry. However, what Silliman fails to point out is that poetry has always contained or made use of the non-syllogistic. Even a poetic technique as conservative or archaic as enjambment, for example, is an example of poetry's attack on syllogistic, or logical, discourse.

xi Havelock's chapter on Mimesis and Plato's attack on poetry is especially telling. While it need be said that what Plato called poetry is very different from what we today know as poetry, the attacks, or logic behind those attacks, are still in use today to marginalize poetry. See, for example, my description of Duncan's anxiety over poetry's social function in my introduction.

xii Olson's appreciation of Havelock's work is impossible to understate. Olson wrote a laudatory review in which he suggested that Preface to Plato was "the only work in criticism which is relevant to all developments in thought and poetry over the past 150 years" (1997, 355).

xiii See Mackey's essay on Duncan, "Gassire's Lute: Robert Duncan's Vietnam War Poems" in *Paracritical Hinge*.

[xiv] Olson, for example, once said of his essays that compose "Proprioception:" "they are incongestible or something. They're not readable. If they're interesting, they can be dug up as signs" (1997, 416). There is only so much the stomach can have of rational criticism.

[xv] Duncan's collection *The Opening of the Field* begins with the poem, "Often I am Permitted to Return to a Field." The poem's first couplet, a continuation of the title, reads: "as if it were a scene made-up by the mind,/that is not mine, but is a made place . . ." (7). For Duncan, the notion of permission is essential, and may derive from his study of the Kabala. But it is also important to consider the communal and imaginative aspects of this permission, and, most importantly, the fact that it needs to be granted, sanctioned, by an Other, or by some other power. This "scene" of "the mind" is constructed through an imagination—"made up"—that is beyond the thought of the single individual, for it is "not mine" for it belongs to everyone. In the same sense, a poem is not of the single mind that constructs it, but is of the communal pool of language and thought that brought it into being. To what extent one reads this coming of the poem as a mystical event—as Duncan often does—or as a by-product of language's material nature, it is impossible to deny the communal aspect of its fruition. If there is one reductive lens through which to read all the poets discussed here it is the lens of community, for all these writers attempt, in their own ways, to make evident the social, linguistic and political spaces we all share.

xvi From what follows, it is clear that I do not view Williams as a zealot of American exceptionalism, or as an obtuse and crude nationalist. I only seek to problematize the relationships that certain poets draw between themselves and the languages they seek to employ in the services of their art.

xvii The origins of the internet as military project should also not be forgotten.
xviii In "Tradition and the Individual Talent" Eliot writes of the origins of the Western-European tradition: "the historical sense compels a man to write not merely with his own generation in his bones, but with a feeling that the whole of literature of Europe from Homer and within it the whole of literature of his own country has a simultaneous existence and composes a simultaneous order" (2007, 538). European literature begins, problematically, with Homer, even though, again, there is a specficity to that history that Eliot does not look towards.
[xix] And it is this idea that is echoed in Pound's assertion in *The Spirit of Romance* that the great poets make "all ages contemperanous" (6).
[xx] It is almost as if Pound prophesied the rise of English as the lingua franca of our current global village.
[xxi] *American Poetics of History: From Emerson to the Moderns*. Baton Rouge: Louisiana State University Press: 1984.
[xxii] For an interesting, if rather problematic take on *Blues People*, see Ralph Ellison's review republished in *Shadow and* Act. What Ellison derides in the work is the attempt to "impose an ideology upon [a] cultural complexity" (249) misses the crux of the matter, one that Ellison, fittingly enough, gets earlier in the review: "Read as a record of an earnest young man's attempt to come to grips with his predicament as a Negro American during a most turbulent period of our history, *Blues People* may be worth the reader's time" (246). Blues *People* is a remarkable text, mostly due to its "poetic" (meaning non-academic) approach to its subject matter, but also because it is a singular record of one artist's exploration of an aesthetic that informs his own work and politics. And what is poetry if not that: the making, creating of something? This is no straw man but a substantial point to consider, since one of Ellison's criticism's of Baraka's text is that he "gives little attention to the blues as lyric" (242), not thinking to conceive of *Blues People* itself as a lyric of sorts, one poet's song within a long tradition of them.
[xxiii] Baraka also uses the complicated term "citizen," suggesting that there is no subject conceivable apart from a "governing," "juridical" apparatus that can bequeath rights to said subject. The intersection between aesthetics, politics and representation is what Baraka and I are trying to unfold here.
[xxiv] Echoing here James Clifford's pun. See his *Routes: Travel and Translation in the Late Twentieth-Century* (1997). The blues is a well-traveled tradition, its feet planted in a variety of historical and social contexts. As in all American Vernaculars, there is already an acceptance of the transnational contexts of the languages at hand.
[xxv] The notion of constant freedom and of constant displacement is one that Houston Baker also writes of. Baker suggests that the railroad brought with it a "promise of unrestrained mobility and unlimited freedom. The blues musician at the crossing . . . became an expert at reproducing or translating these locomotive energies . . . The signal expressive achievement of blues, then, lay in their translation of technological innovativeness, unsettling demographic fluidity, and boundless frontier energy into expression which attracted avid interest from the American masses" (11). There are connections to be made to a kind of Futurist aggrandizing of speed and technology, a further example of how impossible it is to distance the blues from the modernity that gave rise to it.
[xxvi] Gilroy's work suggests that the word tradition may not even be applicable here, since the very term usually implies a concrete, continuous process that the very realities of diaspora contradict.

