

UC Berkeley

UC Berkeley Electronic Theses and Dissertations

Title

Forma, lo performativo, acción poética: Poetic Art's Critiques of--and Alternatives to--an Americas of Conquest

Permalink

<https://escholarship.org/uc/item/1990m259>

Author

Gonzales, Matthew

Publication Date

2021

Peer reviewed|Thesis/dissertation

*Forma, lo performativo, acción poética: Poetic Art's Critiques of—and Alternatives to—an
Americas of Conquest*

By

Matthew S Gonzales

A dissertation submitted in partial satisfaction of the

requirements for the degree of

Doctor of Philosophy

in

Comparative Literature

and the Designated Emphasis in

Critical Theory

in the

Graduate Division

of the

University of California, Berkeley

Committee in charge:

Professor Robert Kaufman, Co-Chair

Professor Genaro Padilla, Co-Chair

Professor Francine Masiello

Professor Bryan Wagner

Spring 2021

Forma, lo performativo, acción poética: Poetic Art's Critiques of—and Alternatives to—an
Americas of Conquest

© 2021

By Matthew S Gonzales

Abstract

Forma, lo performativo, acción poética: Poetic Art's Critiques of—and Alternatives to—an Americas of Conquest

by

Matthew Gonzales

Doctor of Philosophy in Comparative Literature

University of California, Berkeley

Professor Robert Kaufman, Co-Chair

Professor Genaro Padilla, Co-Chair

This dissertation, "*Forma, lo performativo, acción poética: Poetic Art's Critiques of—and Alternatives to—an Americas of Conquest*," takes a comparative approach to the long history of poetic-artistic form in the Americas, together with an analysis rooted in traditions of Frankfurt-School critical aesthetics, in order to propose an alternative genealogy for the emergence of various modern experimentalisms. From the vantage point of the current fiftieth anniversary of the 1970 Chicano Moratorium Against the Vietnam War (though not limited to that moment alone), "*Forma, lo performativo, acción poética*" examines a broad range of texts from the seventeenth to the twentieth centuries to investigate the development of divergent yet still fundamentally related poetic experimentalisms across the Americas. Whereas existing models of trans-American comparative criticism often foreground essentialist notions of experience and identity to produce the historical "grounds" for comparison, my work builds upon Left-Kantian- and Frankfurt School-based notions of critical aesthetics to explore the performative and thus sociopolitical aspects of artistic form itself. Underscoring the primacy of form as critically reflective aesthetic illusion-experience, I unveil the ways that poets and artists have registered and sought to imaginatively contest the realities of colonial capitalism since the advent of European colonialism in the Western Hemisphere. I thereby begin to argue that there exists a still unrecognized history of poetic-artistic form itself operating as anti-colonial, anti-racist, and anti-heterosexist critique of oppressive systems of thought and action in what I deem an "Americas of Conquest."

"*Forma, lo performativo, acción poética*" sets forth the preliminary mapping of the story of poetic art's formal and substantive contestations of power in the Americas. I look at genre, tropes, and formal conventions that bring poetry to the doorsteps of politics. It begins by examining how enslaved African-American poet Phillis Wheatley and Colonial Mexican poet Sor Juana Inés de la Cruz each made use of the dream-vision genre's narrative framing device to register critiques of the racist and heterosexist ideologies shaping their worlds. From that Colonial-period prelude I move to examine the experiments of nineteenth- through twenty-first-century poets and artists to initiate discussion of the politicized and nominally depoliticized modes of artistic rebellion their work employs. My aim, in doing so, is to underscore that the story this dissertation only begins to tell involves a nineteenth- through twenty-first century narrative, one that senses within it prior histories of poetic form as critique in ways that go as far

back as the colonial encounter itself. I thereby proceed to reconsider, for example, the art experiments of the Civil Rights-era Chicana art collective Asco (Spanish for “disgust”) and the 1970s, Pinochet dictatorship-era Chilean art collective *Colectivo Acciones de Arte* (CADA). Thereafter, I look to the forms of *acción poética* that contemporary poet-artists experiment with, specifically in the work of figures like Emmy Pérez, Rafa Esparza, and Harry Gamboa Jr. While the historical framework of this dissertation might seem arbitrarily overextended, it nonetheless constitutes a necessary experiment that allows me to examine the ways in which poetic form, through its own historical unfolding in the Americas (starting with figures like Sor Juana and Wheatley), begins to register and critique the systems of thought and action that enable and sustain colonization, socioeconomic exploitation, and political oppression in the Americas.

“*Forma, lo performativo, acción poética*” seeks to enhance debates on Chicana/Latina literature and culture as well as on global modernism. By foregrounding the work of Chicana/Latina poets and artists while situating their work within a global context, this dissertation underscores the contributions Latinxs have made to modern trans-American literary culture while at the same time embracing, contesting, or entering in dialogue with Eurocentric histories of modernism. Finally, this dissertation highlights the impact of literary and artistic cultures on social transformation processes, contending that avant-garde poets and artists from the geo-social peripheries have cultivated some of the most radical and egalitarian artistic visions of the future.

Table of Contents

Acknowledgments	ii
Introduction: Towards a Theory of the Poem as Peformative/Poetic Thought- Action	1
Chapter 1: On Imagination and Bondage	10
Chapter 2: Performative/Poetic Art Actions: Asco, CADA, Varda, and the Crisis of Consumer Culture	39
Chapter 3: From the Border to the Sky: Poetic Inscription and Trans-Border Crises	64
Chapter 4: Epigrams, Aphorisms, and Alibis: Violence, Art, and the Law (of Poetic Freedom)	86
Conclusion: Telling the Time of History: Poetry's Reactivation of the Light	111
Bibliography	115

Acknowledgments

I would first like to thank my partner, the incredible poet Mae Ramirez, for having experienced alongside me all of the trials of graduate school. Without her this dissertation would not have been possible. I share this accomplishment with her.

This dissertation would likewise not have been possible without the help of so many people. I owe an incredible amount of thanks to my dissertation committee members. Robert Kaufman has done so much to support me that there is no way to put into words how grateful I am to have met and gotten to work with such an inspiring and generous human being. The only way to possibly allude to all that he has done for me is through understatement. Genaro Padilla, the other wonderful co-chair of my dissertation, has also been an incredible source of support. He singlehandedly helped change the entire direction of my studies, and for that I will forever be thankful. He also introduced me to the greatest and most supportive group of peers and colleagues that I could have hoped to find. Francine Masiello is an inspiration in the fullest sense of the term. Working with and learning from her has been, to put it exceedingly mildly, a blessing. Bryan Wagner has been an incredible and amazing supporter of mine since the moment I met him. I thank him for modeling for me the forms of generosity, professionalism, and support that I can only hope to return to the world.

Others have done much to help me along the way. Tom McEnaney and Harsha Ram contributed a great deal to the direction of my research. I thank them both for advising and supporting me, and for always challenging me to produce better work. Chana Kronfeld, Judith Butler, and Catherine Flynn provided me with writing support, always engaging dialogue, and empowering forms of encouragement. I would like to thank Estelle Tarica for being an early supporter and Ivonne del Valle for welcoming and teaching me with her always kind and supportive patience. I am very grateful as well to Laura Pérez, Angela Marino, and the folks at the UC Berkeley Latinx Research Center for having provided me, in recent years, with a second home on campus. To Oliver Arnold and Beth Piatote I would also like to extend my thanks.

To my dearest friends, the members of the Genaro Padilla Collective (GPC)—Frank Cruz, Carlos Macías Prieto, and Robert Lopez Reyes—I owe an incredible amount of thanks. They all taught me so much and helped me identify and think through, at the earliest and most important stages of writing, this dissertation’s central ideas and questions. Danny Luzon and Bristin Jones coached me through what I experienced as a breakthrough in the writing of this dissertation, and for that I will always be grateful. I would also like to thank the rest of my cohort—Simone Stirner, Amanda Siegel, Christopher Scott, Maya’an Sela, and (honorary member) Bat El Elon—for their friendship and emotional support. My friends Marlena Gittleman, Alex Brostoff, Tara Phillips, Maya Kronfeld, Paco Brito, Laura Wagner, Kevin Stone, and Esther Ramer I would also like to thank. A special shout-out goes to my “Latinx Baddies”: Gladys Rivas, Christian González Reyes, and Miguel Samano. They have been some of the best friends I made throughout my time at Berkeley.

Karina Palau has been my unofficial mentor and a dear friend for the past many years. I want to thank her for showing me that I could be a brave, intelligent, hardworking parent, teacher, and scholar. Alberto Ledesma did much to help me professionally develop. I want to thank him for always being available to listen to and help guide me. Rachel Hynson went out of her way, in ways that are hard to fathom, to generously support me. Much of the recent success I’ve had in my work and life is very much thanks to her. I would also like to thank my former mentors at Cal State University, Long Beach and Chaffey College: Nhora Serrano, Vlatka Velcic, Jordan Smith,

Carl Fisher, Robert Nazar, and the staff of the former CSU Long Beach Ronald E. McNair Program. I thank them for gifting me a life with literature. So too do I thank Sandra Richmond and Rita Lindahl-Lynch for their friendship and support and for the incredible work they do to make all that I've alluded to above possible. To anyone I may have forgotten, know that you have my thanks.

I would like to thank my cousin and best friend Brian Ortiz, my cousin Paul Ortiz, and my homeboys Cristian Rocha, Romeo Pagdilao, Juan Peña, Ravi Patel, and Eric Ramirez for introducing me to a life-world of music, literature, and poetry. My most gracious thanks goes to my good friend, the brilliant historian, Kevan Aguilar. He said the words that convinced me to keep going. And finally, I thank my family—my mother Anna Gonzales, my father Max Daniel Gonzales, my siblings Joseph Gonzales, Steven Gonzales, Denise Gonzales, and Rhonda Gonzales, and my dear daughter Luna Violeta Gonzales. Their love has sustained me and brought meaning to the words and life that I write.

Introduction

Towards a Theory of the Poem as Performative/Poetic Thought-Action

“*Sin poesía no hay ciudad*” (“Without poetry there is no city”) (qtd. in Rodríguez López). So reads the artistic slogan of the grassroots literary movement *Acción Poética* (Poetic Action), a movement founded by Mexican poet Armando Alanís Pulido. The slogan attests to the movement’s effort to move poetry out of the sphere of private intellectualism, bring it into the street, and thereby reaffirm that poetry belongs to the people. *Acción Poética* involves the writing of epigrams on whitewashed walls in public spaces. The movement, since its founding in 1996, has spread to over thirty countries throughout Latin America and Europe and has appeared in over one hundred and eighty cities in Mexico. Through graffiti-art practices, *Acción Poética* invokes the historical origins of epigrammatic form (the inscribing of short-form poems onto gravestones, statues, walls, and other surfaces) to produce a democratically oriented poetic art, one that also reinvents and inverts the seemingly anti-art gesture pioneered by Marcel Duchamp with his ready-mades; indeed, in lieu of the author’s signature, each epigram is instead made a part of the movement when it is anonymously signed “*Acción Poética*.” “[L]a idea es que la poesía sea parte cotidiana del paisaje público” (“[T]he idea is to make poetry a quotidian part of the public landscape”), explains Alanís Pulido (qtd. in Paul, 3). The movement, in short, is an attempt to promote access to literature and poetic art. It provides the public with a creative outlet for responding to the world of violence and exploitation that surrounds them, inviting them to write, participate, create, and thereby reclaim what should already be theirs: the democratic, public space of the streets and the ability to bear witness to truth—not least of which, the truth of their own experiences—via poetic language and art.

While this dissertation, “*Forma, lo performativo, acción poética: Poetic Art’s Critiques of— and Alternatives to— an Americas of Conquest*,” shares significant interests, values, and motivations with the *Acción Poética* movement, it nonetheless articulates a distinct, but related notion of *acción poética*. In what follows, I take a comparative approach to the long history of poetic-artistic form in the Americas, together with an analysis rooted in traditions of Frankfurt-School critical aesthetics, to propose an alternative genealogy for the emergence of various modern experimentalisms. From the vantage point of the current fiftieth anniversary of the 1970 Chicano Moratorium Against the Vietnam War (though not limited to that moment alone), “*Forma, lo performativo, acción poética*” examines a broad range of texts from the seventeenth to the twentieth centuries to investigate the development of divergent yet still fundamentally related poetic experimentalisms across the Americas. Whereas existing models of trans-American comparative criticism often foreground essentialist notions of experience and identity to produce the historical “grounds” for comparison, my work builds upon Left-Kantian- and Frankfurt School-based notions of critical aesthetics that facilitate my own movement across historical periods to explore the performative and thus sociopolitical aspects of artistic form itself. Underscoring the primacy of form as critically reflective aesthetic illusion-experience, I unveil the ways that poets and artists have registered and sought to imaginatively contest the realities of colonial capitalism since the advent of European colonialism in the Western Hemisphere. I thereby begin to argue there exists a still unrecognized history of poetic-artistic form itself operating as anti-colonial, anti-racist, and anti-heterosexist critique of oppressive systems of thought and action in what I deem an “Americas of Conquest.”

“*Forma, lo performativo, acción poética*” sets forth the preliminary mapping of the story of poetic art’s formal and substantive contestations of power in the Americas. It begins by examining how enslaved African-American poet Phillis Wheatley and Colonial Mexican poet Sor Juana Inés de la Cruz each made use of the dream-vision genre’s narrative framing device to register mimetically-generated critiques of the racist and heterosexist ideologies shaping their worlds.¹ From that Colonial-period prelude I move—in what might seem a provocative leap across history—to examine the experiments of nineteenth-, twentieth-, and twenty first-century poets and artists to initiate discussion of the politicized and nominally depoliticized modes of artistic rebellion their work employs while attending to the ways their work challenges, from the outset, identitarian claims of ownership over culture. My aim, in doing so, is to underscore that the story this dissertation only begins to tell involves a nineteenth through twenty-first century narrative, one that senses within it prior histories of poetic form as critique in ways that go as far back as the colonial encounter itself. I thereby proceed to reconsider, for example, the art experiments of the Civil Rights-era Chicana art collective Asco (Spanish for “disgust”) together with those of the 1970s, Pinochet dictatorship-era Chilean art collective *Colectivo Acciones de Arte* (CADA) to reveal how Asco and CADA enunciate separate critiques of state violence, museum culture, and the spiritual nihilism that drives late twentieth-century consumer culture. Furthermore, I look to the forms of *acción poética* that contemporary poet-artists experiment with, specifically in the work of figures like Emmy Pérez, Rafa Esparza, and Harry Gamboa Jr. Although beyond the scope of this particular dissertation, a further mapping out of this story would also entail detailed readings and discussions of the works by figures such as Francisco X. Alarcón, Nicolás Guillén, Lorna Dee Cervantes, Rubén Darío, and others.

While the historical framework of this dissertation might seem arbitrarily overextended, it nonetheless constitutes a necessary experiment that allows me to examine the ways in which poetic form, through its own historical unfolding in the Americas (starting with figures like Sor Juana and Wheatley), begins to register and critique the systems of thought and action that enable and sustain the specific history of colonization, socioeconomic exploitation, and political oppression in the Americas. Through its own law of form (which Theodor W. Adorno refers to as art’s law of movement—its artistic attempt to capture the historical dynamics present in the world), poetic art seeks to make available and bring to expression for us aspects of our subjective experiences of social history that our systems of conceptual meaning and objective analysis don’t, by definition, reach. The dissertation thereby seeks to explore how different poets share (both in their poetry and, at times, in their writing of criticism about it) a crucial set of critical and theoretical premises that the dissertation will attempt to further elaborate. More specifically, the dissertation will aim to put these different poets’ and artists’ work into dialogue with modern traditions of viewing aesthetic, and especially lyric-poetic, experience as having a unique role to play in the process of empowering individuals to sense their own capacity for historical agency and to thereby generate, through the artistic imagining of alternative futures, sociopolitical critique of the “real” historical world. In this way, the dissertation’s title speaks to multiple levels of understanding poetic art, or aesthetic form, as a special kind of *acción poética*, one that is “performative” mainly within the experiential realm of literary art and is thus performatively poetic via the forms of thought-action it seeks to imaginatively realize (or project as realizable) in the real world. A further breakdown of each term in the title might proceed along these lines:

¹ The point here about what we might call their “critical mimesis” is that the poetry’s critical semblance character offered a way for the realities at issue to be registered so that otherwise unacknowledged forms of experience and suffering could be articulated in and as poetic form.

² “[Poetry] at the same time has its own sphere of constraints, expectations, and permissions,” she further adds (26).

Forma (the artistic construction of aesthetic, imaginative, artistic form via experimentation with the materials of literary-poetic history [i.e., “form” in the sense of genre, poetic kinds, styles, etc.], which have embedded within them not just the materials or content of social history, but also the subjectively lived experience of a desire to transcend the laws and constraints of social history); *lo performativo* (the performative gesturing towards critical modes of thought that are staged in every poetic artwork and that the audience is able to openly and freely activate, experience, and engage within their variable re-enactment of the interpretive writing work, or thought, that produced the artwork); and *acción poética* (the experiential sensing of one’s own capacity to arrive at or produce aesthetically-determined [as opposed to objectively-determined] forms of judgment—subjectively-felt realizations that one has the capacity to first poetically imagine and then poetically realize or produce, *outside* the experiential realm of the artwork, alternative visions of the future).

In *Poetry and the Fate of the Senses* (2002), Susan Stewart offers a discussion of the work that poetry does to “[create] the figure of the human” via its imaginative and material engagement with the resources of language (12). Crucial to Stewart’s analysis is her extended discussion of how “poetry is embedded in cultural systems of decorum and sensual regulation” (26).² She observes, in her analysis, exactly how it is that poetry *is* embedded in those systems:

The regulation of the senses, of mouth and speech, is completely bound up with processes of social decorum: with who may do what in the presence or absence of whom on what occasions. The notion of poetic *kinds* is tied to the specificity of their use and occasion: the epithalamion, the elegy, the aubade are at once works of art independent of their particular contexts of production and use and social acts tied to specific rules of decorum. Poems are in this sense acts of social intent and consequence and not things in a world of things (26-27).

Stewart seems to suggest here that poems are, in fact, social acts, i.e., efficacious social actions of meaningful “intent and consequence.” They are not mere “things in a world of things,” but instead living, breathing objects that are somehow able (as if they were living) to perform actions. Stewart alludes to the performative nature of the poem as a kind of thought-action, a special kind of speech act that is fundamentally artistic.³

Mexican poet and literary critic Octavio Paz offers us a related observation about notions of poetic action when he reflects upon the paradoxically historical and trans-historical nature of the poem as a material object that exists in and unfolds throughout historical time:

The writing and reading of poems are acts that happen; they take place in time and can be dated. They are history. But, from another perspective, the contrary is also true. While he is writing, the poet does not know what his poem will be like; he will know only when he reads it, after it is finished. The author is the poem’s first reader, and with his reading a series of interpretations and recreations begins. Each reading produces a different poem. No reading is definitive, and in this sense each reading, not excluding that of the author, is an accident of the text. The text dominates its author-reader and its subsequent readers.

² “[Poetry] at the same time has its own sphere of constraints, expectations, and permissions,” she further adds (26).

³ J.L. Austin invites us to consider the special, artistic nature of the poem as a speech act when he explains to us why he has chosen to *exclude* poetic speech from his considerations of speech-act theory: “a performative utterance will, for example, be in a peculiar way hollow or void if said by an actor on the stage, or if introduced in a poem, or spoken in soliloquy. [...] Language in such circumstances is in special ways—intelligibly—used not seriously, but in ways parasitic upon its normal use—ways which fall under the doctrine of the etiolations of language. All this we are excluding from consideration” (22).

It remains and resists the changes of each reading. The text resists history. At the same time, the text comes into being only through those changes. The poem is a trans-historical potentiality actualized in history, in the reading (*Children of the Mire*, 175).

While Paz concedes that the writing and reading of poems are acts that happen, he nonetheless insists that poems are *not*, in and of themselves, real-world, empirical actions. What he instead suggests is that poems are “trans-historical potentialities,” i.e., performative thought-actions waiting to happen, waiting to be realized in history first by the author and then by subsequent readers. The writing of a poem is an interpretive reading of other poems and of the very notion of poetry as a literary kind. The reading of a poem is an interpretive act that reanimates, or brings back to life, the living forms of exploratory, not-yet-determined thought that had produced the poem: “The text,” Paz writes, “is the condition of the readings, and the readings realize the text” (175); “[t]he text is always the same—and at each reading it is different [...] the reading is a repetition (a creative variation) of the original act: the poem’s composition” (176). Poetic form is realized, in other words, through the performative enactment of interpretive reading, which is subjectively lived and experienced in the experiential encounter with the poem. That experience occurs in the in-between space that is the “elsewhere” of poetic experience, an elsewhere that the human imagination constructs in-between its experience of the poem’s formal elements and its own particular, site-specific, subjectively lived experience of the real world. Somewhere in-between those experiences of the poem and the real world, the subject is invited to imagine how he or she might objectively construct, or produce through real-world action, the change that the subject might have poetically felt, desired, or imagined in his or her experience of the poem. Hence a form of *acción poética* has taken place in the cognitive experience of the poem, a form that anticipates and perhaps even critically, but not coercively, demands the future realization of real-world action, *acción poética* in life.

Pascale Casanova, in her seminal work *The World Republic of Letters* (1999), provides us with a framework for thinking about poems as special kinds of social acts that take place in and are even constitutive of not just literary history, but the sociopolitical history of the modern world as well. In her book, Casanova posits literary history as a particular kind of social history, one that is intimately tied to, but also separate from, the history of the modern world. For Casanova, modern literary history is the history of the development of what she calls “the world republic of letters,” a system of unified international literary space that “has its own mode of operation: its own economy, which produces hierarchies and various forms of violence; and, above, all its own history” (11). “The world of letters,” she further explains, “is a relatively unified space characterized by the opposition between the great national literary space, which are also the oldest—and, accordingly, the best endowed—and those literary spaces that have more recently appeared and that are poor by comparison” (83). Literary history is thereby, for Casanova, the history of the development of a hierarchical system of literary power, recognition, and prestige, the “development of underdevelopment” in the world of letters: “In the world republic of letters, the richest spaces are also the oldest, which is to say the ones that were the first to enter into literary competition and whose national classics came to be regarded as universal classics” (82-83). At stake in the battle for power and recognition *in* the world republic of letters is, according to Casanova, the ability to lay claim to the so-called “present” of literature (which we might otherwise refer to as the horizon of cultural modernity) and thereby lay claim to

the ability to canonize certain authors and their works, to provide them with a form of artistic salvation.⁴

In Casanova's center-periphery model of world literary space, the notion of aesthetic autonomy plays a key role in the historical development of the literary world-system and its unequal distribution of cultural capital. Time and age is supposedly that which gives a particular "national literature" or literary tradition the ability to free itself from the political interest of the nation and thereby—by asserting its own autonomy—achieve international recognition and universal value (85). Casanova views this as an act of translation:

[Autonomous literary] space translates political and national issues into its own terms— aesthetic, formal, narrative, poetic—and at once affirms and denies them. Though it is not altogether free from political domination, literature has its own ways and means of asserting a measure of independence; of constituting itself as a distinct world in opposition to the nation and nationalism, a world in which external concerns appear only in refracted form, transformed and reinterpreted in literary terms and with literary instruments (86).

She then adds:

This very long process, through which autonomy is achieved and literary capital hoarded, tends to obscure the political origins of literature; and, by causing the link between literature and nation to be forgotten, encourages a belief in the existence of a literature that is completely pure, beyond the reach of time and history. (86).

Aesthetic autonomy seems to mean, for Casanova, a nominally depoliticized literary style that divests itself of thematically-articulated sociopolitical content; and it thereby seems to signify that a sort of stand is being made on the part of literary artists "against literary nationalism," and "against the intrusion of politics into literary life" (86).

According to Casanova, time becomes the means by which an author is able to affect some sort of literary rebellion. The performative appropriations and repudiations of specific literary styles, in other words, is what allows literary artists—specifically those from the geo-social peripheries—to enact performatively staged literary rebellions against the centers of power in the literary world-system. The meta-artistic performative staging of such acts is precisely what allows an author to differentiate his or herself from the particular literary trends of his or her historical moment on both a local and global scale. "[B]ecause the modern by definition is always new," she writes, "and therefore open to challenge, the only way in literary space to be truly modern is to contest the present as outmoded—to appeal to a still more present present, as yet unknown, which thus becomes the newest certified present" (91). An acute awareness of what the literary present is—or where the center of literary power is currently located (in which literary styles and modes of literary production)—becomes that which allows authors from the geo-social peripheries the ability to lay claim to the new present of literature and thereby stage a literary rebellion of their own, i.e., by wagering an artistic experiment with literary form and style.⁵

⁴ "The modern work," Casanova writes, "is condemned to become dated unless, by achieving the status of a classic, it manages to free itself from the fluctuations of taste and critical opinion [...] Only in this way can a modern work be rescued from aging, by being declared timeless and immortal" (92).

⁵ Thus Casanova writes: "This specifically literary form of time is perceptible only by those writers on the peripheries of the world of letters who, in their openness to international experience, seek to end what they see as their exile from literature. 'National' writers, by contrast, whether they live in central or outlying countries, are united in ignoring world competition (and therefore literary time) and in considering only the local norms and limits assigned to literary practice by their homelands. Indeed, it would not be going too far to say that the only true

Regarding the study that this dissertation undertakes, perhaps the most pertinent examples that Casanova discusses in her book are the case studies of American poet Walt Whitman and Nicaraguan poet Rubén Darío. Casanova, in her relatively conventional reading of Darío's work, posits his nominally depoliticized work as a rather mechanical appropriation of French literary styles, one that allows him to "[avail] himself of the literary powers of France" and thereby "[succeed] in changing the terms of Hispanic aesthetic debate and in imposing French modernism, first upon Latin America and then, reversing the terms of colonial subjugation, upon Spain as well" (96).⁶ Darío, in other words, rebels against Spanish cultural hegemony by artistically invoking (rather than mechanically copying) the depoliticized modes of writing that apparently belonged to France, but that he nonetheless claims a right to experiment with (in spite of any identitarian claims of ownership over culture that the French or anyone else—including Casanova—might wish to impose upon him and his writing). In her reading of Whitman's work, Casanova acknowledges the way Whitman had turned to a vernacular form of experimental poetics—and to formal experiment with epic poetry—to "[propose] the paradoxical idea of American history as a history of the future" (243). She writes:

Unable to draw upon any historical patrimony whose resources he could then hope to increase, it occurred to him to oppose the present to the hereafter of modernity; that is, to discount the present in favor of the future. Ever since Whitman, declaring that the past [...] is no longer an adequate measure of literary innovation, and setting oneself up as the future, and therefore as the avant-garde, has been the solution favored by American writers eager to throw off the tutelage of London who have tried to offset Europe's historical advantages by pronouncing it passé and outmoded (243).

Whitman, in other words, enacts a similar, but stylistically different, literary rebellion to the one that Darío would later enact at the end of the nineteenth century. Unlike Darío, however, Whitman does not turn to a seemingly depoliticized mode of writing. Instead he turns to a mode that seems to double down on an expansive, future-oriented, anti-nationalist vision of the national. Like Darío, he seems to reject the operating logic of the literary world-system, which hinges upon the notion that culture (in whatever shape or form it takes) is the exclusive patrimony of any one particular nation. Aesthetic autonomy, at least as it appears in Casanova's theory, seems to be a rejection of that organizing principle, a rejection of the power that the literary center seems to hold over the periphery, even when that power is masked as nominally "depoliticized" and "international."

Aesthetic autonomy is, as I will show throughout this dissertation, the experience or sensing of one's own ability to arrive at non-predetermined forms of aesthetic judgment, an experience which is registered and made available to recipients of the work in the very material construction or formal composition of the work. It is an experience that one has in the material, but nonetheless ephemeral and fundamentally subjective, experiential process of producing and receiving poetic artworks. In the dissertation, I rely heavily on Left-Kantian notions of aesthetic experience (from Kant to Marx to the Frankfurt School) to underscore the critically reflective nature of the experience that poetic artworks provide as material objects existing in (and in

moderns, the only ones fully to recognize and know the literature of the present, are those who are aware of the existence of this system of literary timekeeping and who, as a result, acknowledge the force of the aesthetic revolutions that have shaped world literary space and the international laws that structure it" (94).

⁶ See Matei Calinescu's *Five Faces of Modernity: Modernism, Avant-Garde, Decadence, Kitsch, Postmodernism* (1977), pp. 69-70.

dialogue with) the “real world,” but also as objects that are as dynamically constructed to be experienced as open-ended artworks—artworks that provide the form rather than the substance of objective conceptuality. The dissertation seeks, in other words, to map out how the poetic artworks in question operate as symbolic forms of thought-action, material objects that register and attest to the historical realities of the modern world, but that also meta-artistically signal their own aesthetic-illusion, or semblance, character to indicate the critical, agency-generating nature of their own unfinished and open-ended quality. The poetic artworks analyzed throughout this dissertation are themselves invested in meta-artistically articulating (through the very way they take up and experiment with poetic-artistic form) a notion of *acción poética* as a way of not just conceptually suggesting or describing the utopian possibilities of agency-driven human action, but allowing their recipients to subjectively feel and experience those possibilities through form’s critique-driven law of movement.

Chapter one takes a historical step backwards to examine the dream vision genre of poetry in the Americas in the seventeenth and eighteenth centuries, specifically in the work of enslaved African-American poet Phillis Wheatley and colonial Mexican poet Sor Juana Inés de la Cruz. I analyze how each poet made innovative use of the dream vision genre’s narrative framing device to register powerful critiques of the racist and heterosexist ideologies shaping their worlds. The chapter argues that Wheatley and Sor Juana mobilize the genre not just to critique, but also articulate their own meta-poetic theories on the very nature of poetic qua aesthetic experience—theories that imagine what it means for historically marginalized subjects like themselves to freely engage in the making and receiving of imaginative poetry. In other words, I show that each poem expresses a profound awareness of its own significance as subversive thought-action against the racist and heterosexist systems of thought that historically produced conditions of marginalization and enslavement in the Americas. By analyzing Wheatley’s and Sor Juana’s work in light of seventeenth- and eighteenth-century discourses on race, gender, and the imagination, I show that their poetry anticipates the philosophic and poetic trends of early nineteenth-century British and German Romanticism, offering what amount to proto-Romantic and proto-modern theories of the aesthetic imagination as well as proto-Kantian theories of poetic art as agency-generating experience.

Using the opening chapter’s interrogations of the dream vision genre’s allegorical explorations of how poetic dream (whether represented as a literal dream, as in Sor Juana, or as an imaginative, dream-like flight, as in Wheatley) stands in a foundational manner for poetic-aesthetic experience (i.e., the experiential sensing of one’s own capacity for critical-reflective subjectivity), the dissertation then leaps ahead to the twentieth century to examine various critical modes of twentieth-century poetic-artistic experiment and how those experiments seek to register and respond to what amounts to the tragic, ongoing legacy of conquest and colonization in the Americas.

In light of the recent fifty-year anniversary of the Chicano Moratorium Against the Vietnam War, as well as the recent passing of the legendary French New Wave film director Agnès Varda, chapter two examines the seldom discussed collaboration between Varda (one of the twentieth and twenty-first centuries’ greatest filmmakers) and the Chicano art collective Asco (Spanish for “disgust”), one of the most important art groups to have emerged from the crucible of the Moratorium. Through the methodological lens of Frankfurt-School critical aesthetics, this chapter argues that Asco and Varda, as well as the Pinochet dictatorship-era art collective *Colectivo Acciones de Arte* (CADA) in Chile, mobilized experimental artistic form itself to

confront the crises of consumer culture.⁷ Following Walter Benjamin (1969) and Theodor W. Adorno (1992), I assert that Asco and CADA enunciate distinct but related critiques of museum culture, state violence, and the spiritual nihilism that drives late twentieth-century consumer culture. Likewise, in arguing for the still-unrealized significance of the Asco-Varda collaboration, I contend that it helps us think critically about the meaning of the Moratorium, along with the art that emerged from it, in the context of the widespread and overtly racist politics in contemporary U.S. political discourse.

Chapter three looks to formal poetic experiment with the sky and with the elemental image of the river in order to transcend some of the conceptual and historical borders that paradoxically delimit the transnational and interdisciplinary field of Latinx literary studies. The chapter comparatively analyzes four poetic artworks: César Vallejo's "Pedro Rojas" poem, from *España, aparta de mí este cáliz*; Raúl Zurita's poetic "happening" "La vida nueva"; the recent 2020 U.S.-based artist intervention project *In Plain Sight*; and Emmy Pérez's poem "Río Grande~Bravo," from her 2016 volume of poems *With the River on Our Face*. In the chapter, I argue that both the sky and the river appear in these artworks as a figure for the material but nonetheless fundamentally subjective dimensions of poetic experience. By turning to formal experiment with the sky—and in Emmy Pérez's work, to formal experiment with the river—each of the works in question attempts to register and attest to the horrific violence and human-rights abuses that had occurred in the world-historical crises that each work separately treats: namely, the 1936-1939 Spanish Civil War; the brutal 1973 Chilean coup d'état and its long, nightmarish aftermath; and the Trump Administration-era humanitarian crisis at the U.S.-México border.

In chapter four, I analyze the poetic-artistic experiments with epigrammatic form of three poet-artists: former core member of the Chicana art collective Asco Harry Gamboa Jr.; Peruvian poet César Vallejo; and Nicaraguan poet Ernesto Cardenal. The chapter argues that each of these artists turns to the epigrammatic form and its satirizing turn of thought to critique their political and artistic opponents while utilizing the experience of the artwork to imaginatively emancipate their audiences from the various forms of policing of both life and thought that the artists historically encounter in life. Through their experiments with what is perhaps the most distilled sub-genre of lyric poetry, these poet-artists critically imagine a realm of poetic experience that is fundamentally in excess of the conceptual determinations of sociopolitical history—a realm that allows each artist to produce, and thereafter seek to realize in life, the artistically imagined dream of a more radiant and just future. That dream is predicated on being free from the brutality of state violence and the at once materially- and spiritually-crushing character of a life determined by the concept and practice of exchange-value. If aesthetic and then particularly lyric form is literature's way of most intensely registering, for cognition and subjectivity alike, our sense capacity for critical-reflective experience, then epigrammatic form stands, in this chapter, as the most intensified micro-form of a semblance-based dynamic that seeks to inscribe such possibility into ourselves and, by extension, into the world.

Ultimately, "*Forma, lo performativo, acción poética*" seeks to enhance debates on Chicana/Latina literature and culture as well as on global modernism. By foregrounding the work of Chicana/Latina poets and artists while situating their work within a global context, this

⁷ Crucially, Asco, Varda, and CADA all see the crisis of consumer culture as inseparable from a larger capitalist economy that aims at mobilizing the cultural aspects of commodity-based society to transform the lifeworlds of the marginalized, dominated, and oppressed into expropriated, gentrified, and remade as "white" living spaces. The title of Varda's film, *Mur Murs*, plays on the Spanish and French terms for the very same walls that so much Chicano artists made—and continue to make—use of.

dissertation underscores the contributions Latinxs have made to modern trans-American literary culture while at the same time contesting Eurocentric histories of modernism. It also seeks to do this by attending to the formal-reflective aspects of their attempts to create artworks that are in excess of and not entirely identical with their political and theoretical stances and motivations. Finally, this dissertation highlights the impact of literary and artistic cultures on social transformation processes, contending that avant-garde poets and artists from the geo-social peripheries have cultivated some of the most radical and egalitarian artistic visions of the future.

Chapter 1

On Imagination and Bondage

Poems and artworks are the material manifestations of historically specific moments of encounter between human subjects and the history of aesthetic form. “The poem,” writes Octavio Paz, “is a trans-historical potentiality [*virtualidad transhistórica*] actualized in history, in the reading” (175). What Paz means by this and related observations, such as “[t]he writing and reading of the poem are acts that happen” (175), is that poems are both: (1) the material manifestations of the interpretive writing work it took to produce them; and (2) material things (be they objects, ideas, or events) that are subsequently brought into being, or made living, in a moment of actualization when the interpretive writing work it took to produce them gets repeated and varied upon by the reader. Paz presents a theory of the poem as a performative construct, and he is not the only one to do so. Susan Stewart and Pascale Casanova have more recently presented theories of poetry and literature as kinds of performative acts, ones that take place in specific geographic and socio-historical locations. Stewart writes: The notion of poetic *kinds* is tied to the specificity of their use and occasion: the epithalamion, the elegy, the aubade are at once works of art independent of their particular contexts of production and use and social acts tied to specific rules of decorum. Poems are in this sense acts of social intent and consequence and not things in a world of things (27). Casanova, meanwhile, offers an history-*cum*-theorization of international literary space wherein the performative appropriations and repudiations of specific literary styles constitute rebellious and revolutionary acts within that space (which she eponymously dubs *The World Republic of Letters*). This mode of thinking, which seeks to evaluate the performative and thus sociopolitical effects of literature and poetry, might be complicated by putting it into dialogue with Kantian- and Frankfurt School-based notions of the aesthetic, which hold that the very concept of art is itself a formal gesture of critique, one characterized by the way artworks mark themselves as semblance or illusion. “In marking itself as illusion,” writes Robert Kaufman, “(as the form rather than substance of conceptuality), in advertising its illusion character to its audience, art signals the interaction and interdependence of, but also the difference between, itself and the world” (210).

This dissertation will argue that there is a still too unrecognized history of poetic-artistic form itself operating as anti-colonial, anti-racist, and anti-heterosexist critique of oppressive systems of thought and action (those proper to the modern world-system and its literary correlate, the world republic of letters) in what I deem an “Americas of Conquest.” Throughout the dissertation, a form of world-systems analysis will be practiced insofar as the unit of analysis will not be a single historical period or location, but rather the history and development of a literary-world system as we encounter it through key episodes chosen for the way they reveal that system’s inner workings. This chapter begins with an analysis of two poems in particular: Phillis Wheatley’s “On Imagination” (1773) and Sor Juana Inés de la Cruz’s *Primero sueño* (*First Dream*) (1692). These poems operate as critical reflections upon the nature of poetic *qua* aesthetic experience and the socio-historical experience of marginalization and bondage. Insofar as they constitute embodied, interpretive expressions of Sor Juana’s and Wheatley’s particular subjective experiences of the colonial/capitalist world, these poems offer separate critiques of the racist and heterosexist ideologies that contribute to the hierarchical structuring of that world. Both poems seem to conceptualize poetic experience and expression itself as a human right, one that comes into conflict with (to borrow language from Adorno) the “pressures of the struggle to

survive” (45). In each of these poems, a notion of imaginative dream vision is at play. Presented in each is a dream or dream-like experience that metaphorically-*cum*-allegorically stands in for aesthetic judgment-experience. Through a remarkable and idiosyncratic use of the narrative framing device that is proper to the dream-vision genre, both poems offer critiques of the socio-historical experience of marginalization and bondage. The dissonant charge of the experience offered by these poems when they highlight the difference between aesthetic illusion-experience and the experience of social history operates as a kind of demand for sociopolitical change that the reader is able to feel and experience aesthetically (in the illusion-experience of the work) across time. Through our analysis here we see and how poetic form, through its own historical unfolding in the Americas, beings to register and critique the systems of thought and action that enable and sustain the specific history of colonization, socioeconomic exploitation, and political oppression in the Americas.

On September 11th, 1773, Phillis Wheatley became the first Black person to have ever written and published a poetry manuscript in the English language. The book, titled *Poem on Various Subjects, Religious and Moral*, contained thirty nine poems, an engraved image of the author, a dedication page, a preface by the author, and two letters, one written by her owner John Wheatley, and another written and signed by a council of eighteen white Bostonian men. This second letter states:

AS it has been repeatedly suggested to the Publisher, by Persons, who have seen the Manuscript, that Numbers would be ready to suspect they were not really the Writings of PHILLIS, he has procured the following Attestation, from the most respectable Characters in *Boston*, that none might have the least Ground for disputing their *Original*.