[xxvii] Consider briefly the popular and folk aspect of the blues: it is an art with many masters but few or no originators. The blues is one of the most democratic of art forms because it insists on exchange and multiplication of its own tradition: it is a tradition almost anyone can join, but that few can master.

[xxviii] I try to avoid the somewhat problematic notion that we are simply speaking here of an "African American" identity, whatever that might be. Rather, we should attempt to draw sympathetic lines of connections between disparate identities that may relate—or even differ—from one another.

[xxix] The inclusion of Kerouac's blues poems, *Book of Blues*, is meant to further suggest, as Hughes's and Mullen's poems do, that there is no essential component to identity and the aesthetic itself: it can be appropriated and performed by anyone. This, however, is also a problematic and fraught condition of aesthetics, since in the past African-American artists—and especially musicians—have seen their work exploited by whites for financial gain, something Mullen tackles directly in *Muse and Drudge:* "white covers of black material" (130). Mullen clarified exactly what she meant by such a quote: "that was a comment on the history of music in this country. What's done by black people and then redone by white people, and white people are the ones who became the millionaires" (652). Elijah Wald states: "Many people consider the blues tradition to be primarily a matter of ethnicity and culture, the musical heritage of the African American South, which can rarely if ever be fully understood by northern, or foreign, or white artists. In a similar sense the word is sometimes applied to the literary style of African American poets and novelists—or, more rarely, European American writers who are familiar with African American milieus—whose work reflects the language and spirit of the world that produced blues music" (6). What we are left with, therefore, are two languages that really cannot speak to one another, but are intricately bound together. In the words of Michael North: "Yet the two races, the two languages, the two tongues are nonetheless inextricably joined: "tongue-tied" means that no matter how painfully black and white may speak past one another, they are still linked. In fact, it might be best to say that they are bound by the condition of being tongue-tied, trapped, as it were, in a language that neither can control or dominate" (9). What is at stake here is a voice, and the notion that such a voice can be performed and enacted by anyone. To what degree there is an authentic, actual voice at stake here is important to consider. In defense of what some might see as Kerouac's appropriation or use of a tradition that is not "his own," there is never a crude or abased feeling to his blues. They strike one as being "authentic" if one simply considers the blues as music of the oppressed or down trodden. Never in *Mexico City Blues* does Kerouac imply a stance of oppression akin to racism.

[xxx] The term experience is a particularly loaded one, and readers should refer to my entry on it.