We whose Names are under-written, do assure the World, that the POEMS specified in the following Page, were (as we verily believe) written by PHILLIS, a young Negro Girl, who was but a few Years since, brought an uncultivated Barbarian from *Africa*, and has ever since been, and now is, under the Disadvantage of serving as a Slave in a Family in this Town. She has been examined by some of the best Judges, and is thought qualified to write them.

Among the signatures included in the letter is that of future Declaration-of-Independence signer John Hancock. His signature, along with those of the letter’s other signatories, gives the letter a kind of legal force. It attests to the fact that a landmark decision had been made regarding the Black race’s ability to produce poetry, as it was essentially decided that, contrary to popular eighteenth-century opinion, Blacks were in fact capable of producing it.

In *The Trials of Phillis Wheatley* (2003), Henry Louis Gates Jr. rehearses the longstanding controversy surrounding Wheatley’s *Poems*, starting with the so-called “trial” of Phillis Wheatley, the courtroom-like encounter between her and the council of men who would orally examine her and then produce the attestation letter. Gates then proceeds to discuss the second “trial” Wheatley and her *Poems* would be subjected to, as conducted by Thomas Jefferson in his criticism of her work. In this historical episode, Jefferson, the man who wrote the Declaration of Independence, also writes these words about Phillis Wheatley: “Misery is often the parent of the most affecting touches in poetry. Among the blacks is misery enough, God knows, but not poetry. Love is the peculiar oestrum of the poet. Their love is ardent, but it kindles the senses only, not the imagination. Religion, indeed, has produced a Phyllis Whately [*sic*]; but it could not produce a poet. The compositions published under her name are below the dignity of criticism” (qtd. in Gates, 44).

As Gates explains, Jefferson's words participate in an "Enlightenment conversation on race and reason" insofar as they mimic the opinions expressed by Enlightenment-era philosophers David Hume and Immanuel Kant, who wrote that Blacks were incapable of producing poetry, art, and science on account of a perceived mental inferiority. On the basis of their observations that no Black person had yet been observed to have "ever discovered any symptoms of ingenuity," as Hume writes—or, as Kant states, "presented anything great in art or science"—both Hume and Kant conclude that Blacks were an inferior human subspecies more akin to apes than whites. Hume's dismissal of the work of Francis Williams, a Black Jamaican man who in 1759 had written an ode in Latin, is echoed in Jefferson's criticism of Wheatley. "In Jamaica," writes Hume, "indeed they talk of one Negro as a man of parts and learning; but 'tis likely he is admired for very slender accomplishment, like a parrot, who speaks a few words plainly" (qtd. in Gates, 24-25).

Jefferson's charge that the education and spirituality provided by religion "could not produce a poet," only a "Phyllis Whately," is a way of calling Wheatley a fake, parrot-like imitator-poet. He accuses her, in Benjaminian terms, of mechanical reproduction. To Jefferson, she is the quintessential example of the Black race's inability to produce original, critical thought. Her poetry and its inability to kindle or excite his imagination is supposed to be proof of that fact (although what it also really proves is his inability to exercise his imagination to the extent required to realize the significance of her poetry). And perhaps what is most remarkable is that Wheatley knew her poetry would be criticized for being mere imitation.

In his criticism of her poetry, Jefferson's use of the word "imagination" is no coincidence. "Imagination" had at that point in the late eighteenth century become the core value of the developing trend of thought that would soon become British and German Romanticism. As historian James Engell argues, "[t]he creative imagination had [...] become, by 1780, an ideal to believe in wholeheartedly, a goal, a state of mind or being toward which to aspire—something it had never been before" (viii). One of the major figures in the history of the development of this idea of the imagination is Joseph Addison, who published his influential *Spectator* series on "the pleasures of the imagination" in 1712. This series of essays sets out to describe "what it is that gives a beauty to many passages of the finest writers both in prose and verse," as Addison explains in the prefatory essay "On Taste" (112). The series is essentially a treatise on the value of aesthetic experience. Like a doctor prescribing medicine, Addison intends to prescribe the "pleasures of the imagination" to his reader: "to recommend to my reader the pursuit of those pleasures." Addison creates two categories of these "pleasures": first, the primary pleasures "which entirely proceed from such objects as before our eyes"; and then the secondary pleasures "which flow from the ideas of visible objects, when the objects are not actually before the eye, but are called into our memories, or formed into agreeable visions of things, that are either absent or fictitious" (113). These secondary pleasures are those produced by art objects, and they "[proceed] from that action of the mind which compares the ideas arising from the original objects with the ideas we receive from the statue, the picture, the description, or sound, that represents them" (117).

Addison's theory is a proto-Kantian theory of aesthetic judgment-experience. What appears in Kant as a division between the beautiful and the sublime appears in Addison as a tripartite division between the "*great, uncommon, or beautiful*," three forms of pleasing-to-the-
imagination experience (113). Addison anticipates, or sets the stage for, Kant and his feeling of the sublime when he argues that "[o]ur imagination loves to be filled with an object, or to grasp

at any thing that is too big for its capacity.”⁸ He also anticipates Kant’s notion and theoretical description of a “subjective universality” when he writes: “We are struck, we know not how, with the symmetry of a thing we see, and immediately assent to the beauty of an object without inquiring into the particular causes and occasions of it” (113). Kant will later write that “the beautiful is that which apart from concepts is represented as the object of a universal satisfaction.” He explains further:

[because] it [the beautiful] does not rest on any inclination of the subject (nor upon any other premeditated interest), but since the person who judges feels himself quite *free* as regards the satisfaction which he attaches to the object, he cannot find the ground of this satisfaction in any private conditions connected with his own subject, and hence it must be regarded as grounded on what he can presuppose in every other person [...] He will therefore speak of the beautiful as if beauty were a characteristic of the object and the judgment logical (constituting a cognition of the object by means of concepts of it), although it is only aesthetical and involves merely a reference of the representation of the object to the subject (emphasis in original, 378).

While Addison anticipates and most likely influences Kant, there are notable differences between their theories. Addison, for example, defines the pleasures of the imagination as those which “arise from visible objects, either when we have them actually in our view, or when we call up their ideas into our minds by paintings, statues, descriptions, or any the like occasion” (113). And so he defines his theory of aesthetic experience primarily in terms of the sense-experience of sight while Kant privileges no particular form of sensory experience. What might be the most significant difference between their theories is the way each author deals with the subject of standards of taste. Whereas Kant clearly states that “[t]here can be no objective rule of taste which shall determine by means of concepts what is beautiful,” “[f]or every judgement from this source is aesthetical; i.e., the feeling of the subject, and not a concept of the object, is its determining ground” (379, 384), Addison maintains the idea that “good taste” is an extant thing that can be cultivated through “polite conversation” with “the writings of the most polite authors” and “men of polite genius.” “It is likewise necessary,” he writes, “for a man who would form to himself a finished taste of good writing, to be well versed in the works of the best critics both ancient and modern” (“On Taste,” 112). Another more ambivalent statement of his proclaims that the difference in taste between men “must proceed either from the perfection of imagination in one more than in another, or from the different ideas that several readers affix to the same words.” He makes this claim before doubling down and stating:

For to have a true relish, and form a right judgment of a description, a man should be born with a good imagination, and must have well weighed the force and energy that lie in the several words of a language, so as to be able to distinguish which are most significant and expressive of their proper ideas, and what additional strength and beauty they are capable of receiving from conjunction with others. The fancy⁹ must be warm, to retain the print of those images it hath received from outward objects, and the judgment discerning, to know what expressions are most proper to clothe and adorn them to the best advantage. A man who is deficient in either of these respects, though he may receive

⁸ Kant later writes: “The feeling of the sublime is therefore a feeling of pain arising from the want of accordance between the aesthetical estimation of magnitude formed by the imagination and the estimation of the same formed by reason. There is at the same time a pleasure thus excited, arising from the correspondence with rational ideas of this very judgment of the inadequacy of our greatest faculty of sense, insofar as it is a law for us to strive after these ideas” (389).

⁹ Addison uses the terms “fancy” and “imagination” synonymously.

the general notion of a description, can never see distinctly all its particular beauties; as a person with a weak sight may have the confused prospect of a place that lies before him, without entering into its several parts, or discerning the variety of its colors in their full glory and perfection (118).

This is the sort of deficiency of which Jefferson accuses Wheatley and the entire Black race. It is a deficiency that cannot be compensated for by any amount of cultivation, as the figure Jefferson creates of Wheatley as imitator-poet proves in his eyes.

Wheatley anticipates and works to counter this form of criticism in her work. We might turn to her most controversial poem “On being brought from Africa to America” to begin our exploration of how her poetry does this. This short, eight line-long poem is occasionally cited as proof that Wheatley was grateful for her enslavement and that she considered the institution of slavery to be a benevolent, merciful thing that delivered her from a state of ignorance:

’Twas mercy brought me from my *Pagan* land,
Taught my benighted soul to understand
That there’s a God, that there’s a *Saviour* too:
Once I redemption neither sought nor knew.
Some view our sable race with scornful eye,
“Their colour is a diabolic die.”
Remember, *Christians*, *Negros*, black as *Cain*,
May be refin’d, and join th’ angelic train (1-8).

Wheatley wrote the poem when she was only fourteen years old, about seven years after she had been kidnapped from her home in West Africa and brought across the Middle Passage on the slave ship she would be named after (the *Phyllis*) to be sold at an auction in Boston. Readers who view this poem as a sign of her submissiveness to whites are likely struck by her use of the word “mercy” instead of “cruelty,” or the more factual, though by no means neutral, “slave ship”; her pejorative designation of Africa as a “*Pagan* land”; and the apparent message that her enslavement was an act of merciful redemption as opposed to a brutally cruel act. Wheatley appears to express her appreciation for slavery, which becomes synonymous here with religious education and enlightenment. But what many readers miss is the way this poem is designed to counter racist notions that Blacks can’t be educated or spiritually “refin’d.” That or they perceive the implicit fault of such a claim, which suggests that Blacks, as opposed to slave-owning whites, are the ones in need of some form of corrective refinement. But the poem is more complex than that, especially when we consider the ways that a secular education is enfolded into the religious education alluded to here.

Because the poem is addressed to a white audience as a kind of reprimand, it could also be construed as being addressed to Blacks as a kind of tongue-in-cheek admonishment of whites. The poem’s message is this: Christians (i.e., whites), stop racializing Blacks; stop viewing them as incapable of religious thought and feeling; stop viewing them as deficient; you are wrong to do so. This message ultimately suggests that whites are the ones in need of corrective refinement, a refinement that the poem itself seeks to give. By juxtaposing the terms “*Christians*” and “*Negros*,” the poem ironizes the ostensibly deracialized, but actually racialized as “white,” meaning of the term “Christian.” The poem works against the process of racialization at multiple levels: (1) by conveying the aforementioned message; (2) by having that message explicitly conveyed by a Black speaker, who presumptuously *qua* subversively assumes an authoritative,

down-speaking voice; and (3) by operating as the material manifestation of the actual ability of a Black person to produce high-order thought in the dual form of religious sentiment and secular poetry. The dual effect of the poem's closing admonishment might be more effectively grasped if we consider the possibility, however unlikely, that the final two lines were written with the following hyperbaton in mind: "Remember, *Negros*, black as *Cain*, *Christians* / May be refin'd, and join th' angelic train."

The best and most remarkable example to which we might turn to examine how Wheatley's poetry anticipates and responds to the racist criticism her work would receive is the poem "On Imagination." Like Jefferson's use of the term "imagination," it is no coincidence that Wheatley uses it here. She too is participating in the developing trend of thought that would soon turn into Romanticism. In fact, Wheatley's poem expresses a proto-Kantian theory of aesthetic experience that is even more "proto-Kantian" and "proto-Romantic" than even Addison's theory. Moreover, it is a theory that simultaneously operates as a subversive thought-action against anti-Black racism. Here is the full poem:

Thy various works, imperial queen, we see,
How bright their forms! how deck'd with pomp by thee!
Thy wondrous acts in beauteous order stand,
And all attest how potent is thine hand.

From *Helicon*'s refulgent heights attend,
Ye sacred choir, and my attempts befriend:
To tell her glories with a faithful tongue,
Ye blooming graces, triumph in my song.

Now here, now there, the roving *Fancy* flies,
Till some lov'd object strikes her wand'ring eyes,
Whose silken fetters all the senses bind,
And soft captivity involves the mind.

Imagination! who can sing thy force?
Or who describe the swiftness of thy course?
Soaring through the air to find the bright abode,
Th' empyreal palace of the thund'ring God,
We on thy pinions can surpass the wind,
And leave the rolling universe behind:
From star to star the mental optics rove,
Measure the skies, and range the realms above.
There in one view we grasp the mighty whole,
Or with new worlds amaze th' unbounded soul.

Though *Winter* frowns to *Fancy*'s raptured eyes
The fields may flourish, and gay scenes arise;
The frozen deeps may break their iron bands,
And bid their waters murmur o'er the sands.
Fair *Flora* may resume her fragrant reign,

And with her flow'ry riches deck the plain;
Sylvanus may diffuse his honours round,
And all the forest may with leaves be crown'd:
Show'rs may descend, and dews their gems disclose,
And nectar sparkle on the blooming rose.

Such is thy pow'r, nor are thine orders vain,
O thou leader of the mental train:
In full perfection all thy works are wrought,
And thine the sceptre o'er the realms of thought.
Before thy throne the subject-passions bow,
Of subject-passions sov'reign ruler Thou,
At thy command joy rushes on the heart,
And through the glowing veins the spirits dart.

Fancy might now her silken-pinions try
To rise from earth, and sweep th' expanse on high;
From *Tithon's* bed now might *Aurora* rise,
Her cheeks all glowing with celestial dies,
While a pure stream of light o'erflows the skies.
The monarch of the day I might behold,
And all the mountains tipt with radiant gold,
But I reluctant leave the pleasing views,
Which *Fancy* dresses to delight the *Muse*;
Winter austere forbids me to aspire,
And northern tempests damp the rising fire;
They chill the tides of *Fancy's* flowing sea,
Cease then, my song, cease the unequal lay (1-53).

The poem might be categorized as a “dream vision” poem in the sense that it makes strategic use of the specific framework that is proper to the dream-vision genre. That framework has been described by numerous scholars, most notably those of the late medieval English dream-vision poem,¹⁰ as involving (1) the first person account of a dream, followed by (2) a description of the dreamer's awakening. When reduced to its most essential elements, the dream-vision poem is a narrative framing device that separates two distinct modes of experience: historical experience of empirical reality; and the mentally-projected illusion experience of the imagined reality that is the dream.

The poem begins with a proto-Kantian proclamation about the imagination's power and ability to produce beautiful works that would be universally recognized as such:

Thy various works, imperial queen, we see,

¹⁰ For more on the dream-vision genre, see the following: Constance B. Heatt's *The Realism of Dream Visions: The Poetic Exploitation of the Dream-Experience in Chaucer and His Contemporaries*. Mouton & Co, 1967; J. Stephen Russell's *The English Dream Vision: Anatomy of a Form*. Ohio State University Press, 1988; A. C. Spearing's *Medieval Dream-Poetry*. Cambridge University Press, 1976; and Douglas B. Wilson's *The Romantic Dream: Wordsworth and the Poetics of the Unconscious*. University of Nebraska Press, 1993.

How bright their forms! how deck'd with pomp by thee!
Thy wondrous acts in beauteous order stand,
And all attest how potent is thine hand.

The use of the collective “we” in the first line already begins to suggest the apparent universality of the works created by the “imperial queen” imagination. But it is the stanza’s final line that offers a clear indication that all persons would universally attest (*à la* subjective universality) to the imagination’s power to produce beautiful forms if and when confronted by them. Still, the more subtle and potentially subversive point this line articulates is that all persons indiscriminately (regardless of something like race, class, gender, etc.) have the capacity to see and recognize such beauty where and when it occurs.

Stanza three begins the poem’s poetic-*cum*-analytical description of the imagination. “Now here, now there, the roving *Fancy* flies,” the speaker explains, using the figure of *Fancy* to personify the imagination in a way that allows them to maintain their use of heroic couplets while literalizing the meaning of the idiom “flight of fancy,” which suggests a “soaring” (as in adventurous and unrestrained) use of the imagination. This also allows the speaker to create alliterative, fricative, and sibilant sound-play with the words “*Fancy* flies.” While the apparent distinction being made here between “roving *Fancy*” and “imperial queen” imagination does seem to anticipate in remarkable ways the rigorous distinction Samuel Taylor Coleridge would later make between fancy and imagination in *Biographia Literaria* (1817), it is also the case that these terms were used synonymously at the time Wheatley was writing, most notably by Addison and Mark Akenside. Here and throughout the poem “imagination” is used in a more celebratory mode of writing, while “fancy” (the more prosodic term) is used more frequently to describe the imagination’s activity, i.e., how it works, and what makes it so powerful and praiseworthy in the first place.¹¹

The speaker proceeds to describe the moment when the imagination, in the midst of its wandering flight, encounters and then becomes captivated—held in the “silken fetters” of what the speaker calls a “soft captivity”—by the image of a particular thing or object. This description and its playfully strange transformation of the more figurative notion of captivity *qua* fascination into the more literal state of bondage or captivity serves to highlight the imagination’s *seemingly* passive role in the process of deciding what sort of idea, object, or image it regards as interesting. The grammar of this passage *seems* to suggest that it is the object with its captivating qualities that actively works to capture the imagination via its interest. But

¹¹ Not only did Addison make similar use of the terms “imagination” and “fancy,” which he equated with one another, but so too did Mark Akenside, author of *The Pleasures of Imagination* (1744), a didactic poem based on Addison’s work that also happens to be the most likely source that Wheatley had read related to Addison and the emerging discourse on imagination. In fact, Wheatley appears to have borrowed the phrase “silken fetters” from Akenside’s poem, which in book two states: “Has thy constant heart refused/The silken fetters of delicious ease?” (561-562). Prior to Wheatley, Addison, and Akenside, the two terms were *not* used synonymously. For a detailed history of the distinction between fancy and imagination and an account of how the traditional distinction (which placed fancy above imagination) was reversed in and throughout the eighteenth century (culminating in Coleridge), see the thirteenth chapter in James Engell’s *The Creative Imagination: Enlightenment to Romanticism*. Harvard University Press, 1981. It’s also worth noting that even if a weak distinction is, in fact, being made between the two terms in Wheatley’s poem, it would still be an historical inaccuracy to assert, as John C. Shields does in *Phillis Wheatley and the Romantics* (2010), that Wheatley was the first to make such a distinction wherein imagination is considered the more powerful or important faculty. John Dryden was known to have made such a distinction in the preface to *Annus Mirabilis* (1667); and William Duff is the first person to have argued a rigorous, philosophical distinction favoring imagination, which he does in *Essay on Original Genius* (1767).

what it also more subtly suggests is that the imagination actively seeks out and pursue the object in a way that might seem paradoxical: without knowing what it's looking for and without having any fixed criteria with which to determine what it is or should be looking for; in a word, wanderingly. Thus it is the object which *appears* to strike the imagination and enslave it in a "soft captivity." But this is a way of describing the imagination's ability to think and work freely, without (to use Kantian terms), the restriction of any determinative concept. This, put differently, becomes a way of articulating how the imagination allows one to exercise and experience a particular form of freedom: freedom of the imagination—freedom of thought—from conceptual determination; freedom figured here as wandering flight.

The fourth stanza makes this proto-Kantian theory of the imagination more explicit. Here the speaker celebrates and proclaims the imagination's power and ability to free the subject mentally. Speaking now explicitly to and about the imagination, who was addressed and finally named in the apostrophic lines preceding these (to be discussed), the speaker details what is simultaneously an analytical description of what the imagination can do and a metaphorical image-description of the freedom as flight-like experience that the imagination provides:

Soaring through air to find the bright abode,
...
We on thy pinions can surpass the wind,
And leave the rolling universe behind:

Significantly, the freedom as flight-like experience described in these lines is figured here in the form of a kind of escape, a leaving behind of the "rolling universe" and a transcendental surpassing of the wind. Following these lines, the speaker proceeds to give an even more explicit, thinly-veiled metaphorical description of the mental freedom one experiences via the imagination and its powers:

From star to star the mental optics rove,
Measure the skies, and range the realms above.
There in one view we grasp the mighty whole,
Or with new worlds amaze th' unbounded soul.

The metaphor here is one that playfully equates the totalizing and limitless view made possible by the imagination with visual and experiential freedom for the subject, who stands above the "mighty whole" of the universe, gazing down upon the stars and their systems, "grasping" them in the dual sense of visual perception but also knowledge apprehension.

The fifth stanza marks the beginning of a second metaphorical image-description of what the imagination can do. This time, however, the image is not one of flight *per se*, but of a face-to-face encounter between the returning figure of *Fancy* and the newly introduced figure of *Winter*. This figure's introduction represents a significant shift in the poem in the sense that the figure itself is a personification of the winter season, but also more broadly of the subject's "real-world" historical environment. So suddenly the notion and supposed reality of the "real world" emerges here as something that the imagination must explicitly contend with and overcome. Consider the stanza's first two lines: "Though *Winter* frowns to *Fancy's* raptur'd eyes / The fields may flourish, and gay scenes arise." Here the imagination becomes a metonym for the subject, who encounters their "real-world" environment in the visually and experientially

displeasing form of what is presumably—given the fact that it bears a sad, frowning face—a difficult, cold, and bleak winter season. Yet the subject is already engaged in the process of overcoming the constraints, pains, and displeasures of that experience via the imagination and its powers, which allow the subject to imaginatively envision and experience something else, something other than the difficult and harsh conditions of this cold, “real-world” winter environment—namely, the spring, which appears here in the form of flourishing fields and pleasure-inducing scenes. The rest of the stanza proceeds to describe in further detail the spring season as it emerges in the form of an imaginatively produced dream vision to overtake and transform the winter reality, and hence the subject’s experience of it, into something more pleasurable.

The final stanza contains what might be the most significant moment in the poem, when the speaker reveals that the figure of *Winter* has returned to forbid them from enjoying or taking part in the pleasures of the reality-suspending dream vision produced by the imagination. This is also the moment that brings the poem to a close. It reads:

But I reluctant leave the pleasing views,
Which *Fancy* dresses to delight the *Muse*;
Winter austere forbids me to aspire,
And northern tempests damp the rising fire;
They chill the tides of *Fancy*’s flowing sea,
Cease then, my song, cease the unequal lay.

Here the poem expresses a profound awareness of its own significance as subversive thought-action against the kind of anti-Black racism that was prevalent in eighteenth-century British America and that was part of the racial division of labor upon which the world-system was built. It expresses, in other words, an awareness of what it means for an historically marginalized and literally enslaved subject like Wheatley to engage in the making and receiving of poetry and art. This it does by making significant use of the dream-vision genre’s narrative framing device. Here the concluding frame that typically describes the dreamer’s reawakening is one that describes the speaker’s reluctant reawakening, i.e., their forced removal from the pleasing but fictional views of the dream. *Winter* as the harsh reality of historical experience reasserts itself here to negate the false reality of the dream and relegate it to the status of a pejoratively false and deceptively unreal fiction.

But *Winter* also carries with it a prohibition. It explicitly forbids the speaker from “aspiring” Although ambiguously stated, the word “aspire” operates as an allusion to two seemingly distinct, though actually inseparably connected, aspirations: (1) the speaker’s endeavor to achieve intellectual “heights” via the imagination and its “soaring” (i.e., liberating and illuminating) powers; and (2) the speaker’s endeavor to achieve greatness as a poet through the attempt to produce a celebratory song-poem worthy of the imagination’s greatness (to produce a great poem, in other words). This attempt to produce a great poem constitutes *the principal drama* of the unfolding song-poem insofar as it is an attempt which might fail. The poem makes this clear early on. Consider, for instance, the second stanza, which features the speaker participating in the literary convention of invoking the muses for poetic inspiration:

From *Helicon*’s refulgent heights attend,
Ye sacred choir, and my attempts befriend:

To tell her glories with a faithful tongue,
Ye blooming graces, triumph in my song.

The paradoxical effect of this sort of gesture is that it already begins to flatter and lavish praise upon the poem's thematic subject (in this case, the imagination), which it does by subtly suggesting that the presumably quite skilled poet might still require assistance in order to do justice to such a great subject.

Turning back to the poem's end, we see that the prohibition against "aspiring" is actually against the related if not synonymous activities of making poetry and making free use of the imagination to produce poetic dream visions. Indeed, the grammatical structure of these lines imply there is a causal relation between *Winter*'s imposition of the prohibitive law (nominally against "aspiring") and (1) the speaker's leaving of the dream vision and its pleasing views, (2) their no longer engaging in the process of imaginatively producing dream visions, and (3) their dramatically staged call to end the song-poem as well as their actual ending of it.

What we ultimately have here is a moment where the poem seeks to create the illusion that the speaker is the author calling for their own song-poem to end in direct response to the external imposition of a ban against the making of poetry and the free exercise of the mind. Wheatley is imagining herself being censored here by someone she actually refuses to be censored by. She has created the fiction of a speaker who is silenced and re-enslaved by the Slave Master-like figure of power and authority *Winter*. Indeed, the reality that the speaker is being forced to recognize and submit to in their forced reawakening from the dream is the reality of being a subjugated, disenfranchised, and presumably enslaved subject. This is the same reality that the speaker's dream vision of spring had worked to counter. Consider the subtle allusion made to the "iron bands" of slavery in the process of describing that dream vision of winter's transformation into spring: "The frozen deeps may break their iron bands, / And bid their waters murmur o'er the sands." While the dream-vision image of the face-to-face encounter between *Winter* and *Fancy* is still not one of literal flight activity, it nevertheless manages to operate as a metaphorical image of freedom, and of freedom as escape-like flight from the speaker's historical experience of slavery.

The speaker's subaltern status lends new meaning to their attempt to produce a song-poem worthy of the imagination's greatness insofar as the stakes involved now seem to be much higher. This corresponds to the aforementioned situation Gates describes in *The Trials of Phillis Wheatley*, wherein Wheatley was forced to prove she was capable of writing her *Poems* via an oral examination conducted by a tribunal of eighteen white Bostonian men. In his retelling of this story, Gates exaggerates the importance of the oral exam that supposedly took place, as well as that of the attestation letter, which he claims "was deemed absolutely essential to the publication of Wheatley's book" (30). Joanna Brooks has shown how it's possible that no such examination ever took place and that Wheatley might have written the letter herself only to have it signed by the men whose signatures she needed to legitimize the document. According to Brooks, this was "part of a months-long strategy to secure the London publication of her *Poems*" (7). Brooks highlights the fact that the book was set to be published "even before the arrival of the attestation on English shores" (7). So the situation with the letter was not as imperative as Gates makes it seem. But even though there are some historical inaccuracies in Gates' retelling of the book's publication, his analysis of the situation surrounding it is convincing. What Gates perceives in the *idea* of the oral exam is the idea of a historical encounter between Wheatley (the figure of Black poetry) and a group of men who represent historical forces of power and oppression.

“It was the primal scene of African-American letters” (5), Gates writes in the dramatic opening of his book. Gates’ description of the encounter between Wheatley and these men is one of a courtroom encounter wherein Wheatley is on trial to defend herself and her race from the charge that they are not capable of producing literature. “She is on trial and so is her race,” he writes before turning to articulate what he understands to be at stake in that trial: “Their [the council’s] interrogation of this witness, and her answers, would determine not only this woman’s fate but the subsequent direction of the antislavery movement, as well as the birth of what a later commentator would call ‘a new species of literature,’ the literature written by slaves” (7).

As this passage—which ends with the birth of African-American literature—shows, Gates’ use of the term “primal scene” is more Freudian than it might at first seem. In the African-American literary tradition he participates in, and whose conception and birth he is attempting to visualize and bear witness to, the primal scene is often a violent one: the scene of eroticized violence against a slave; the rape of an enslaved person by their master; etc. There is a sort of violence already involved in the *idea* of the courtroom encounter in the sense that the exam is predicated on notions of racial inferiority that do violence against the Black subject, racializing them in a way that attempts to legitimize and motivate the oppressive mistreatment of that subject and the committing of real-world acts of violence against them. The potential for further violence to be committed exists in the council’s pending judgment. We receive a glimpse of that violence and its productive capacities in the saga Gates recounts of Jefferson’s criticism of Wheatley and her work. In his reading of that criticism, Gates correctly concludes that Jefferson’s literary-critical “ruling” effectively overturns the decision made by the council in the first trial: “Having survived the tribunal of eighteen in 1772, Wheatley now finds her genuineness impinged by a larger authority, subjected to a higher test of originality and invention” (49). And it is “[b]y shifting the terms of authenticity—from the very possibility of her authorship to the quality of her authorship” that Jefferson is able to “[indict] her” for what Gates calls “a failure of a higher form of authenticity” (49).

Throughout Wheatley’s poem, the dream experience is that of being allowed to engage freely in the freedom as flight-like experience that poetic imagination provides. It is the dream of being free from the conditions of being subjugated by the Slave Master-like figure of *Winter*. Poetry, according to the meta-poetic theory articulated within the poem, has the power to allow one to exercise and experience freedom of the imagination, freedom of thought, from conceptual determination. It empowers and allows one to escape the imposed reality of historical experience, to imagine and arrive at new possibilities of thought to be realized as truth. The experience provided by poetry is one that transforms the subject’s knowledge of their own situation as an historically-produced subject and allows them to perceive and experience it in new and unfamiliar ways. In this case, the speaker realizes that their experience of being a slave is the experience of having been enslaved. The imposed reality of their own enslavement is precisely what the aesthetic experience provided by poetry allows them to think beyond and imaginatively escape. They are able to perceive the false necessity of it and the falseness of the claim that it is more natural, real or true than the fiction of the dream, which is the dream *qua* thought *qua* realization that they should be free and have a right to freedom. The occasion of the poem itself presents the speaker with the opportunity to demonstrate, for themselves and in front of others, their equal capacity for producing high-order thought; and hence to prove by way of performative thought-action that they are not just equal, but capable of aspiring to incredible heights of poetic, intellectual, and human achievement.

The poem's speaker emerges from their dream-vision experience a mentally-liberated and empowered subject. But *Winter*'s return reveals that such liberation and empowerment is itself not enough. This is also the reality the speaker is forced to confront in the final stanza. So we are given the final six lines, wherein the speaker takes leave of the "pleasing views" poetry provides and then calls for an end to their song-poem by declaring it "unequal": "Cease then, my song, cease the unequal lay." So ends the actual poem written by Wheatley, the "mother of African-American literature," as Gates calls her (50). Gates views Jefferson's criticism of her work as *the* thing that motivates the production of African-American literature after Wheatley: "Jefferson's comments about the role of [the Black race's] literature in any meaningful assessment of the African-American's civil rights became the strongest motivation for blacks to create a body of literature that would implicitly prove Jefferson wrong" (50-51). Gates euphemistically calls Jefferson the "midwife" of African-American literature, though what he means to call him is the "father," as Jefferson is the father who brutalizes Wheatley and her poetry in this violent episode of encounter between her and the reality of anti-Black racism and oppression.

For Wheatley to have ended her poem in this way means she was likely well aware of the significance of her poetic actions. More so than any other poem of hers, "On Imagination" registers the encounter between her and her desire to write poetry and the reality of anti-Black racism and oppression. The poem stages that encounter in the encounter between *Fancy* (a figure for the enslaved) and *Winter* (the reality of enslavement). So when the speaker states, "Though *Winter* frowns to *Fancy*'s raptur'd eyes / The fields may flourish, and gay scenes arise," we are presented, confronted even, with an image (fictional though it may be) of Wheatley dramatically stating her belief in the power of poetry to actuate her sense of freedom or historical agency. And when *Winter* returns to forbid the speaker from "aspiring," we receive a sense of the despair she must have felt, or merely wanted to convey, at the reality of her situation.

What's remarkable is that Wheatley wrote her way to freedom. Her poetry is what presented her with the opportunity to visit London where she met with "Benjamin Franklin, the Earl of Dartmouth, and other members of English high society" (Carretta, xxvi). In a letter to General David Wooster sent on October 18, 1773, about a month after her return from England, Wheatley alludes to her recently-granted manumission from slavery, which she claims was given her "at the desire of my friends in England" (147). Her biographer Vincent Carretta has argued it wasn't actually the case that Wheatley's friends were so impressed with her writing and intellect that they implored her master to free her, but that she instead took advantage of the 1772 Mansfield decision (which held that no slave could be forcibly removed from England against their will) to negotiate the terms of her return to Boston so that they would include her manumission (*Biography*, 137). Whether she did this or not, the conditions for her release (whether received or negotiated) were produced by her writings. So when Gates argues that the results of the oral exam "ultimately, would determine whether she remained a slave or would be set free" (6), what he means is that her poetry had the power to create the conditions for her release from slavery. As Eric Slauter remarks, "[t]he emerging cultural revolution against neoclassicism" (i.e., the aforementioned trend of proto-Romantic thought) "transformed the meaning of mental activity at precisely the moment that the political revolution against British rule placed mental activity at the center of what it meant to be a rights-bearing individual" (83). Gates' understanding of the significance of her poetry reveals itself through statements he makes about her performance at the exam: "Essentially, she was auditioning for the humanity of the entire African people" (27). But, contrary to these claims, it is at the site of her poetry that the dramatic performance he imagines happening at the exam really takes place.

And it is as that site that Wheatley has been repeatedly subjects to “trials of authenticity.” This, indeed, is the entire point of Gates’ aptly-titled book *The TRIALS* (as in multiple trials) of *Phillis Wheatley*. In addition to the aforementioned trials administered by the council and by Jefferson, Wheatley was also subjected to a “trial” by twentieth-century critics, specifically those of the Black Arts Movement, who found her work to not be “black enough”: “Too black to be taken seriously by white critics in the eighteenth century, Wheatley was now considered too white to interest black critics in the twentieth” (Gates, 82). Gates highlights the incredible irony of this situation: “[t]he Jeffersonian critique has been recuperated and recycled by successive generations of black writers and critics” (82); “the sort of racist suspicions and anxieties that attended Wheatley’s writings” (originally via the charge that her work was merely imitative) “are now directed at black forms of expression that seem to fail a new sort of authenticity, as determined by the yardstick of cultural affirmation” (83). So it is the question of “Who is black enough?” (83), as Gates puts it, that becomes, in recent years, the thing used against her in the process of determining her work’s apparent lack of value.

Wheatley’s poem conveys an anticipatory awareness of this criticism (that her poems were imitative reproductions of already-established, and soon-to-be racialized “white,” styles and conventions) via the construction of an image of voice. Consider the speaker’s final words: “Cease then, my song, cease the unequal lay.” These amount to a tongue-in-cheek statement about racial inequality that participates at once in the literary convention of affecting a modest pose while openly acknowledging that the song-poem produced by a subjugated and enslaved subject is always going to be considered unequal. These words announce the tragic failure of the speaker’s attempt to produce a great song-poem at the same time that they secretly declare that attempt to have been a success. The ambiguous use of the word “unequal” here suggests in a strict sense (perhaps too strict) that an unequal relation exists between this song-poem and others. It does not specify whether this song-poem is inferior or superior to others; so there is the open possibility, however unlikely, that the word “unequal” suggests that this song-poem is not just great, but supreme. The stronger possibility, however, is that the word implies inferiority: “Cease then, my [inferior] song, cease the unequal lay.” So we might read the last line as a concession, an admission made by the speaker that her song is inferior and that she is an inferior person/poet.

But this is a common rhetorical strategy known as the humility *topos*. Logan Dale Greene defines this *topos* as “a claim of inferiority for rhetorical purposes (2004, 236). Greene writes that it is “a tactic designed to deflect criticism and enhance influence” (151). In the hands of women writers, Greene concludes that “the humility *topos* offers a self-definition that conforms to cultural expectations and masks the extent to which behavior challenges those expectations” (2009, 51-52). The humility *topos* is, in the words, a rhetorical strategy that allows subaltern subjects to engage in transgressive behavior. In the case of Wheatley’s poem, we can only assume that the speaker is a subject who has been racialized Black and gendered a woman. In fact, one of the poem’s most important aspects is that it doesn’t identify the speaker or give any indication of how others would identify them with regard to race and gender. And it is only on the basis of their status as a subjugated and enslaved subaltern subject that we can imagine the speaker being able to use the humility *topos* in this way (though it is possible that *Poems* essentially asks to be read and received with Wheatley’s identity as a Black woman in mind, and that is historically how it has been received). Nevertheless, the poem makes use of the speaker’s subject position to create an image of voice: that of a marginalized subject who is humble *qua* servile and audacious at the same time.

A comparison might be made between this moment and the moment of poetic apostrophe that occurs in the fourth stanza when the speaker finally names the imagination directly and not by way of epithet for the first and only time in the poem. To repeat, this is the only time the word “imagination” appears in the poem. It reads: “*Imagination!* who can sing thy force?” This moment (to use Adornian language) is a poetic event¹² meant to be experienced as a powerful moment of poetry. Johnathan Culler explains, in his seminal essay “Apostrophe,” that “the vocative of apostrophe is a device which the poetic voice uses to establish with an object a relationship which helps constitute him” as a visionary poet (63). “The poet makes himself a poetic presence through an image of voice,” he writes, “and nothing figures voice better than the pure *O* of undifferentiated voicing” (63). As one of his interlocutors William Waters puts it, “To cry ‘O’ to something insentient is self-consciously to stage a drama of the self calling” (61). It is to “wager that one can pull off this extravagant verbal gesture and so be proven as the poet one claims to be” (61). To cite Culler again: “It [apostrophe] is the pure embodiment of poetic pretension: of the subject’s claim that in his verse he is not merely an empirical poet, a writer of verse, but the embodiment of poetic tradition and of the spirit of poesy” (63).

The lines blur here between Wheatley and the poem’s speaker. In the drama of the speaker’s might-fail attempt to produce a song-poem worthy of the imagination’s greatness, this moment represents (to use another Adornian phrase) a sort of go-for-broke moment. It is an all-out attempt to sing the imagination’s force and establish the speaker in response to their own rhetorically posed question as *the* poet who *can*, in fact, sing its force. The line is remarkable for the way it uses the humility *topos* to bolster its claim. By rhetorically asking “who can sing thy force?” the speaker celebrates the imagination by insinuating the laudatory, but self-effacing answer: presumably no one, and certainly not me. This contributes to the spirit of excess contained in the apostrophic declaration “*Imagination!*” which is an outburst that conveys simultaneous feelings of overwhelming joy and despair (feelings of the sublime, to use Kantian terminology). The pretension involved in the speaker’s apostrophic wager, in the attempt to establish herself as *the* poet capable of singing the imagination’s force, is tailored by the modest pose they affect in order to downplay, but not in any way reduce, what might more accurately be called the “presumptuousness” of their claim. For it is “presumptuous” of a subaltern and enslaved subject like the speaker, and like Wheatley, to assert themselves in this way, or so it would be considered by those audiences who believe in and support the systems of thought and action that contribute to the speaker’s designation and lived-reality as subaltern and enslaved.

Turning now to consider Sor Juana’s *Primero sueño*, we will see how the poem makes similar use of the dream-vision genre’s narrative framing device to offer its own critical reflection upon the nature of aesthetic experience while simultaneously articulating a critique of heterosexist thought and action, and of power more broadly. We will also see how her poem seeks to make available and bring to expression for us aspects of our subjective experiences of social history that our systems of conceptual meaning and objective analysis don’t, by definition, reach. The poem fits more easily the standard definition of a dream-poem insofar as it thematically recounts the experience of an actual dream vision had by the speaker while sleeping

¹² Perhaps it is of the kind Adorno writes about when he states: “in acquiring self-consciousness as a literary language, in striving for an absolute objectivity unrestricted by any considerations of communication, language both distances itself from the objectivity of spirit, of living language, and substitutes a poetic event for a language that is no longer present” (“On Lyric Poetry and Society,” 44)

through the night. The poem itself is a 975-line long *silva*-poem¹³ written in the difficult, erudite style of Luis de Góngora's *Las soledades* (1613). The poem might be broken into multiple sections, though these are arbitrary divisions that only help us orient ourselves in the poem's narrative development: a first section that describes the coming of the night and the process of the world's animal inhabitants falling asleep; a second describing the physiological process of the human body falling asleep; a third recounting the soul's cosmic dream-vision voyage through space and its repeated attempts to attain, through upward flight movement, intellectual heights that would give it a totalizing knowledge of the universe; and then a final section describing the body's reawakening process and the return of day. Not all of these sections will be relevant to our reading of the poem. Instead we will focus on key moments that illuminate our understanding of the poem's critique of power.