[xxxi] As Arnold Rampersad and David Roessel remind us, Hughes, at different times in his career, thought of himself as a "folk poet," (4-5) suggesting further parallels between Hughes's poetry and the democratic and open-ended form of the blues.

[xxxii] Although to what degree any poem or text fully articulates a "human" voice is up for debate as well, for the written text always suggests a certain amount of artifice that betrays the sense of a "natural," "spoken" language.

[xxxiii] A role that has often left them silenced. Consider Baraka's history of the form in *Blues People*, which often excludes the question of gender.

[xxxiv] A personal note: I often teach Shakespeare's "Sonnet 18" in order to dispel such ideological conditioning. I never begin by telling my students that the love object in the poem is a man. When my students discuss the poem, they always do as such through a

heteronormative discourse, assuming that the poem's voice is addressing a woman. Of course we can take this one step further and suggest that the poem is meant to voice the concerns of a woman, in which case the relationship with the Dark Lady would also dispel notions of a strictly heteronormative reading as well.

[xxxv] The yoking together of the experimental and the socially conscious in Mullen's work is also discussed by Deborah Mix in her *A Vocabulary of Thinking: Gertrude Stein and Contemporary North American Women's Innovative Writing* (2007).

[xxxvi] Huehls suggests that Mullen's singular mode of representing disparate strands in the black diasporic tradition is the pun. For Huehls the pun is the writerly figuration that allows Mullen to engage with disparate facets of the African-American tradition: "Specifically, Mullen employs the pun's multiplication of meaning to elaborate on three important themes that recur throughout the poem: exchange economies, subjectivity, and history. The structure and content of Mullen's puns provide an epistemological model for critiquing the surplus value of the body that slave owners suppressed in order to instrumentalize humans; for deploying Du Bois's notion of double consciousness in a way that maintains the fracture as a constitutive part of black subjective consciousness; and for exposing the formative role of miscegenation (racial doubling) in the making of history, a role that history is invested in repressing" (23). While I agree with Huehls's reading of the ways in which Mullen attempts to multiple and problematize notions of black subjectivity, through language, I find his over-reliance on the pun to be rather reductive. I would point to Mullen's conflation of so many disparate aesthetic traditions—the blues, the lyric tradition, the Sapphic tradition—and suggest that one of the virtues of a text like *Muse and Drudge* is that it is attempting to move beyond the notion of a Double Consciousness, that it is arguing more for a schizoid—not in the pathological sense— subjectivity, closer along the lines as that formulated by Deleuze and Guattari in their *Anti-Oedipus: Schizophrenia and Capitalism* (1983), a subjecitivity that is as fractured and stratified as the global flow of capital and which contains multitudes and is not simply bifurcated or split into two.

[xxxvii] And like many of Hughes's poems, Mullen's work suggests that the blues is also a tradition available to women as well. It can be a form in which to carve out a space for a feminist poetics.

[xxxviii] Such a move, of course, also places Mullen in a variety of other traditions, in particular the L=A=N=G=U=A=G=E poets and poststructuralist antihumanist approaches to language.

[xxxix] Gender in particular is an issue that Mullen engages with again and again in her writings. In *Muse and Drudge*, the gendered and ideological implications of the muse in the title are a source of constant critique and examination. Mullen also explores, as Deborah Mix suggests, the possibilities of a woman's writing/language, and what such a writing may look like: "write on the vagina/of virgin lamb paper/mother times mirror/divided by daughter" (112). In this poem, the body itself becomes a writing tablet, suggesting the impossible division of body and language.

[xl] A new anthology of Williams' translations from the Spanish, *By Word of Mouth*, makes this clear. Very little work has been on Williams' existence as a bilingual poet and, therefore, a poet who operated within lingustic traditions that go beyond the American. This, however, is not to suggest that his primary concern was not with the establishment or examination of what an American vernacular might look like, but that his poetics are impossible to divorce from the other traditions he travelled in.

[xli] See his *Anxiety of Influence* (1997) and *The Western Canon* (1995).

[xlii] Gilles Deleuze, in a wonderfully insightful essay titled "On the Superiority of Anglo-American Literature" wrote of the urge for American authors towards flight and movement:

"American literature operates according to geographical lines: the flight towards the West, the discovery that the true East is in the West, the sense of the frontiers as something to cross, to push back, to go beyond" (2002, 37).

[xliii] Place and Fitterman in an appendix to their *Notes on Conceptualisms* supply a syllabus that lists a variety of conceptual practices. Examples include poetry constructed through "appropriation," "appropriation with sampling," "documentation," and "flarf," (73-76) each one of these mini-schools operating in radically different ways

xliv To some extent, all writing is constraint based. Hence the existence of genre, and poetic forms. Even free verse can be said to be contain a constraint: one against constraint. However, the very historicity of the movement also needs to be foregrounded. There is a great amount of self-reflexivity to what such writers are doing, clearly being influenced, for example, by the Oulipo school. There is, in other words, a very distinct and particular quality to the writings from such poets that needs to be considered as being truly all their own.

[xlv] My thanks to Ammiel Alcalay in pointing out this amazingly interesting—and rather frightening—part of the report.

[xlvi] A connection that would suggest an affinity between conceptual poetry and the L=A=N=G=U=A=G=E school that has, to my knowledge, not yet been examined in much detail, although critic Jessica Lewis Luck in her essay "Entries on a Post-Language Poetics in Harryette Mullen's Dictionary," does consider Mullen's connections to the aforementioned tradition.

xlvii Although it should be noted that where Haraway celebrates the coming of the cyborg and its possibilities for engendering new and different subjectivities, partially due to the breakdown between nature and technology, Shiva bemoans this very shattering of such borders. For Shiva, the maintenance of a border separating nature from the human and its technologies is an important part of combating the kind of exploitation of the animal that the Western world has come to take for granted.

[xlviii] An always important term to question and prod with sceptisicm, the notion of originality. What is original, who holds the keys to authenticty and uniqueness? Mullen's work constantly throws into doubt the very idea that we can find something pure, real, in a world where to deny cross-cultural mixing and borrowing has been used to defend the inherently unfair status quo.

[xlix] Ironically enough, can we suggest that Homeric norms of composing through repetition and differentiation is, perhaps, the closest formalistic parallel to oral composing in vernacular forms like the dozens and rap?

[l] Much of this critique against the "common" conception of modernity arises from the simple fact that the poets under discussion here are American poets. As Donald Marshall puts it in his forward to Stephen Melville's book, *Philosophy Beside Itself*: "For the American, modernism is not the sign of alienation and cultural despair in the face of historical catastrophes. On the contrary, through modernism America triumphantly accedes to its rightful status as a world culture in the 'American century.' It is the end of provincialism, the end of childhood. Americans domesticate modernism by regarding it as something with a quite smart European accent, mental furniture harmonious with cheap trips abroad and fond recollections of croissants for breakfast. Nausea in Kalamazoo is a cousin far removed from Bouville. American kitsch voraciously absorbs modernist clichés, which become a standard background, a universalism unconstrained by local history" (xix).

[li] See "The Work of Art in the Age of Mechanical Reproduction." While it is important to keep in mind that Benjmain does not simply bemoan the loss of "aura," there is a melancholy-tinge to the essay that suggests that something has been lost from the world, a

something that can never truly be replaced. One can suggest that this is a further extension of the loss of experience itself.

[lii] As Jacques Ranciere quite tellingly points out in his study *The Word Made Flesh*, modern poetry has internalized Plato's main criticism of poetics in general: that it lies and tends to abstract reality. Poetry has confirmed Plato's greatest fear by *becoming* Plato's greatest fear.