In *Primero sueño*, the dream vision's concluding frame is the poem's last line: "*el mundo iluminado, y yo despierta*" ("the world illuminated, and I awake").¹⁴ This is the only line that makes direct reference to the speaker; and just like the final lines of "On imagination," this line subtly alludes to the speaker's subject-position. Indeed, the Spanish adjective *despierta* genders the speaker a woman at the precise moment that the poem ends. So the line might read or be translated as: "the world illuminated, and I, a woman-gendered subject, awake"; or "the world illuminated, and I awake a woman." The implicit gendering of the subject via a linguistic construction that refers to that gender as a condition, one that happens to be coterminous with the condition of being "awake," implies that the reality to which the speaker reawakens is that of being a woman-gendered subject in a presumably heterosexist world. Here the poem wants to create the illusion that Sor Juana is the speaker and that she references her own life and the challenges and forms of discrimination she faced as a woman in seventeenth-century Colonial Mexico. The poem does this by suspending that reality only to have the weight of that suspension (built up over the course of the entire 975-line poem) explode with the slightest gesture offered at the last possible moment toward what might be a reference to the author and her life.

Feminist readings of *Primero sueño*, and of Sor Juana's work generally, abound. She has been called the "first feminist of America," a title first given to her by Dorothy Schons in 1925.¹⁵ Sor Juana wrote what is considered by many to be a groundbreaking proto-feminist text (Wray, 134) in 1961, a letter titled *Respuesta a Sor Filotea* (*Response to Sor Filotea*).¹⁶ This letter had been written in response to a letter penned by one of her contemporaries, the bishop of Puebla Manuel Fernández de Santa Cruz, a man who utilized the pseudonym Sor Filotea to present

¹³ The *silva* is a verse form consisting of hendecasyllable and heptasyllable lines with no fixed order or rhyme-scheme (though a majority of the lines are rhymed), and no fixed number of lines.

¹⁴ A more literal, though incredibly awkward in English, translation of these words ("y yo despierta") would be: "and me awake." This translation would give a better sense of how the word *despierta* functions as an adjective in the Spanish as opposed to a verb. Still it seems appropriate to translate it as "I awake" in order to capture the forceful effect of the original, which occurs as a sort of event, as if the act of awakening were happening at that moment.

¹⁵ Schons actually called her "The First Feminist in the New World" in an article titled the same. See Schons, Dorothy. "The First Feminist in the New World." *Equal Rights*, October 31, 1925: 11-12.

¹⁶ This is the shorthand title for *Respuesta de la poetisa a la muy ilustre Sor Filotea de la Cruz* [*The Poetess' Response to the Most Illustrious Sor Filotea de la Cruz*]. For a comprehensive study of the text's critical reception, see Grady C. Wray's "Challenging Theological Authority: The *Carta atenagórica/Crisis sobre un sermón* and the *Respuesta a Sor Filotea*." *The Routledge Research Companion to the Works of Sor Juana Inés de La Cruz*. Edited by Emilie L. Bergmann and Stacey Schlau. Routledge, 2017.

himself as a woman while publishing his *Carta de Sor Filotea (Letter from Sor Filotea)*¹⁷ alongside and as a prologue to Sor Juana's *Carta atenagórica (Letter Worthy of Athena)*. The controversy Sor Juana is responding to here is one that emerges from her criticism and refutation of Antonio Viera's *Sermão do Mandato (Monday Thursday Sermon)*¹⁸ and then from the bishop's subsequent admonishment of her and her letter, which he published without her permission. His *Carta de Sor Filotea* is less an introduction to Sor Juana's *Carta atenagórica* than it is a warning directed at her. "I have seen the letter in which you refute the favors of Christ's love as defined by the Reverent Father Antonio de Viera," he writes, referencing the *Carta atenagórica*, "[...] But to my judgment, no one who reads your treatise can deny that your pen was cut finer than either of theirs" (the other person he refers to is the Portuguese bishop Sebastian César de Meneses, who he had just praised alongside Viera) "and they can take pride in finding themselves refuted by a woman who is the glory of her sex" (222).

After explaining his motivations for having published the *Carta atenagórica* without consulting her and explaining that she should perhaps be more grateful to God for having given her such talents, the bishop changes his tone to articulate a more severe admonishment:

My judgment is not such a harsh censor that it disapproves of poetry—for which Your Grace has been so celebrated—since St. Teresa, St. Gregory of Nazianzus, and other saints canonized this ability with their poems; but I do wish that you would imitate them, not only in meter, but also in choice of subject.

I do not approve the vulgarity of those who rebuke the practice of letters in women, for many have applied themselves to this study, and not without praise from Saint Jerome. It is true that Saint Paul says women should not teach, but he does not command that women should not study in order to learn, for he wished only to avoid the risk of haughtiness in our sex, always so inclined to vanity (224).

Following a lengthy biblical reference to the Old Testament story of Sarah, used to underscore the message that women are meant to be subservient to patriarchal figures of authority (i.e., men and God), the bishop then writes: "Any learning that leads women to haughtiness cannot please God [*Letras que engendran elación, no las quire Dios en la mujer*]" (224). This statement—along with the follow-up assertion that "the Apostle Paul does not reprove learning as long as it does not remove women from their state of obedience"—is then followed by a series of admonishments: "I do not expect you to alter your temperament by renouncing books; but to improve by reading the book of Christ from time to time"; "You have spent a good deal of time studying philosophers and poets; now it is time for you to perfect these pursuits and improve your books"; and then he delivers an injunction: "You have spent no little time with these sciences that excite the curiosity; *move on now [pase ya]*, like the great Boethius, to more profitable ones, joining the subtleties of natural philosophy with the usefulness [*utilidad*] of a moral one" (emphasis added, 228).

Sor Juana pens her *Response* three months later. In it, she gives two reasons for her delay in responding: (1) because she feels incapable of saying anything worthy of Sor Filotea; and (2) because the favor of publishing her letter on her behalf "was a favor of such magnitude that not only can it *not* be bounded by the confines of speech, but it also exceeds all powers of gratitude" (38). Sor Juana is, throughout the letter, being facetious. She knows the *Carta de Sor Filotea* was written by the bishop and that he did not mean well. This she virtually says so: "It is not false humility, señora, but the candid truth of all my soul, that when I received in my hands the printed

¹⁷ The letter's full title is *Carta de Sor Filotea de la Cruz [Letter from Sor Filotea de la Cruz]*.

¹⁸ Antonio Viera was a well-known Portuguese preacher of the time.

letter which you saw fit to call “Worthy of Athena,” I burst into tears of confusion (a thing that does not come easily to me), because it seemed to me that your favor was nothing more than a reproach from God aimed at how poorly I returned His favors; and while He corrects others with punishments; He wished to reduce me through benefits” (40).

Sor Juana initiates her defense by claiming that her reluctance to write on sacred matters is due “*not* to any dislike or lack of application, but to an abundance of fear and reverence owed to those Sacred Letters” (44). “I want no trouble with the Holy Office,” she later states, referencing the precarious position the bishop’s letter puts her in and how she might be subject to claims that her writings are heretical. Here she is explaining why she chooses to write on “profane subjects,” as opposed to religious ones: “for a heresy against art is not punished by the Holy Office” (44). Sor Juana constructs art here as an autonomous space where regardless of the criticism she might receive regarding the quality of her work, she would still ultimately “be permitted to take Communion and hear Mass” (44). “For in such matters,” she writes, “according to the judgment of the very ones who slander me, I have neither the obligation to know, nor the ability to do correctly [*ni aptitude para acertar*], and thus if I err, there is neither fault nor discredit” (44-46).

Sor Juana is talking explicitly now about gender, and she is using the heterosexist forms of thought expressed by her critics to her advantage, using them to undermine the bishop’s letter and the power it has to prescribe her actions. Rhetorically, the *Respuesta* is designed to operate as a defense or *apologia* while appearing to be a concession. Consider the following statements made in close proximity to one another; one features her declaring her acceptance of the bishop’s admonition while the other features her countering its implicit claim that her studies and writings constitute heretical transgressions of the patriarchal-*cum*-religious order of Colonial Mexican society: “I declare that I receive in my very soul your most holy admonition to apply my study to Holy Scripture; for although it arrives in the guise of counsel, it shall have for me the weight of law [*sustancia de precepto*]” (44); “I do not study in order to write, nor far less in order to teach (which would be boundless arrogance in me), but only to see whether by studying I may become less ignorant” (46).

Sor Juana’s claim that her decision to write has never been her own, but one compelled by an “outside force” (“*fuera ajena*”) (46) is one that will become the letter’s argumentative refrain. Her argument is that it is God’s will that she study and write literature, and to develop this argument she launches into an autobiographical portion of the letter wherein she tells of her childhood experiences, and how at the age of three she learned to read and how at age six her innate desire to study compelled her to ask her mother to dress her as a boy so she could study sciences at the university in Mexico City. In these historical-*cum*-mythological autobiographical episodes, Sor Juana is confronted with the reality of gender identity, as her mother’s refusal forces her to turn to her grandfather’s library as compensation for not being allowed to study or receive instruction via official channels. As Octavio Paz writes, “[h]er grandfather’s books opened the doors to a world which neither her mother nor her sisters could enter: a man’s world” (79). Those “doors” might be more accurately conceived of as “backdoors” since she used her grandfather’s library to gain unauthorized access to the knowledge, education, and enlightenment she was initially denied on the basis of her gender. For Sor Juana, writes Paz, “[k]nowledge is transgression. She herself says so” when she writes that ““neither punishments nor reprimands were enough to prevent” her from reading her grandfather’s books (83).

Sor Juana’s desire to study is or becomes synonymous with a desire to transgress gender norms in Colonial Mexico. Paz speaks of this transgressive desire as “a movement toward maleness [*virilización*]” (83). “As a girl,” he writes, referencing this part of the *Respuesta*, “she

cuts her hair and wants to wear men's clothing; as a young woman, she neutralizes her sex beneath the habits of a nun; as an adult, in her great poem *Primero sueño*, she identifies with the hero Phaethon" (83). Paz references Sor Juana's practices of secular study and religious life and conflates them with feminist practices of "masculinization." He does this for good reason, as Sor Juana makes it clear that her desire for knowledge comes into conflict with the role assigned to her at birth as a woman. Hence her discussion of the episode in which she cuts her hair as a form of penance for not learning enough or studying hard enough: "my resolve was so intense that even though the natural adornment of hair is so esteemed in women (especially in the bloom of youth), I would cut off four to six finger lengths of it, measuring how long it had been before, and then imposing on myself a rule that if by the time it had grown back I did not know that which I had set out to learn, then I would cut it again as punishment for my dull-wittedness [...] for it did not seem right to me that hair should embellish a head that was so bare of facts—the more desirable adornment" (50). In this passage, Sor Juana juxtaposes her desire for knowledge with the appeal of conforming to her assigned role as a woman and shows that she desires otherwise. The gesture of cutting her hair communicates her willingness to undermine the system of thought and action that differentiates between men and women on the basis of external appearance. At the same time, she presents an alternative (which Paz failed to see) by suggesting that knowledge is "the more desirable adornment." This is not so much a "movement towards maleness" as it is a deconstruction of the terms of gendered knowledge. The transgressive element of this gesture is not so much the actual cutter of her hair as it is the articulation of an alternative value system via the telling of this mythological-*cum*-historical tale designed to undermine her audience's way of perceiving the relation between women, gender, and knowledge.

Primero sueño has been read with these questions in mind. Stephanie Merrim, for example, asks, in relation to the effect produced by the sudden revelation of the speaker's gender in the poem's last lines: "Do they [the last lines] set the feminine quest for knowledge, and perhaps, by extension, the feminine, on an equal continuum with the masculine? Or do they privilege the female, feminizing and/or personalizing quest?" (21). Georgina Sabat-Rivers provides a semi-answer to the question when she writes that these lines assert a "faith in womankind" (157). So does Susan M. MacKenna when she wages that the poem's final line is where Sor Juana "clearly and most definitively claims herself as a woman" (50). These claims are formulated in response to the assertions of figures like Paz who argue, as Paz does, that the poem's last line "in no way alters the impersonality of the poem" (336). They also respond to those critics who claim that Sor Juana desired to be a man and that her poem expresses that desire.¹⁹ In "Visions of Gender: Sor Juana and the *First Dream*" (2003), Licia Fiol-Matta contends that "the single appearance of gender and number [...] does not necessarily lead to feminine embodiment or expressive first-person enunciation" (347-348). She proceeds to claim that "if the soul in the *Dream* is a pure, genderless intelligence or faculty, then there is no necessary correlation between the last verse and the subject represented in the poem as the soul, unless one believes that the body is a fairly static object existing on the poem's fringes until the soul finishes its journey and is ready to rejoin the body" (350).

¹⁹ To be fair, those who have made this claim seem to do so in order to recognize Sor Juana's desire for equal treatment. See, for example, Antonio Alatorre's "Sor Juana y los hombres." *Estudios: filosofía, historia, letras*, edited by Instituto Tecnológico Autónomo de México. ITAM, no. 7, 1986, p. 183-198. "Sor Juana tuvo el sueño de ser hombre. Sólo que, en este sueño, hombre no significaba individuo de sexo masculino, sino individuo del género *homo sapiens*. 'Hombre', no en contraposición a 'mujer', sino en contraposición a 'animal'" (185).

Fiol-Matta's reading seems to negate the very premise of the dream-vision poem by arguing that the dreaming subject who journeys throughout the poem and experiences the dream is not the same person who declares herself a woman awake at the poem's end. Fiol-Matta expresses some rhetorical incredulity towards the mind-body dualism that constitutes the dream-poem's framework.²⁰ Paz, in his discussion of the dream-vision genre's literary history, traces that dualism back to "Plato and his disciples" (360). His analysis observes the influence of Athanasius Kircher's *Iter exstaticum* (1656)—a book which tells of the cosmic dream-vision voyage of a soul enraptured by music—on Sor Juana's poem and arrives at the conclusion that *Primero sueño* breaks from this hermetic tradition of dream-vision literature in a number of significant ways: (1) by being a poem as opposed to prose; (2) by maintaining a sense of impersonality (the same alluded to above) via the construction of a de-particularized subject as protagonist; and (3) by foregoing the inclusion of a supernatural agent to serve as guide for the voyaging soul. This third break—considered by Paz to be a truly momentous historical event ("*una verdadera escisión*" [Spanish edition, 482])—leads to a fourth: the fact that the poem "ends in nonvision" (367); "In Sor Juana's poem, not only is there no demiurge, there is no revelation" (367). For him, this makes it "the first example of an attitude—the solitary soul confronting the universe—that later, beginning with romanticism, would be[come] the spiritual axis of Western poetry" (367).

These claims characterize Sor Juana as *the first "modern" poet*, a major precursor to the poets of the nineteenth and twentieth centuries, from Romanticism onward. "Sor Juana's poem inaugurates a poetic mode that is central to the modern age," he writes, "[...] a mode that *defines* modern poetry in its most radical and extreme form" (emphasis in original, 381). Paz describes that mode repeatedly as transgression, rebellion, daring acts of defiance, and, as he puts it in relation to the poem's end, "the revelation of nonrevelation" (381). This phrase denoting Paz's understanding of the poem's groundbreaking nature bears a striking resemblance to the Kantian notion of "purposiveness without purpose" and to the expression Percy Bysshe Shelley uses to describe Milton's radical portrayal of Satan in *Paradise Lost*: as a "bold neglect of direct moral purpose" (1141).²¹ To what extent, we might ask, is Sor Juana's *Respuesta* also a Shelleyan defense of poetry? Recall the bishop of Puebla's appeal to the concept of utility in the injunction he delivers to Sor Juana, and notice the strange resemblance it bears to the criticism of poetry promoted by Thomas Love Peacock in *The Four Ages of Poetry* (1820), i.e., the essay prompting Shelley to deliver his *Defence*: "You have spent no little time with these sciences that excite the curiosity; move on now, like the great Boethius, to more profitable ones, joining the subtleties of natural philosophy with the usefulness [*utilidad*] of a moral one."

In the *Respuesta*, Sor Juana does defend poetry by arguing that the writing of verse is not at odds with religious custom and showing that holy scripture is a compendium of verse. This is

²⁰ Fiol-Matta appropriates this incredulity from Yolanda Martínez-San Miguel and her book *Saberes americanos: subalternidad y epistemología en los escritos de Sor Juana* (1999). Martínez-San Miguel, however, presents a much more convincing argument that grounds itself in discussion of the poem's representations of the body and its relation to the dreaming mind/soul (wherein the biological processes of the body, starting in the stomach, are the source of the vapors that produce or enable dream); Martínez-San Miguel also grounds this argument in Medieval-era dream theory and belief. While presenting this argument, Martínez-San Miguel does not insist, as Fiol-Matta does, that this conceptualization of the relation between the body and mind does anything to undermine the way the poem uses the dream-poem's framework to posit a relation between the dreaming subject and the one that reawakens at the poem's end. For more see: Martínez-San Miguel, Yolanda. *Saberes Americanos: Subalternidad y Epistemología En Los Escritos de Sor Juana*. Instituto Internacional de Literatura Iberoamericana, Universidad de Pittsburgh, 1999.

²¹ Robert Kaufman indicates the also-Kantian character of Shelley's "politically-inflected" (i.e., radical, Left) *Defence of Poetry* (1840) in "Legislators of the Post-Everything World: Shelley's *Defence* of Adorno."

where she singles out *Primero sueño* as the sole thing she had ever written of her own volition: “I recall having written nothing at my own pleasure save a trifling thing [*un papelillo*] they call *The Dream [El Sueño]*” (96). This statement highlights the special status she gives the poem. Allegedly written for no other purpose than to provide personal pleasure, the poem is identified here as a *magnum opus*, the poem most valued by poet herself.

Primero sueño tells the story of a soul’s cosmic dream voyage through space in an allegorical quest for knowledge. It begins with the coming of the night, which emerges in the form of a shadow:

<p>Pyramidal, funesta, de la tierra nacida sombra, al cielo encaminaba de vanos obeliscos punta altiva, escalar pretendiendo las estrellas si bien sus luces bellas —exentas siempre, siempre rutilantes— la tenebrosa guerra, que con negros vapores le intimaba la pavorosa sombra fugitiva, burlaban tan distantes, que su atezado ceño al superior convexo aun no llegaba del orbe de la diosa, que tres veces hermosa con tres hermosos rostros ser ostenta, quedando sólo dueño del aire que empañaba con el aliento denso que exhalaba;</p>	<p>Pyramidal, ill-fated shadow, born of earth, headed skyward, high point of hallow obelisks, attempting in vain to scale the stars, those beauteous lights —forever shining, forever free— mocking with their distance the dark war which the fearful fugitive shade heralded with black vapors, its darkened, furrowed brow still unable to reach the superior convex of the goddess orb, which with three beautiful faces boasts herself three times gorgeous, so only it remained an owner of air sullied with dense breath exhaled (1-18);</p>
--	---

This is the earth’s shadow rising from its own surface and being cast upon the sky. In vain it attempts to scale the stars which mock it and the war its wages upon them with their distance. The shadow is ultimately left defeated, “remaining only an owner / of the air it sullied / with dense breath exhaled.” This passage, the poem’s opening image, expresses and anticipates many of the motifs that will be repeated throughout the poem: transgression, power, hope, ambition, desire, and defeat. It also anticipates the mind-body dualism that will soon become, once we arrive at the moment when the body falls asleep, the poem’s narrative frame and focus; for the shadow which strives in vain to reach the stars is but a figure for the earth-body’s immaterial, soul-like substance, which takes flight out and away from its surface in an attempt to not just reach, but conquer and wage war upon the sky (which itself is a figure for power, dominion, and domain, as the “heavens” often are). The pyramidal structure of the shadow itself represents the hierarchical structure of the social situation the passage describes, wherein the celestial bodies of the stars and the goddess-orb moon remain unimpeachable at the top while the earthly shadow remains below. The shadow *qua* pyramidal structure and its skyward movement thus become a figure for ambition. Its attempt to ascend and challenge the dominion and domain of the stars, to invade their space and extinguish their radiance, is a transgressive act. But it is also an effort that fails. Hence its polyphonic and for that reason ambiguous characterization as *funesta* (dismal, dark, fatal, disastrous, ill-fated); and hence the melancholic ending where the shadow is left an

empty-handed owner of not just “air” (which is one way to say “nothing”), but an owner of that air sullied by the bitter product of the shadow’s exertions, i.e., its own panting breath. This defeated, panting, pyramidal shadow may well be a figure for the dissonant, panting poetic voice that emerges throughout the poem.

The poem moves to describe the reign of silence that the night heralds on earth. It is a silence in which “none but the subdued voices / of nocturnal birds were permitted,” these being “so somber, so grave / that even the silence was not broken.” What follows is a meta-poetic description of *Primero sueño* (an ekphrastic description of the poem *as* a song-poem), but before we can arrive there, Sor Juana offers us, as a lead-up, three allusions to mythological figures; two of them are female and one male; all of them are transgressive figures who were punished by being turned into “nocturnal birds” (i.e., owls or bats). These figures constitute the chorus of birds that will produce the somber, grave song that will lull the world to sleep.

The most interesting of these allusions is the first, in which reference is made to Nyctimene, daughter of king Epopeus of Lesbos, who was made into an owl by goddess-of-Wisdom Minerva for having (in some accounts willingly and others unwillingly) engaged in intercourse with her father. Sor Juana’s Nyctimene is a shamefaced owl that “spies / through cracks in sacred doors,” waiting for an opportune moment to sneak in and drink oil from the church’s alter lamps:²²

Con tardo vuelo y canto, del oído
mal, y aun peor del ánimo admitido,
la avergonzada Nictimene acecha
de las sagradas puertas los resquicios,
o de las claraboyas eminentes
los huecos más propicios,
que capaz a su intento le abren brecha,
y sacrílega llega a los lucientes
faroles sacros de perenne llama
que extingue, si no infama,
en licor claro la materia crasa
consumiendo, que el árbol de Minerva
de su fruto, de prensas agravado,
congojoso sudó y rindió forzado.

With slow flight and song aggravating
to ear, and even worse for the soul,
the shamefaced Nyctimene spies
through cracks in sacred doors,
or through the most gainful openings
of prominent windows,
which breach a hole for her intent,
and profane she arrives at the lamps
of eternal flame, sacred, shining,
extinguished now by her, if not defiled,
consuming, as she does, that clear liquid,
oily substance that Minerva’s tree,
from its fruit afflicted by presses, sweated out
distressed and relinquished under pressure
(25-38).

This is an allegorical description of how knowledge is both gained and rewarded. It is homologous to, and indeed may just be a dark shadow-image of, the biblical fall in that knowledge is obtained through a transgressive act of consumption, one that must be committed in secret. Knowledge is, in other words, that which must be stolen from power, as power has restricted its accessibility. For that reason, Nyctimene must spy through cracks and those “most

²² The *Dialogus creaturarum* (1483) includes a fable which describes the owl as “cruel” (i.e., evil) and it references this idea (that owls lurk in churches to drink the oil of the alter lamp) and attributes it to the owl as characteristic behavior. Whether Sor Juana is referencing the *Dialogus* directly or she is merely alluding to a common Medieval-era belief is to be determined. The “alter lamps” being referred to are also known as “chancel lamps,” “sanctuary lamps,” or “eternal flames.” They refer to the custom of keeping a lamp perpetually lit in the church, using olive oil to fuel it, for the purpose of indicating Christ’s presence.

gainful openings of prominent windows, / which breach a hole for her intent.” Crossing a threshold—that of the law, as symbolized by the church’s hyper-vigilant, though not impregnable, structure—she arrives profane (*sacrilega*) “at the sacred, / shining lamps of eternal flame,” which she heretically “extinguishes, if not desecrates, / consuming, as she does, that clear liquid, / oily substance that Minerva’s tree, from its fruit afflicted by presses, sweated out / distressed and relinquished under pressure.” This image of olives being pressed to produce the oil Nyctimene consumes is one of torture. It describes knowledge apprehension as a difficult, painful process of struggle and defeat, a violent process that transforms the raw materials of nature into a product, and finally as a process that could potentially result in, or be rewarded with, severe punishment designed to compel submission.

If a reference is being made, it is to the Inquisition and to the difficulties Sor Juana encountered in her life as a woman in Colonial Mexico. The message is nonetheless a universal one: this is how power operates; this is what learning is like and how wisdom and knowledge are rewarded. In the *Respuesta*, Sor Juana alludes to the persecutory criticism she received from those who she regarded as jealous of her intellect by turning to the example of Christ and comparing herself to him. Her claim is that Christ’s crown of thorns is what’s bestowed upon the exceptionally intelligent: “[I]n this world it is not enough that the wise mind be scorned; it must be beaten and abused as well. The head that is a treasury of wisdom can hope for no other crown than of thorns.” This she regards ultimately as a triumph: “[F]or the triumph of the wise is won with sorrow and celebrated with tears,” she writes, before making one last comparison to Christ: “It was Christ the king of Wisdom who first wore that crown, so that seeing it sanctified upon His brow, other wise men [*otros sabios*] might lose their horror of it, and know they need aspire to no other honor.” This statement, with its rhetorical force and flourish, functions as a declaration, a pronouncement that she would rather follow Christ’s example and wear a crown of thorns than be forced to submit. It constitutes, in other words, a figurative picking-up and placing of the crown on her own head.

In *Primero sueño*, Fancy’s wings are a curse. They appear as the “naked, dreary membrane wings” belonging to the Minyades (three mythological figures who were turned to bats by Bacchus for having refused to engage in the Bacchanalia). These figures, together with Nyctimene and Ascalaphus (another mythological figure who was transformed into an owl), make up the choir of birds—“that fearful choir / of discord and non-melody”—that will lull the world to sleep with their song. That song is described in the poem as lumbering and slow, composed of “black *maximas* and *longas*”—the longest notes possible in the musical notation system of the Medieval period—“and more pauses than sounds [*voces*].” The emphasis here is on temporal duration and prolongation, a stretching of the measure and experience of time through an expansion of the space between the intervals that mark its rhythm. This is an ekphrastic description of how the poem operates. It too is engaged in a process of expanding time by stretching the space between its intervals of stops with frequent interventions from the parenthetical ideas, clauses, and descriptions that all seem to defer the poem’s progress and contribute to its meandering, slow, run-on like quality. The passage in question enacts this quality as it describes it. And as it turns to recount the wind’s movement—which acts as a conductor for the chorus of birds, ushering their song—it suddenly realizes, or reveals, an inversion: the wind’s (and hence the song’s) tempo is “so slow, so restrained,” that it falls asleep between drifts (“*en media se quedó tal vez dormido*”). A significant and unexpected break occurs in the middle of this parenthetical prolongation or “movement,” a full stop heralded by the word

dormido (asleep). The prolongation itself falls into and becomes that which it deferred: an event, counterpart to the one that occurs at the poem's end.

The song, characterized here as one of discord and non-melody (“*no canora*”), will later be characterized as a “*triste son intercadente*” (“dismal song of displaced rhythm”). Shelley, meanwhile, writes in his *Defense* that “[a] poet is a nightingale, who sits in darkness and sings to cheer its own solitude” (1135). *Primero sueño* is like that song of the nightingale: it is discordant and melancholic, yet a pleasurable sort of antidote for the sentiment of solitude and sorrow that inspires its production. Just like in Shelley's aphorism, that sentiment is itself a product of the dark and sorrowful nighttime environment that prevails around it, oppressing and distressing the bird, driving it to sing. In Shelley's aphorism, that environment operates as a reference to the social, i.e., the poet's historical surroundings. We can only assume it has a similar meaning in *Primero sueño*. Although we cannot be sure of the nighttime environment's allegorical meaning in the poem, we can argue strongly in favor of a possible connection between it, its associated feelings of melancholy and defeat, and the images of the social that pervade the poem.

Consider the images of kings that occur between lines 113 and 146. The first describes a lion (king of beasts) being “hounded by his own dogs,” a “once illustrious monarch” made vulnerable, turned into “but a trembling fawn” by the night and the need for sleep it brings. The second describes a king in the form and figure of “Jupiter's bounteous bird” (i.e., an eagle), perched atop a tree, standing on one foot while carrying a small stone in the other to prevent itself from falling asleep (were that to happen, the stone would drop and “sound the alarm,” so to speak). Both are images of kings beset with worry, unable to yield to sleep because their positions of power make them a target. And they are aware that insurrection lurks in the night, waiting for them to lower their guard. The thesis that emerges from these lines is this: power has no legitimacy; it is only maintained by fear (both its own fear and that which it inspires via reflex necessity in those it dominates through the imposition of repressive silence). In the second image, sleep is not just what heralds the possibility of insurrection and regicide; but it is actually figured as an invading force that must be withstood: “because, if inevitably occurs [*si necesario fué admitido*] / it won't be permitted for long, / before being cut off, cast out, / by that royal, rustic caution.”

The poem proceeds to describe the process by which the body falls asleep and the mind starts dreaming. In the actual dream described in the poem, the dreaming subject's soul (*alma*) soars to the highest of imaginable heights, described hyperbolically as higher than the highest of mountains and higher than the pyramids of Egypt and the Tower of Babel. It ascends so high that it dwarfs those locations and occupies the highest region of the mind (“*la más eminente* / [...] *parte de su propia mente*”), a metaphysical pyramidal peak. Stationed there, the soul is able to see the entire cosmos, a view so immense that it overwhelms the mind's capacity to comprehend what it sees. The mind, described here as a coward, retreats (“*cobarde, retrocedió*”), only to begin the learning process anew. This time it utilizes a methodical process of systematized learning and scientific inquiry as opposed to an attempt to comprehend all via a single intuitive act. But it soon encounters a problem: Even the most basic and easy-to-understand starting-point unit, a single object such as the spring from which a stream flows or a flower, proves to be overwhelmingly complex and mystery-filled; so the mind retreats once again a coward before not just the complexity of the object before it, but also before the terrifying and now even more overwhelming prospect of what it would mean to pursue knowledge of the cosmos in this way.

We thereafter arrive at the moment in the poem when the soul resolves to take flight again, this time with a full awareness of the impossible nature of the task it undertakes. Paz considers

this one of the key moments in the poem, “one of the most beautiful” as well (337). It tells of the myth of Phaethon, who asks his father (the sun-god Apollo) for permission to drive the chariot of the sun for a day, a task requiring such a high-level of skill that not even Zeus would dare attempt it. To put it simply, Phaethon fails spectacularly. He loses control of the sun-chariot, endangering the earth in the process, and is then smote by Zeus before plummeting into the river Eridanos. Paz argues that “[t]he figure of Phaethon influenced Sor Juana in two ways. First, as an intellectual example that joins love of learning to daring: reason and spirit. Second, because he represents freedom in its most extreme form: transgression” (384). Phaethon is, as Paz argues, an emblem of rebellion. He is *the* image that the soul in the poem calls upon to “ignite the spirit,” and his is the example the soul resolves to follow. The poem explains:

donde el ánimo halla
—más que el temor ejemplos de
escarmiento—
abiertas sendas al atrevimiento,
que una ya vez trilladas, no hay castigo
que intento baste a remover segundo
(segunda ambición digo).
Ni el panteón profundo
—cerúlea tumba a su infeliz ceniza—,
ni el vengativo rayo fulminante
mueve, por más que avisa,
al ánimo arrogante
que, el vivir despreciando, determina
su nombre eternizar en su rüina.
Tipo es, antes, modelo:
ejemplar pernicioso
que alas engendra a repetido vuelo,
del ánimo ambicioso
que—del mismo terror haciendo halago
que al valor lisonjĕa—
las glorias deletreä
entre los caracteres del estrago.

where the soul finds
—more than fear, tales of
caution—
open paths to daring
once well known, no punishment severe
enough exists to deter a second attempt
(second ambition, I say).
Neither the deepwater grave
—cerulean tomb to his sorrowful ash—,
nor the swift, vengeful bolt
can shake, as much as it warns,
the imperious soul
which, discounting life, aims to
eternalize its name in ruin.
More prototype, he is, than warning:
pernicious paragon
who for a second flight spawns wings
of arrogant soul,
who—fashioning from that same dread
the praise which flatters valor—
between the letters of defeat
spells out splendors of glory (791-810).

The image of Phaethon attempting to drive the sun-chariot across the sky is one that heralds the night’s end and the coming of day. It anticipates, in other words, the poem’s end and hence the end of the dream within the poem. The sun, as Paz’s reading implies, is a figure for knowledge. By choosing Phaethon’s daring attempt to harness the sun’s power as the crowning example of all the various images of transgression scattered throughout the poem, Sor Juana expresses an intense love of an desire for truth. It is an inspirational act of daring, she insists, to attempt to pursue knowledge and to seek truth in the context of a situation wherein the law prohibits and seeks to punish those who might (in spite of that law) dare to know. Following Frank Justus Miller’s translation of Ovid’s *Metamorphoses*, the epitaph inscribed on Phaethon’s grave expresses a similar sentiment: “Here Phaëthon Lies: In Phoebus’ [Apollo’s] Car He Fared, / And Though He Greatly Failed, More Greatly He Dared” (103). The law appears here in the form and figure of the state, which seeks to silence the anti-authoritarian message communicated

by Phaethon's daring act: "O never would that punishment be proclaimed, / so the crime would never be tried!" The speaker then explains that the state would respond either by feigning a "false ignorance" or by punishing "the impudent offense" "with secret torment." This it would do to keep the public uninformed and to thereby prevent the spread of rebellious action: "for the malice of that foremost crime / imperils through public notice, / [like a] rampant virus spreading [*contagio dilatado trascendiendo*]."

Soon after we are treated to the poem's climax, which assumes the form of a climactic military battle between night and day. As the sun approaches, it is heralded first by the morning-star Venus ("*el hermoso / apacible lucero [de Venus]*") and then by the dawn, which is dually figured here as the goddess Aurora ("old man Tithonus' gorgeous wife") and a female warrior ("amazon in a thousand lights bedecked [*vestida*] / and so armed against the night"). Aurora is reconfigured here to be not just an image of beauty, but of beauty and strength combined, so that beauty is strength and vice versa. Although powerful, beautiful sights, Venus and the dawn are considered "but a delicate prelude" to the sun's spectacular appearance, "which [came] amassing troops / of fledgling glimmers [*bisoñas vislumbres*] / —reserving those most robust, / veteran flames for the rearguard." The night, meanwhile, is figured as an "usurping tyrant [*tirana usurpadora*] / of the kingdom once held by day," who "[dons] a black laurel of a thousand shades" and "[holds] sway over the shadows, / before whom even she shook with fear [*de queen run ella misma se espantaba*"].

Just as it is about to begin, the battle takes an unexpected turn when the night reveals herself to be a coward who knows she does not have the forces required to prevail against the sun. So she retreats, or attempt to, before the battle can even begin:

a la fuga ya casi cometiéndolo	now nearly committed more
más que a la fuerza, el medio de salvarse,	to fleeing than fighting, her sole means
ronca tocó bocina	of salvation, she blew her raucous siren
a recoger los negros escuadrones	to summon those black squadrons
para poder en orden retirarse.	and arrange an orderly retreat (934-938).

But before she is able to leave, she is "besieged by the nearest profusion of scattering rays [*reflejos*] / which dawned above the loftiest point / of the world's most upright towers." The speaker then delves into a description of the sun rising triumphantly, driving out the night, forcing her to retreat hastily with her forces in total disarray:

y a la que antes funesta fué tirana	and brigades swarmed upon she who was
de su imperio, atropadas embestían:	once a pernicious tyrant of the realm:
que sin concierto huyendo presurosa	who incoherent, fleeing with haste
—en sus mismos horrores tropezando—	—stumbling over her selfsame horrors—
su sombra iba pisando,	trampled her own shade,
y llegar al ocaso pretendía	and so she sought to arrive in twilight
con el (sin orden ya) desbaratado	with that (now in disarray) ramshackle
ejército de sombras, acosado	army of shadows, hounded by
de la luz que el alcance le seguía.	that light which closed in upon it (950-958).

Neither the battle nor the poem end here. Instead, we are treated to one final moment:

Consiguió, al fin, la vista del ocaso
 el fugitivo paso,
 y—en su mismo despeño recobrada
 esforzando el aliento en la rüina—
 en la mitad del globo que ha dejado
 el sol desamparada,
 segunda vez rebelde determina
 mirarse coronada,
 mientras nuestro hemisferio la dorada
 ilustra del sol madeja hermosa,
 que con luz judiciosa
 de orden distributivo, repartiendo
 a las cosas visibles sus colores
 iba, y restituyendo
 entera a los sentidos exteriores
 su operación, quedando a luz más cierta
 el mundo iluminado, y yo despierta.

That fugitive step won, at last, sight
 of the sunseting West,
 and—so restored by her own decline
 enlivening her spirit in ruin—
 in that half of the world left
 unguarded by the sun,
 defiant she resolves to see herself
 crowned once again,
 meanwhile our hemisphere was revealed
 by the sun's beauteous golden mane,
 which with sagacious light
 of distributive order, went about
 disbursing its hues to all things
 visible, revitalizing
 the outer senses to full capacity,
 leaving in a more certain light
 the world illuminated, and I awake (959-
 975).

Just as Milton “alleged no superiority of moral virtue to his God over his devil” (1141), Sor Juana alleges no such thing in relation to the conflict between night and day. Despite being referred to as a tyrant, coward, and usurper of the sun's realm, the night is not condemned here by the speaker. Instead, she appears to experience a sort of redemption: her defeat on one side of the planet is a sign of her triumph on the other. She is “restored by her own decline” insofar as sunrise on this side of the earth means nightfall on the other. Although she suffers a loss, she is not yet defeated. Instead, she remains defiant (*rebelde*) and “resolves to see herself crowned once again.” A reference is being made here to both: (1) the day-night cycle of the earth's rotational period (or the sun's geocentric orbit, as it is described in the poem) which anticipates the night's return to that side of the planet from which she was just expelled—and hence another attempt to rebel against the sun and reclaim her dominion over his realm; and (2) the spiritual resolve and courage demonstrated, explained, and regarded as a triumph in the Phaethon episode of the dream. The night is reenacting here the soul's decision to persevere in its endeavor to pursue knowledge of the cosmos despite the adversity it has encountered and the likelihood of failure. She is, like Phaethon, ennobled in her defeat, as her spirit is enlivened in its own ruin. The paradox expressed here and in the Phaethon episode of the dream is akin to the claim Walter Benjamin makes in his “Theses on the Philosophy of History” that the working class derives its strength, or as he puts it, “both its hatred and its spirit of sacrifice,” from images of ruin; “for both are nourished by the image of enslaved ancestors rather than that of liberated grandchildren” (260).

What Sor Juana posits here is a circular model of historical time, or what might be considered a dialectical view of history as constant, ongoing war or struggle. The day-night cycle of the earth's rotational period is figured here as history *qua* war. In this war, the sun triumphs; so it would seem the poem ends on a celebratory note of triumph, one that commentators like Sabot-Rivers and MacKenna have interpreted to mean a triumphant declaration of womanhood. Others, meanwhile, have struggled to reconcile this apparent triumph with the abrupt and inconclusive ending to the soul's dream vision, which left the soul unable to follow through on

its third attempt to pursue knowledge of the cosmos. So they come to regard the poem as “the history of a defeat” (Paz, 378). Perhaps both interpretations are correct. Perhaps what drives the speaker to declare herself a woman awake at the poem’s end is the adversity and defeat she encounters in the dream-vision experience and the lessons she learns from it; perhaps her declaration of consciousness is to be regarded as a triumph insofar as it constitutes a radical reclamation of her identity as a woman. So the final line might be read as one that does not just refer passively to the speaker’s condition as a woman who has the misfortune of having to exit the dream and return to the “real world,” but one that powerfully expresses a decision not to yield in the face of adversity and a desire to rebel against the idea that being gendered a woman might be in any way considered an undesirable condition to be shamefully disclaimed, repudiated, or denied.