[liii] Granted, this poem is almost taken randomly to support my line of argumentation here; there are hundreds of other poems that could have been used to draw such a line of reasoning. But I take this arbitrary selection process as an indication that many such lyric poems can hold the key to better coming to terms with the idea of what experience can mean with the contexts of American modernity. That one could attempt an understanding of the last hundred years of American history by reading the poem-fossils from poets such as Hughes.

[liv] Wealth clearly in terms of abundance and overflow of experience, not in a sense of "positive" or "better."

[lv] Another readily available example is Joyce's *Finnegans Wake*, a text that many recent scholars have approached through a postcolonial-critical lens.

[lvi] Another readily available example is Joyce's *Finnegans Wake*, a text that many recent scholars have approached through a postcolonial-critical lens.

[lvii] The fact that both women are nameless and are simply identified by their "job" titles suggests an almost archetypal, allegorical feel to the proceedings, making the Dante comparisons easier to understand.

lviii Again, as with almost all the poets under discussion here, I am more interested in the theoretical aspects of Stein's works. Such a reading, I feel, grounds the writers as not mere practitioners of an art but rather as thinkers commited to exploring the vexed relationships between art and social life. We need not read theorists on politics or language to understand where an author is coming from.

lix Even a work as opaque as *Tender Buttons*, for example, can be read as a text more about the process of knowledge than about the simply act of representing things as they are. In other words, Stein is attempting to show us the inner workings of coming to language, and to thought, rather than the end product that is representation.

[lx] While clearly Nijinsky would not have been fully nude while dancing, I simply suggest a kind of "nudity" of revelation in his dancing that is meant to make apparent the hidden and repressed: here sexuality itself. As Joan Acocella writes in her introduction to his madness diaries, Nijinsky, as the Golden Slave in *Scheherazade*, when "he appeared in brown body paint, and grinning, and wound with pearls" was "not so much a sex object as sex itself, with all the accoutrements that the fin de siècle imagination could supply: exoticism, androgyny, enslavement, violence" (X). Nijinsky's Golden Slave, like Williams' Grotesque Dancer, therefore, is meant to represent the Real, to use a Lacanian term, behind the ideological face that exists to buffer our too-direct confrontations with the truth.

[lxi] The implications of such a fact fall, unfortunately, outside the confines of my examination here. It would be interesting, for example, to suggest that Modernism itself already contains within it the seeds of Harraway's conception of the cyborg, for example, and that the Modernist works under discussion here prove as such.

[lxii] See Carl Rapp's *William Carlos Williams and Romantic Idealism* (Hanover: Brown University Press, 1984) for a detailed discussion of Williams as Romantic poet.

[lxiii] Although to what degree the metaphysical can, at our current historical juncture, be fully divorced from any consideration of the theological is impossible to say. One need only reference what metaphysics meant to Aristotle to illustrate that this was not always the case.