From these poems, we might derive a theory of the poem and artwork as something that has the ability to activate a person’s understanding of their situation as a historically-produced subject and grant them a more developed sense of historical agency. “There is no document of civilization which is not at the same time a document of barbarism,” writes Benjamin (256). Meanwhile, his Frankfurt-School colleague Theodor Adorno argues that “the lyric work is always the subjective expression of a social antagonism” (45). Adorno goes on to claim that poetic subjectivity is itself indebted to privilege: the pressures of the struggle for survival allow only a few human beings to grasp the universal through immersion in the self or to develop as autonomous subjects capable of freely expressing themselves. The others, however, those who not only stand alienated, as though they were objects, facing the disconcerted poetic subject but who have also literally been degraded to objects of history, have the same right, or a greater right, to grope for the sounds in which sufferings and dreams are welded. This inalienable right has asserted itself again and again, in forms however impure, mutilated, fragmentary, and intermittent—the only forms possible for those who have to bear the burden (45).

Adorno conceptualizes poetic expression here as a kind of human right that comes into conflict with the “pressures of the struggle to survive.” *Primero sueño* and “On Imagination” seem to embody and articulate a similar assertion, if not the same exact one. These poems articulate a sense of dissatisfaction with the world that they seek to make available to others via the medium of poetry and the aesthetic experience it provides. The pleasurable illusion experience described in each poem is meant to be felt in disaccord with the historical experience of colonial capitalism. What Benjamin and Adorno both refer to is how the global division of labor and the exploitation of the marginalized and oppressed marks the production of cultural objects insofar as it is the unseen labor of the oppressed that facilitates the production of those objects. These are the “cultural treasures” that Benjamin claims “owe their existence not only to the efforts of the great minds and talents who have created them, but also to the anonymous toil of their contemporaries” (256). As embodied, interpretive expressions of Sor Juana’s and Wheatley’s particular subjective experiences of the colonial/capitalist world, these poems offer a critique of the racist and heterosexist ideologies that contribute to the hierarchical structuring of that world. It may be, as Paz seems to suggest in relation to *Primero sueño*, that they even initiate a specific mode of artistic rebellion that is central to the modern era and characteristic of modern poetry and art. In the chapters that follow, we will indeed turn to examine how these the issues articulated in these two poems (regarding the very nature of aesthetic-poetic experience and how it allows for an experiential sensing of one’s own capacity for critical-reflective

subjectivity) later reemerge in the critical modes of twentieth-century poetic-artistic experiment. There we will likewise see how those experiments also seek to register and respond to the tragic, ongoing legacy of conquest and colonization in the Americas.

Chapter 2

Performative/Poetic Art Actions: Asco, CADA, Varda, and the Crisis of Consumer Culture

In the penultimate moments of her documentary film *Mur Murs* (1980), Agnès Varda, the so-called “mother” of the French New Wave film movement, utters these words which begin with an “elsewhere”: “Elsewhere, Willie Herrón and his friends relate to time with the impatience of childhood and the rage of *la raza*. They paint a whole wall in a weekend and invent a performance. Put it together quickly, make nonsense of it, then undo it even more quickly—that’s the subject and the very essence of this happening” (1:14:21). The “elsewhere” of which Varda speaks is a location in East L.A., where the Chicana art collective Asco (Spanish for “disgust”) staged a performance for her titled “Death of Fashion.” But it is also the “elsewhere” that is the realm of aesthetic judgment experience. Immanuel Kant, in his theoretical description of the experience of the “beautiful,” defines that experiential realm as one that has the semblance of conceptual objectivity. What one experiences in the encounter with a beautiful object, what is occasioned by that experience, is the *form* rather than substance of meaningful conceptuality. Kant explains:

[Because the beautiful] does not rest on any inclination of the subject (nor upon any other premeditated interest), but since the person who judges feels himself quite *free* as regards the satisfaction which he attaches to the object, he cannot find the ground of this satisfaction in any private conditions connected with his own subject, and hence it must be regarded as grounded on what he can presuppose in every other person [...] He will therefore speak of the beautiful as if beauty were a characteristic of the object and the judgment logical [...] although it is only aesthetical and involves merely a reference of the representation of the object to the subject (emphasis in original, §6, p. 46).

Kant’s mere description of what the beautiful is and does, and of what it has been doing for centuries, holds that there can be “no objective rule of taste which shall determine by means of concepts what is beautiful” (§8, p. 50). “For every judgment from this source,” he writes, “is aesthetical; i.e., the feeling of the subject, and not a concept of the object, is its determining ground” (§17, p.68). In short, the beautiful is a destroyer of laws. It frees one, in the experience of the work, from the socially-imposed limits of conceptuality, which are reproduced at the site of and upon the self.

This chapter will examine and explore the role that aesthetic judgment experience plays in the works produced by two art collectives: the above-mentioned Chicana art collective Asco and the Chilean art collective *Colectivo Acciones de Arte* (CADA). More specifically, the chapter will examine the role that art plays in the activist works of these two neo-avant-garde art collectives while exploring the dialogue between their works and the historical events that inspired them: the 1973 military coup in Chile and the Chicano Moratorium (which recently observed its fiftieth anniversary on August 29, 2020). In honor of this event and of Varda’s life and work (who recently passed away on March 29, 2019), and in order to highlight this surprising connection between the Chicano Moratorium and the French New Wave, we shall at times consider Asco’s work through the very filmic lens that Varda used to capture and portray it. Moving between readings of the performance artworks of Asco and CADA, as well of readings of Varda’s documentary film *Mur Murs*, this chapter will argue that Asco, CADA, and Varda all experiment with art’s concept *as* aesthetic form to produce works that, through the very

experience they provide, attempt to address the fundamental crisis of colonial capitalism, which, as their own artworks insist, is a crisis of memory, experience, and imagination. They do this by seeking to make the very nature of this crisis available to their audiences as an experience to be deeply felt or experientially had. Put differently, they seek to make available what Walter Benjamin once described as the experience (*Erfahrung*) of non-experience (*Erlebnis*), or what we might describe, more generally, as the non-experience of colonial capitalism. Ultimately, this chapter seeks to bring to the fore exactly how and where Asco's, CADA's, and Varda's artworks turn to intense experiment with artistic form—and with avant-garde modes of art practice in particular—to highlight the unique role that poetic art plays in the process of experientially empowering individuals to sense their capacity for historical agency and to thereby generate genuinely new critiques of the historical world.

Let's return to Varda's words in the penultimate moments of *Mur Murs*, when she introduces Asco and begins to describe their performance "Death of Fashion," which she will in turn interpret and portray through her own filmic lens. The scene that follows is a double performance, the interpretive portrayal and preservation of Asco's "Death of Fashion" on film. Know that our analysis of this performance will not arrive until after we have analyzed and discussed several of Asco's other works as well as a few of CADA's. That said, here again are the words Varda speaks: "Elsewhere, Willie Herrón and his friends relate to time with the impatience of childhood and the rage of *la raza*. They paint a whole wall in a weekend and invent a performance. Put it together quickly, make nonsense of it, then undo it even more quickly—that's the subject and the very essence of this happening." As she speaks, images—first of the aftermath of the performance, then of the artists preparing for it—flash upon the screen. They've painted a mural of a skull on the back wall of a community arts center in East Los Angeles. The skull's cranial orbits are set around two adjacent second-story windows, while its mouth opens wide to enclose two ground-level doors. A fast-cutting montage sequence depicts the artists positioning life-size paper figures of people and other objects (including an oversized heart and stiletto shoes) around the set. This editing style, together with the strange, atmospheric sounds that play in the background, gives the scene a nightmarish, dream-like quality. "Do they mean to challenge the idea of a mural and confront the wall itself, or enter into the wall and be part of it forever?" (1:14:45) Varda asks, as the scene cuts to still images of Patssi Valdez, one of the group's core members, being taped to a wall in one of their most iconic performances, "Instant Mural" (1974).

Varda's filmic portrayal of the performance, a montage sequence that rearranges the flow and order of time, begins with Valdez ripping the oversized heart in half. With a smirk, she returns the camera's gaze and steps between the two halves, placing them behind her on each side as if to reveal her emerging self. The scene then cuts to a close-up of another core member, Harry Gamboa Jr., on what appears to be a different day or perhaps sometime before the performance began (for he is without his face paint and costumery). Gamboa, in this cutaway shot, glances swiftly away from the camera while exhaling a nervous laugh. Quickly, we are returned to the performance where Gamboa appears lighting a paper human figure on fire. He and Valdez then watch as another burns. Valdez can be seen carrying one of the oversized stiletto shoes to the fire and placing it on top. More paper figures burn as she parades around in the background. Valdez wears a bright red cellophane headpiece and what might be described as a modern medici collar, also made of the same red cellophane, which spills forth structurally, enveloping her figure and framing her face. The camera pans up to reveal another core artist, Willie Herrón, emerging from

a second-story window. Using a rope, he rappels down and lands on his feet. As Gamboa would later explain, “Willie and Gronk [Asco’s fourth core member] were going to be teardrops falling out of the eyes on ropes” (qtd. in Lerner, 210). A close-up shot of Valdez in her futuristic garb, obscured behind a thick veil of black smoke, flashes on the screen and is followed in quick succession by another image, that of a partially burned paper human figure lying fallen on the floor. It is a woman holding a camera.

Gamboa, facing the camera and standing in the scene’s foreground, wearing his all-black costume with white face paint, yellow-painted eyebrows, and a mitre made of black tar-paper, then begins to speak: “Why is East L.A. burning? Why are Chicanos burning themselves? Why are we burning ourselves? We shall tend to go layer by layer and destroy our own history and create from the ashes” (1:15:46). In the midst of his speech, images of Herrón wearing a graffiti-style skull mask and pouring the imaginary contents of an empty bucket over the smoldering fire play upon the screen. Chaos then erupts as the artists unfurl what appears to be a roll of oversized paper out of one of the windows, casting it into air to create a cascading effect. Back on the floor, in front of the skull’s open mouth, the artists hurl pieces of crumpled paper—scattered about like refuse—into the air. One artist thrashes violently on the ground in the midst of that refuse. Suddenly, the montage sequence ends with a garbage truck appearing on screen. We watch and listen as its noisy mechanical arms lift a dumpster filled with refuse and empties it into its hull. As the truck places the dumpster back on the ground, the camera tracks right to reveal the performance scene in the background as Gamboa approaches carrying two paper shoes. He throws one into the now-empty dumpster and walks back to the scene. As he walks, we hear Varda’s voice once more: “Everything ends up in dust and rubbish, ground up by mechanical means. Everything disappears, even certain murals” (1:16:38).

At an earlier moment of the film, Gronk and Herrón can be seen standing before a mural they had painted collaboratively at the Estrada Courts housing project in East L.A., talking about police violence in their community: “The police came into our community. They started beating people up...[O]ur mural was sort of like a message to our community and to the outside world as to the conditions we feel as being a minority in the United States” (46:18). The mural, titled *Black and White Mural* (1973), consists of multiple, monochromatic panels that depict, among other things, scenes from the 1970 Chicano Moratorium, an anti-Vietnam War protest that erupted into a “police riot” when police disbursed the crowd using tear gas and batons and that resulted in the controversial death of award-winning Mexican-American L.A. Times columnist (and news director of a local Spanish-language T.V. station, KMEX-TV) Rubén Salazar. Salazar was killed when police fired tear-gas canisters into a local bar where he was located. One of the canisters struck him in the head, killing him instantly. His death was regarded almost immediately as a political assassination by many within the community due to the reporting he did on police violence and local *Movimiento* protests such as the East L.A. Walkouts (which some Asco members had participated in as student-organizers). The LAPD even had a special file on him and his reporting, which they considered to be “antipolice.” *Black and White Mural* conjures the Moratorium and Salazar’s death with two images in particular: one panoramic image (the longest included in the mural) of a street filled with officers in riot gear as they stand around on Whittier Blvd. outside what might be the Silver Dollar Café, where Salazar was killed; and another of what might be Salazar’s slain corpse, a grisly crime-scene photograph. Beside this second image is the image of a face bearing an astonished and presumably horrified expression. It is the face of a mime named Baptiste Debureau, one of the main characters from the classic French film *Children of Paradise* (1945). As Gronk explains in numerous interviews, this is a

reference to the situation surrounding the film's production, i.e., the Nazi occupation of France during WWII. It is "a point of reference, a nod to those who have been occupied prior" (*ASCO Interviews*, 15:21). "The idea behind the piece," he states, "was to leave a record of a particular moment of time in a neighborhood that experienced occupation by law enforcement" (14:36).

It was supposedly in the midst of the Moratorium riot that Gamboa was first given a copy of the Leftist Chicano magazine *Regeneración* by its founder Francisca Flores, an event that would lead to the formation of Asco, as soon after he would be invited to become the magazine's editor, whereupon he would bring his artist friends together for their first collaborations as a group making art for the magazine. On December 24th, 1971, the group would put on their first public performance, a "happening" titled "Stations of the Cross." Supposedly, this performance was staged in response to the city's cancellation of the annual Christmas parade in East L.A., which had been cancelled due to—and as punishment for—the Moratorium. The performance featured Herrón dressed as "Christ/Death" (a representation of Christ wearing *calavera* face paint), Gronk dressed as "Pontius Pilate (aka Popcorn)" (an offbeat character wearing a green bowler hat, toting a large fur purse, and carrying a bag of popcorn), and Gamboa dressed as a zombie alter boy wearing an animal skull headpiece. With Herrón shouldering a large, fifteen-foot-long cross made of cardboard, he, Gronk, and Gamboa made their way down Whittier Blvd., the main thoroughfare in East L.A., walking for a mile "in silent procession" before arriving at the U.S. Marine Corps Recruiting Station, where "[t]hey placed the cross at its entrance and observed a five-minute vigil" which ended with Gronk "[blessing] the site with handfuls of scattered popcorn" (Gamboa, "In the City of Angels," 76-77).

Described by Gamboa as "an alternative ritual of resistance to belief systems that glorified useless deaths" (76), "Stations of the Cross" is, as the title suggests, a playful profanation of the religious custom of commemorating Christ's death by reenacting the *Via Dolorosa*, the processional route Christ walked whilst bearing his own cross on the way to his crucifixion. The performance, with its sacrilege and surreal imagery, is designed to offend its audience of majority Roman Catholic community members. Gamboa, in his mythical-historical retelling of the performance, states that "[t]he immediate reaction of the audience was primarily confusion laced with verbal hostility" (76-77). At the same time, the performance is designed to operate as an equally surreal and symbolic protest against the high casualty rate of Chicanos in the Vietnam War (the same issue around which the Moratorium was organized). Hence the strange vigil held at the Marine Corps Recruiting Station, itself an irreverent profanation of secular protest rituals meant to honor the dead and pronounce injustice.

One year later, again on December 24th, the group would perform another "happening" following the same processional route, this one titled "Walking Mural." Gamboa offers a vivid description of the event and the artists' costumes: "Valdez was the Virgen de Guadalupe-in-Black, dressed in a black crepe gown, a black and silver cardboard aura, and an aluminum *calavera* on the back of her head. Gronk was an X-mas Tree, embellished with three inverted lime green chiffon dresses, many red glass bulbs [these appear to be blue in photographs of the event] and a five-pointed star painted in acrylic on his face. Herrón was a multifaceted mural that had become bored with its environment and left. Gamboa documented the event on black-and-white and color slides as well as on Super-8 film with the intent of using the imagery to reach a conceptually different audience from those who had experienced the performance directly. *Walking Mural* followed the same severely beaten path along the boulevard as *Stations of the Cross* a year earlier. Several individuals, converted in passing, joined their silent walk through the crowds" (79). Again, the performance is dually conceptualized as an irreverent religious

parade and Civil Rights protest march. This time, however, direct aim is taken at Chicano muralism and *Movimiento* aesthetics. It is a commonplace to remark upon Asco's gestural repudiation of pre-Columbian imagery, Chicano nationalism, and other ethnocultural and identity-based themes.²³ Yet, it is essential to understand that this performance launches an attack upon the dominant aesthetic in 60s- and 70s-era Chicano art, which sought to support and help build the Chicano Movement through cultural affirmation, the imaginative construction of an ethnocultural identity, and the promotion of Chicano nationalism. The performance itself is a radical declaration of aesthetic autonomy from the aims of the Chicano movement. It is an attack upon the institution of Chicano art and a repudiation of the demand that their art be a militant and correct expression of Chicano Movement politics. This is currently the least understood aspect of their art.

Theodor W. Adorno, in his essay "Commitment" (1962), mounts a compelling defense of autonomous artworks that rebel against the assumption they must convey some sort of concrete message or enunciate a correct political attitude. His defense, at the same time, is an attack upon politically "committed" works that declare themselves critical or socialist while practicing a style that is ultimately expressive, in Adorno's view, of a compliance with the status quo. In highlighting the affinities between the conventionalism of the far right and those on the left who want art to have a clear and specific function, he writes: "Literary realism of any provenance whatsoever, even if it calls itself critical or socialist, is more compatible with this antagonistic attitude toward everything strange or upsetting than are works that through their very approach, without swearing by political slogans, put the rigid coordinate system of the authoritarian character out of action" (78-79). "Art," he writes further, "is not a matter of pointing up alternatives but rather of resisting, solely through artistic form, the course of the world, which continues to hold a pistol to the heads of human beings" (80). Aesthetic form itself, art's character as a "nonconceptual object" or, to use the Kantian phrase, a "purposiveness without purpose," is where Adorno identifies art's most radical symbolic gesture of resistance to the world. Autonomous works—those governed *not* by any effect they seek to produce, but by "their inherent structure"—are, according to Adorno, "knowledge in the form of a nonconceptual object" (92). Here we must note that "aesthetic autonomy" does not allude to an apolitical or depoliticized art that seeks to distance itself thematically from socio-political content. Rather, it alludes to art's concept as a determinate negation of historical-empirical reality. As aesthetic form (not-yet-subsumed knowledge of the world), art distances itself from the world and from that which is already known. To elucidate the advantages autonomous works have over nominally "committed" ones, Adorno turns to Beckett's and Kafka's bodies of work as examples that "arouse the anxiety that existentialism [i.e., the doctrine underlying Sartre's 'committed' works] only talks about" (90). In highlighting the effect these afunctional works have upon their audience, he writes: "Their implacability compels the change in attitude that committed works only demand" (90). In a word, they are more truthful to, and hence more critical of, the reality they seek to *re-present* anew in aesthetic-illusion experience than are those works that, however

²³ Asco pursued, as others have explained, a "post-Chicano aesthetic," one that "complicate[s] notions of a return to indigenous authenticity, instead acknowledging a diverse, fragmentary array of cross-cultural interfaces and pop culture influences" (Benavidez, *Gronk*, 29). Coiner of the term "post-Chicano aesthetic," Max Benavidez, asserts that "[p]ost-Chicano artists are asking to be judged by criteria that applies to art in general. Their work calls for critics and other observers to remove their own ethnic and cultural blinders" ("The Post-Chicano Aesthetic").

leftist and critical they might claim to be, rely upon familiar modes of representation to convey already known facts about the world.