[lxiv] See, for example, Ann W. Fisher Werth's essay "'A Rose to the End of Time': Williams Carlos Williams and Marriage," in *Twentieth–Century Literature*, Vol. 36, No. 2, pp. 155-172.
[lxv] The masculinist overtones of the word "genius" are also examined by Gertrude Stein in her *Autobiography of Alice B. Toklas*. It is Stein, writing as Toklas, who says that the only geniuses she has ever met are Picasso, Whitehead and Stein. To what degree Stein's placing of herself within this troika is meant to subvert the masculine, heteronormative and patriarchal notions of genius or further reify them is up for debate.
[lxvi] What can such a term also suggest for readings of such pronouns within English? While such a difference or swerve in knowledge seems to be much more obvious or easier to discern in a language like Spanish where nouns invoke gender, we should always consider the ways language always contains gendered or sexually loaded implications.
[lxvii] A term such as *nosotras*, in other words, exists on a variety of levels. It dissects and moves across a number of different ideological suppositions in regards to identity construction. Like knowledge for Foucault, such terms are used for "cutting" through the strata of experience to allow us to see the ideological underpinnings at work.
[lxviii] Keeping in mind, of course, how the very word *Queer* itself began as a slur, and has now been reused, recycled, reappropriated to suggest a prideful affiliation and connection to a community that has been historically ostracized in America.
[lxix] Particular critical texts of interest are *Weird English* by Ch'ien, *Multilingual America* by Lawrence and *Lost and Found in Translation* by Cutter.
[lxx] Although I would also disagree with Onuwemene's assertion that to transliterate easily establishes the locus of thought in the original source language. Such a division, I would suggest, is already foiled by the process of transliteration, that transliteration argues for a *thought* already existing in the "target" language that does not exist in the "pure" original.
[lxx] Considering American literature through a postcolonial lens is not an attempt to do away, or suggest an equivalency, with the terrible political realities of third world exploitation that necessitated the rise of the discipline, but only to suggest that the outlook can provide us with critical approaches for other contexts as well.
[lxxi] Considering American literature through a postcolonial lens is not an attempt to do away, or suggest an equivalency, with the terrible political realities of third world exploitation that necessitated the rise of the discipline, but only to suggest that the outlook can provide us with critical approaches for other contexts as well.
[lxxii] For Giles, see his *Atlantic Republic: The American Tradition in English Literature* (2002). For Kaplan, see *The Anarchy of Empire in the Making of U.S. Culture* (2005).
[lxxiii] This section began as a discussion of sorts with Van Dyck's essay "Greek Poetry Elsewhere." Where my reading of the process of transliteration takes off from Van Dyck's is in my instance on maintaining the distances that exist between translation and transliteration as different processes that result in different politics. Van Dyck's reading gestures towards the political possibilities of such work but falls short of discussing such issues, preferring instead to focus on the aesthetic and fetishistic qualities of such a poetics.
[lxxiv] A fascinating website (and publishing outfit) by the University of Rochester called Three Percent is an excellent and ongoing resource for the discussion of translation politics and economics. Three Percent has also begun publishing literature in translation under their imprint Open Letter books.
[lxxv] At last count, three percent of the literary texts published every year in the United States are titles in translation.

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[lxxvii] In a different context, but one that has a tangential applicability to the one under discussion here, Nicos Poulantzas has argued for the ways in which the state reduces differences between national groups in terms of temporalities and space. Regardless, the process is the same: the elimination of differences by the state apparatus.

[lxxviii] This is a problematic question to ask within the context of a Greek-American poetics. After all, what sense can we make of the power dynamics that exist between Greek and English, especially since there is no direct history of lingustic and cultural oppression between the two cultures/languages? And considering the fact that English is so inflected by Ancient Greek and Latinate words suggest an undue amount of influence the other way as well.

[lxxix] And as many others before him, Rancière locates the political in the realm of the voice and of language. Who is it that gets to speak, to narrate their own stories? The link between the political and language as speech/talk is nothing new. Consider Spivak's work "Can the Subaltern Speak?" and her work with Judith Butler, "Who Sings the Nation State?" a title which brings to mind a lyrical aspect. I make such points to further bridge the distances that separate discussions of lyric poetry within the realm of the political. Readings that depoliticize the lyric form never simply consider that the speaking voice itself *is* the very fabric of the political.

[lxxx] In this sense, it is helpful to consider transliteration as making apparent the radical alterity that exists within every language, that radical kernel that resists translation but can be "seen" in transliteration. This is not to imply that transliteration reduces languages to some crass equivalencies, but that it simply allows the contours of such irreducible differences to become apparent.

[lxxxi] This simultaneity, also an underlining principle of De Bois's "Double Consciousness," further suggests any and all American identities are fractured and displaced by definition.

[lxxxi] Lawrence Alan Rosenwald writes of the uncertainty of the term America in his *Multilingual America*: "The word…"American"… is an imprecise term…it implies wrongly that America is co-extensive with the United States. But "United States" is also an imprecise term, especially when it is used to refer to events in parts of North America that became part of the United States only later. There is no perfect term here; I use the imperfect ones as seems appropriate, and "American" more often" (ix). The word is a fraught one, if only for the fact that it continues to be contested.

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[lxxxiii] Weirding English and the process of transliteration are not the same, but do share many affinities, especially in the sense that both processes can result in socially and politically challenging texts.

[lxxxiv] The English language itself has become a contested battlefield for many postcolonial writers and rightfull so. Ngugi wa Thiong'o in his seminal text *Decolonizing the Mind* argues

that to fully and completely escape the creative and political stranglehold that English held over his own literature (and perhaps the literature of his nation) he needed to write in his own native tongue of Gikuyu. The connection to the Greek-American case can be made as follows: American critics (that is, critics who most likely only have a grasp on English) are reductively reading such Greek American texts as Economou's or Broumas's through the lens of English only, and that such texts are, therefore, only understood within the context of American literature. These texts demand a multilingual approach.

[lxxxv] I take "aesthetic adventoursness" as an avant guard, radical gesture by which art can be reconciled and made a viable exponent of experience and being. There is a density to this off-hand comment by Chien that, unfortunately, this dissertation does not have the time or space to fully deal with.

[lxxxvi] It would be interesting to consider transliteration as the presence of that which is lost in translation.

[lxxxvii] The prototypical scene of the immigrant working his way through customs and being re-named is a familiar scene in a variety of Greek-American texts. Elia Kazan, for example, illustrates this process of how names are translated rather than transliterated in his film *America, America*. Stavros, who assumes the identity of his dead companion Hohanness Gardashian, gives his name and, in reply, the customs officer gives him the "American name" of Joe Arness. There is no chance for the name Hohanness Gardashian to exist in transliteration but only through translation into English, suggesting that the nation has no room for those whose names it cannot speak.

[lxxxviii] It is interesting that despite Whitman's call for a national poetics that will incorporate all within the discourse of the nation, there is still the cosmic self that "contains multitudes." It is almost impossible, then, to separate the people from the poet and differences are once again lost in translation. This becomes important when one thinks of the Whitman that writes in "Song of Myself," "I am untranslatable," making himself both the first and last word on issues of representation within the nation.

[lxxxix] It would be interesting to consider transliteration as the presence of that which is lost in translation.

[xc] A brief bibliography would include Alice Notley's *The Descent of Alette*, Ed Dorn's *Gunslinger*, Williams Carlos Williams *Paterson*, Charles Olson's *The Maximus Poems*, Robert Duncan's *The Passages* sequence, and texts that are not normally included in such a tradition, such as Ezra Pound's *The Cantos* or Derek Walcott's *Omeros*.

[xci] See Notley's essay, "On Homer's Art."

[xcii] For a fuller understanding of where Žižek stands on this issue, see his *Living in the End Times* (2010), pg. 43-49.

[xciii] See also Broumas's poem, "Artemis," a poem that blurs the linguistic distances between the "O" of English and the Omega (Ω) of Greek.

xciv For a further examination of the role that African-American music played in establishing the Modernist lyric, see Geoffrey Jacques' *A Change in the Weather*. For Jacques "too little attentioin has been paid to the ways in which the lyrics of ragtime-era songs have influenced modernist poetry" (59). What makes Jacques' study truly valubale is his commitment to examining the public life of music in early 20th century America. His argument extends to show how African-American music came to influence the modern lyric.

xcv Full disclosure: I get the sense that this dissertation is simply the beginning of something new, if not something totally different. I see four or five different projects possible beginning from here. The process of writing a dissertation has struck me as the writing of a preface of sorts, the "real" work will come later, perhaps in the near future. This is all preamble, but

perhaps everything is and we simply fool ourselves into thinking that certain things are enclosed and fully realized projects.

xcvi I use the gender-neutral person in lieu of the problematic man for obvious reasons, even if the writers mentioned here do not necessarily do the same. For example, as critics Charles Bernstein and Miriam Nichols have also pointed out, Olson often wrote of "man" as active and creative agent in the world, and such a term, whether Olson truly meant it or not, does necessarily carry patriarchal authority with it. I also use the term person to denote those theoretical and poetic approaches in the works of such writers where the questions raised wish to transcend, or at least avoid, the politics surrounding gender, if such a move is possible.

xcvii As Ernesto Laclau and Chantal Mouffe state in their seminal work, *Hegemony and Socalist Strategy* "we have shown that the category of 'discourse' has a pedigree in contemporary thought going back to the three main intellectual currents of the twentieth century: analytical philosophy, phenomenology, and structuralism. In these three the century started with an illusion of immediacy, of a non-discursively mediated access to the things themselves - the referent, the phenomenon and the sign, respectively. In all three, however, this illusion of immediacy dissolved at some point, and had to be replaced by one form or another of discursive mediation. This is what happened in analytical philosophy with the work of the later Wittgenstein, in phenomenology with the existential analytic of Heidegger, and in structuralism with the post-structuralist critique of the sign" (x). While correct, Laclau and Mouffe are not privy to the idea that many American poets in the last century never truly abandoned or gave up on the immediacy of lived experience, espcially the New American poets such as Olson, Creeley, Duncan, Levertov, Baraka, etc. Hence my hesitation to suggest affinities between philosophically dense terms such as ontology with what poets such as Creeley and Olson are practicing.

xcviii An interesting point suggested to me by Ammiel Alcalay is that Wieners may have been Olson's best student in that he, perhaps more than any other young poet to work under the older master, truly understood the call of the work, and developed an aesthetics beyond superficial recognition.

xcix Miriam Nichols, to give but one example, writes that the differences between Olson and Creeley are ones of scale: "Olson writes on an epic scale, Creeley on the lyric" (71). Again, such a view distorts, to some extent, what both poets were trying to accomplish and certainly obfuscates Olson's concern with the mundane, essential and common experiences of everyday living.

c How does Olson define the polis? To give a fully formed response would require another dissertation. Simply put, I would like to consider polis as the ground upon which any sense of self or personhood is conceived. Locality and geography as a compass for experience, not as abstract quality.

ci Although for the most part I have tried to shy away from applying what has come to be known as "affect theory" to the works under discussion here, if only because Creeley's definition is more than enough to work with, and because the work itself operates within its own terms. Let us work with the particulars under discussion here.

cii Person as opposed to subject for a variety of reasons. The first and most obvious: as a means of trying to move away from a certain theoretical position which the term subject almost automatically initiates. Secondly, and perhaps most importantly, because person suggests a term that operates outside the confines of that—i.e. poststructuralist discourse—theoretical frame. In fact Judith Butler also makes this distinction in her work *The Psychic Life of Power*: "'The subject' is sometimes bandied about as if it were inter- changeable with

'the person' or 'the individual.' The genealogy of the subject as a critical category, however, suggests that the subject, rather than be identified strictly with the individual, ought to be designated as a linguistic category, a placeholder, a structure in formation. Individuals come to occupy the site of the subject (the subject simultaneously emerges as a "site"), and they enjoy intelligibility only to the extent that they are, as it were, first established in language" (10). This distinction is helpful if only becomes it suggests that there is a site or a place for personhood that rests outside of conventional discourse, much in the same way that I have been arguing that American poetics of the last century, in many instances, falls outside of conventional theoretical approaches that seek to confine, theorize, bound and reduce it to "discourse."

ciii An allusion to one of Lawrence's last works, *The Man Who Died*, a novel about the risen Christ, but one that seeks to represent the human aspects of the figure. A precursor of sorts to Nikos Kazantzakis' *The Last Temptation of Christ*.

civ Not very dissimilar from Wordsworth's notion of poetry being the recollection of a moment of spontaneous emotion recollected in tranquility.

cv Singular here, but always plural, multiple, the sense of multitudes as human populace.

cvi Consider how many of Creeley's poems, for example, are about marriage and domestic arrangements. In such poems, even though the voice is situated in the first person, there is always the consideration of an other "self" or another person. The dynamics of the relationship always foreground how the voice will constitute itself.

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