Asco's work is powerful precisely because it is autonomous. It refuses compartmentalization at every turn. Consider the iconic performance "Spray Paint LACMA (a.k.a., Project Pie in De/Face)" (1972). This performance occurred when Gronk, Gamboa, and Herrón (Valdez's exclusion will soon be discussed) spray-painted their names onto the outer surface of the Los Angeles County Museum of Art (LACMA). The artists claim they did this in response to the words of the museum's curator who allegedly, when asked why there were no Chicano works in the museum, answered that "Chicanos don't make art, they're in gangs"²⁴ or (as explained in a different retelling of the event) that "Chicanos only make folk art, not fine art."²⁵ The idea behind the curator's words, regardless of these variations in retellings, is that Chicanos aren't capable of producing sophisticated artworks; instead, they're only capable of making "low" forms of popular art, vandalism, and gang-related violence. The performance is a version of the Duchampian ready-made, except the artists "signatures" are also invocations of the territorial graffiti marks made by L.A. street gangs. The idea behind the work was to prove the curator both right and wrong and to shame the museum by using the curator's words against it as a proverbial pie in the face (hence the pun in the work's secondary title). By using spray paint to conceptually transform the museum itself into a work of art—or as Gamboa explains, "the first conceptual work of Chicano art to be exhibited at LACMA" (79)—the artists mockingly prove themselves capable of making the kind of "sophisticated" work desired by the museum that plays upon established codes of high-art practice. At the same time, they facetiously prove themselves to be the criminal delinquents—members of an "art gang," as Gamboa once put it—that the museum's curator had accused all Chicanos of being. *À la* Marcel Duchamp (but also in the style of street gangs), the performance is ultimately an attack upon the European-American art institution and its racist and exclusionary practices.

In *Theory of the Avant-Garde* (year), Peter Bürger claims that the European avant-garde art movements of the early 1900s (Dada, Surrealism, Futurism, etc.) were the first to have sought to negate the category of the "work of art" through their avant-garde art practices. His argument, to be more precise, is that the European avant-garde movements sought to negate not just "an earlier form of art (a style) but art as an institution that is unassociated with the life praxis of men" (49). The substance of his theory is that these art movements, which he otherwise refers to as the "historical avant-garde," launched an historic attack upon not just museum culture and the "art institution," but upon art's concept as determinate negation of historical-empirical reality, which he claims had become an institution in modern "bourgeois" society. To support his argument, Bürger posits a stagist version of art history that begins with the "sacral art" of the Medieval period, advances to the "courtly art" of the Baroque period, and then ends with the "bourgeois art" of the modern period (which heralds, or sets the stage for, the coming of the avant-garde). These three stages are defined by the way art functions in society: so "sacral art" is defined by its cultic function and its collective modes of production and reception; "courtly art" by its representational function, its individual mode of production, and its no longer sacral, but still collective mode of reception; and then "bourgeois art" is defined by its specific function, which Bürger alludes to as "the portrayal of bourgeois self-understanding," and by its individual modes of production and reception. This broad-strokes version of art history is designed to

²⁴ See "The Asco Interviews," <https://youtu.be/iyFViWGU06I>.

²⁵ See C. Odine Chavoya's "Internal Exiles: The Interventionist Public and Performance Art of Asco." See also Chon Noriega's "Conceptual Graffiti and the Public Art Museum: Spray Paint LACMA" for the first version cited.

explain art's historical process of becoming secular and autonomous (i.e. functionless and separate from life). Bürger, however, ascribes a specific function to autonomous art in "bourgeois" society when he claims that art, like religion, has a consolatory, ideological function: "The citizen who, in everyday life has been reduced to a partial function (mean-ends activity) can be discovered in art as 'human being.' Here, one can unfold the abundance of one's talents, though with the proviso that this sphere remain strictly separate from the praxis of life" (48-49). This leads him to claim that the specific function of autonomous art in "bourgeois" society is ultimately the "neutralization of critique," or the "neutralization of impulses to change society." "Art allows," he writes, "at least an imagined satisfaction of individual needs that are repressed in daily praxis. Through the enjoyment of art, the atrophied bourgeois individual can experience the self as personality. But because art is detached from daily life, this experience remains without tangible effect, i.e., it cannot be integrated into that life. The lack of tangible effects is not the same as functionlessness [...], but characterizes a specific function of art in bourgeois society: the neutralization of critique. This neutralization of impulses to change society is thus closely related to the role art plays in the development of bourgeois subjectivity" (13). In light of this view, which might be erroneous and based on a misunderstanding of Adorno, the "historical avant-garde" emerges as an historic attempt to change the way art functions in society via the attempt to eradicate art's concept—its autonomous character—altogether.

Asco's art *seems* to be engaged in this sort of art-eradicating, avant-garde art practice. Indeed, the Duchampian ready-made is but one version of the avant-gardist "manifestation" (a category of the artwork that Bürger invents to describe how avant-garde works stylistically oppose the very category of the work). Regarding the ready-made, Bürger writes the following: "The signature, whose very purpose it is to mark what is individual in the work, that it owes its existence to this particular artist, is inscribed on an arbitrarily chosen mass product, because all claims to individual creativity are to be mocked" (51-52). Octavio Paz, meanwhile, offers a more complex analysis of the ready-made in "Marcel Duchamp, or The Castle of Purity" (1966): "The Readymades are anonymous objects that the artist's gratuitous gesture, the mere fact of choosing them, converts into works of art. At the same time this gesture does away with the notion of art object. The essence of the act is contradiction; it is the plastic equivalent of the pun. As the latter destroys meaning, the former destroys the idea of value. The Readymades are not anti-art, like so many modern creations, but rather *an-artistic* (*a-rtísticos*). Neither art nor anti-art, but something in between, indifferent, existing in a void" (20-22).

Unlike the Duchampian ready-made, however, Asco's ready-made, "Spray Paint LACMA," confronts a situation that is specific to the non-Western artists of the geo-social peripheries. In an essay titled "Rethinking the Theory of the Avant-Garde from the Periphery" (year?), George Yúdice describes that situation (which he formulates specifically in relation to Latin American artists) as follows: "It is not simply a matter of rejecting the conventionalized art of the bourgeoisie; the new art also entails, on the one hand, confronting European tradition and, on the other, competing with the European avant-garde rejection of that tradition. This double injunction puts Latin American artists in an apparent double bind: whether they accommodate the 'esprit nouveau' [of the European avant-garde] or whether they reject it on the basis of Americanism or nationalism, they act in accordance with the very logic of the European avant-garde" (53-54). Yúdice's analysis posits or presupposes a version of what Pascale Casanova calls "the world republic of letters," a literary world-system wherein the performative appropriations and repudiations of specific literary styles, made from specific geo-social locations, constitute

rebellious and revolutionary acts within that system. The double bind situation of which Yúdice speaks is a product of European cultural hegemony, which Casanova argues is a product of the literary world-system's specific measure of time: "Literary space creates a present on the basis of which all positions can be measured, a point in relation to which all other points can be located" (88). This point, which Casanova calls "the Greenwich meridian of literature," operates as a temporal point of reference for the geo-social mapping of literary projects and experiments. It is otherwise known as the horizon—or present—of cultural modernity. Casanova's theory is that all writers contend with one another for the ability to lay claim to the present of literature, to declare themselves the most "modern" in a bid for recognition and to attain artistic salvation (i.e., canonization).

It could be said that Asco pursues a strategy similar to the one Casanova describes in her study of authors from the geo-social peripheries, those who she claims strategically turned to Paris to appropriate the styles, conventions, and techniques that were considered the most "modern" in an effort to accelerate literary time and bring their respective literary traditions "up to date." Hence we might read Asco's use of the ready-made, or their inclusion of a reference to *Children of Paradise* in *Black and White Mural*, as a mechanical procedure designed to accommodate the global cultural system that upholds European cultural hegemony, even if they were at the same time subverting the dominating influence of European-American culture and Chicano Movement aesthetics. Such a reading, however, overlooks the way that Asco's appropriative—or better yet, invocative—use of the ready-made challenges identitarianist claims of ownership over culture. At the expense of private property (and with the literal defacing of it), Asco's ready-made brings the ready-made concept to life (giving *it* recognition and saving *it* from oblivion), just as the ready-made concept, together with a play upon graffiti-vandalism, helps enliven Asco's work.

"Spray Paint LACMA" is more than just a concept. It is a performance, a site-specific one, but also one that continues to take place in the recurring historical encounter between the work (or what's left of it) and its recipients. On the day following the initial performance, Gamboa returned to the scene of the performance/crime with Valdez in an effort to document the group's actions before they could be whitewashed by the city. This was also an effort to include the excluded Valdez, who on the previous day was persuaded not to accompany the group because they were worried she wouldn't be able to run fast enough in the platform shoes she liked to wear, should they get caught. One of the photographs Gamboa and Valdez collaboratively produced upon their return has since become *the* signature image associated with the event. This image, which is as iconic as the performance itself, features Valdez standing on a footbridge above the men's signatures, looking off to the side, as if she were just a visitor passing by the museum, indifferent to, or perhaps just unaware of, what had occurred. Valdez's presence in this photograph is one of its most significant and salient features. She stands situated in the center of the image, wearing casual clothes, a simple red shirt and blue jeans. Her body is front-facing, while her arms rest upon the rail of the exterior footbridge. The spray-painted signatures, meanwhile, are located just beneath her, on the side of the footbridge opposite to where she stands. She appears looking over her shoulder, away from the camera and bridge, though her brown face and arms remain clearly visible. Her hair is long and black. She wears a "moderate" amount of makeup (blush, eyeshadow, and lip liner), though it is difficult to distinguish the actual amount or style. Her posture makes it seem as if she might be trying to look casual while keeping watch for authorities. It bespeaks an anxiety about being associated with the work, presumably for fear of punishment. Ultimately, her performance is a kind of non-performance. It

conveys something of the reality of situation insofar as her involvement in the act needed to be masked. The artwork, in other words, via Valdez's performance, lays bare the system of racist and heterosexist policing of both life and thought. It likewise pushes us to sense and experience in our experiential encounter with the artwork aspects of our own subjective experiences of the world that our quotidian systems of conceptual meaning and analysis are unable to reach.

A similar street performance was carried out by the Chilean art collective known as *Colectivo Acciones de Arte* [Art Actions Collective] (or CADA, for short), on October 17th, 1979, when the artists (Fernando Balcells, Juan Castillo, Diamela Eltit, Lotty Rosenfeld, and Raúl Zurita) orchestrated a parade-like motorcade of ten empty milk trucks driving single-file through the city of Santiago, before arriving at—and stationing themselves in front of—the Museo Nacional de Bellas Artes (MNBA), where the artists proceeded to hang a large white sheet before the museum's entrance so as to block it. This performance, titled "Inversión de escena" ("Scene Inversion"), was part of another series of art actions that occurred fourteen days prior, when the artists distributed a hundred half-liter bags of milk to people living in the poverty-stricken commune La Granja (which is located on the outskirts of Santiago). As part of the same series of actions, the artists also did the following: redistributed the emptied milk bags to local artists for them to use as material for milk-inspired art; published a milk-themed poem in that week's issue of the progressive-left magazine *Hoy*; delivered a manifesto-like speech via loudspeaker before the building-headquarters of the United Nations Economic Commission for Latin America and the Caribbean (ECLAC); used materials from these events (including video recordings of the artists distributing the milk at La Granja and a tape recording of them delivering their speech at ECLAC) to create an art installation at the Galería Centro Imagen; and coordinated with artists in Bogotá, Columbia and Toronto, Canada (Cecilia Vicuña and Eugenio Téllez) to create similar milk-themed performances.

This interrelated series of art actions was subsequently called "Para no morir de hambre en el arte" ("For Not Dying of Hunger in Art"). It takes its name from the title of an unpublished series of poems Zurita had written sometime between 1974 and '78. As Robert Neustadt explains, the poems "are presented in the form of three 'projects'" that essentially lay the foundations for these art actions ("Para no morir" and "Inversión de escena"), and for one that Zurita would later realize in 1982 (27). They read:

"Para no morir de hambre en el arte/Exposiciones"

I.

LOS TEXTOS DEL POEMA 'MI AMOR DE DIOS' EXPUESTOS EN LAS SALAS
DE PROCESOS DE DISTINTAS PLANTAS LECHERAS SUDAMERICANAS.

EL BLANCO DE LA PÁGINA DEL POEMA EXPUESTO: LECHE DISTRIBUIDA Y
CONSUMIDA EN LA CIUDAD

EL HECHO COTIDIANO DE BEBER LECHE (ALGUNOS MINUTOS)
CONSUMANDO/ CONSUMIENDO EL TEXTO EN LA VIDA, ALIMENTANDO
LA EXPERIENCIA EN EL ARTE.

II.

CUATRO CAMIONES LECHEROS CADA UNO CON UNA PALABRA DE LA
FRASE 'MI AMOR DE DIOS' PINTADAS EN SU POSTERIOR SOBRE EL

LOGO Y LA MARCA DE LA EMPRESA. LOS COMIONES SE VAN ALTERNANDO Y PASANDO EN LA CARRETERA CONFORMANDO, EN SUS SUCESIVAS ALINEACIONES, DISTINTAS FRASES A PARTIR MATRIZ.

III.
EN EL CIELO, CON LETRAS DE HUMO BLANCO—COMO LOS AVIONES DE LA PUBLICIDAD QUE ESCRIBEN SUS AVISOS EN LAS ALTURAS—LAS 31 FRASES CON LAS DEFINICIONES DE DIOS ESCRITAS SUCESIVAMENTE.

[“For Not Dying of Hunger in Art/Exhibitions”

I.
LINES FROM THE POEM ‘MY LOVE OF GOD’ ON DISPLAY IN THE PROCESSING ROOMS OF DIFFERENT SOUTH AMERICAN MILK FACTORIES.

THE WHITE OF THE POEM’S PAGE ON DISPLAY: MILK DISTRIBUTED AND CONSUMED IN THE CITY.

THE QUOTIDIAN FACT OF DRINKING MILK (A FEW MINUTES) CONSUMMATING/ CONSUMING THE TEXT IN LIFE, NOURISHING THE EXPERIENCE IN ART.

II.

FOUR MILK TRUCKS EACH WITH A WORD OF THE PHRASE ‘MY LOVE OF GOD’ PAINTED ON ITS BACK ABOVE THE COMPANY LOGO AND BRANDNAME. THE TRUCKS GO ALTERNATING AND PASSING ONE ANOTHER ON THE HIGHWAY CONFORMING, IN THEIR SUCCESSIVE ARRANGEMENTS, DIFFERENT PHRASES FROM A MATRIX.

III.

IN THE SKY, WITH LETTERS OF WHITE SMOKE—LIKE THE ADVERTISEMENT PLANES THAT WRITE THEIR NOTICES ON HIGH—THE 31 PHRASES WITH THE DEFINITIONS OF GOD WRITTEN SUCCESSIVELY.]

Another unpublished poem, written around the same time, reiterates and expands upon some of these ideas:

“Para ver”

LAS LECHERIAS COMO LOS UNICOS TEMPLOS REALES/ SOPORTES DESDE DONDE ES POSIBLE VER EL EXTERMINIO, EL DESVARIO, TE DIGO MAS QUE EN EL ARTE DE DENUNCIA.

EL BLANCO DE LA LECHE FLUYENDO EN CAMIONES A TRAVES DEL GRIS DE LAS CARRETERAS. BAJO ELLA, DIOS ES EL MANTEL DEL MUNDO/ COLORES SOBRE COLORES.

LA LECHE DERRAMADA BAJO EL AZUL DEL CIELO: AVISOS LUMINOSOS

PARA NO MORIR DE HAMBRE EN EL ARTE.

[“For Seeing”

DAIRIES AS THE ONLY TRUE TEMPLES/ BASES FROM WHICH IT IS
POSSIBLE TO SEE THE EXTERMINATION, THE LUNACY, MORE I TELL
YOU THAN IN PROTEST ART.

THE WHITE OF MILK FLOWING IN TRUCKS ACROSS THE GREY OF THE
HIGHWAYS. BELOW IT, GOD IS THE ALTER CLOTH-EARTH/ COLORS
UPON COLORS.

MILK SPILLED BENEATH THE BLUE OF THE SKY: LUMINOUS NOTICES FOR
NOT DYING OF HUNGER IN ART.]

“My Love of God,” the poem referenced in “For Not Dying of Hunger in Art/Exhibitions,” is also known as “La vida nueva” (“The New Life”), and it was realized as an art action when Zurita (with the help of Rosenfeld and Eltit) hired five planes to skywrite the poem above New York City in “homage”—as Zurita explains—“to minority groups throughout the world and, more specifically, to the Spanish-speaking people of the United States” (“Introductory Note”). While the verses from that poem were not used in these art actions (“Para no morir” and “Inversión”), modified versions of lines from these prefatory poems were used in “Inversion” when the artists hung two large white sheets of paper with the following lines inscribed on them in the processing room of the milk factory from which the milk trucks (those involved in the art action) set off:

LA OBRA ES:
UN VASO DE LECHE DERRAMADO BAJO EL AZUL DEL CIELO

[THE WORK IS:
A GLASS OF MILK SPILLED BENEATH THE BLUE OF THE SKY]

LA OBRA SERA:
LA PRODUCCION DE UNA NUEVA VIDA BAJO EL AZUL DE NUESTRO CIELO

[THE WORK WILL BE:
THE PRODUCTION OF A NEW LIFE BENEATH THE BLUE OF OUR SKY]

It is also the case that the milk-themed poem published in *Hoy* was intended to be a realization of the idea proposed in the second stanza of “For Not Dying,” which the artists meant to realize by having the magazine publish a completely blank page with only “CADA” printed at the bottom. According to Neustadt,²⁶ the artists composed the milk-themed poem at the request of the magazine’s director, who did not want the page to be blank (25-26). That poem reads:

Imaginar esta página completamente

To imagine this page completely blank.

²⁶ Neustadt cites Rosenfeld, but where this information comes from is unclear, since the interview with Rosenfeld that Neustadt includes in his monograph makes no mention of this.

blanca.

Imaginar esta página blanca
accediendo a todos los rincones de Chile
como la leche diaria a consumir.

Imaginar cada rincón de Chile
privado del consumo diario de leche
como páginas blancas por llenar.

To imagine this blank page
spreading to all corners of Chile
like our daily milk to consume.

To imagine every corner in Chile
deprived of its daily consummation of
milk
like blank pages to be filled.

A reference is being made here and throughout these art actions and poems to the Allende government's *Medio Litro* (Half Liter) program, which guaranteed a daily provision of one half liter of milk to every child under fifteen in the nation. Following the 1973 coup, that program was terminated by the post-coup military dictatorship, which sought to revert the former government's socialist policies and implement neoliberal economic reforms. This meant, among other things, privatizing, decentralizing, and cutting the costs of public health and education programs. Although the *Medio Litro* program was terminated, milk continued to be distributed via the pre-Allende *Programa Nacional de Alimentación Complementaria* (National Program for Supplemental Nutrition) (PNAC), but only to children between the ages of two and five. That program remained unchanged until 1982, when the military government attempted to replace it with another program that would solely provide service to children at risk of malnutrition. In 1985, a failed attempt was made to further reduce and limit the amount of milk distributed from 23,000 to 6,000 tons annually and to replace it with rice. That attempt failed due to the pushback from policy experts and doctors and the threat of unrest from local communities.

Within this context of neoliberal economic reform, but also severe political repression of the left, CADA appealed to the concept of milk to invoke the idea that people have a right to nourishment in both life and art. The public art exhibition projects Zurita poetically describes in "For Not Dying" posit poetry as a form of nourishment and milk as the nourishment needed to experience not just life, but art as well. "The quotidian fact of drinking milk," what amounts to but a few minutes out of one's day, becomes, in these poetic works, a quasi-religious experience. The daily consuming of milk is figured as the consummation of a ritual act, the consummation/consuming of "the text in life, nourishing the experience in art." The drinking of milk, in other words, is figured as a form of art-life experience, a beautiful, meaning-filled act that is intrinsically poetic and that makes poetic experience not only possible in the first place (insofar as it sustains the life that experiences art), but also possible again (it is the conceptual material being used to make these artworks, which themselves are new instantiations of art). The whiteness of the poem's page signals the poem's nourishing, milk-like quality, which Zurita and CADA sought to literally put on display so that it would be like "milk distributed and consumed in," and throughout, "the city." Art is being brought to the public through these art actions and placed in a site of industrial milk production which itself is made a part of the artwork while also serving as one of the work's distributing apparatuses. This is all being figured as a matter of life and death in art. The title, "For Not Dying of Hunger in Art," suggests that one could indeed metaphorically die of hunger in art, that this is a real danger, a real form of deprivation. The distributing of milk at La Granja is a figure for the act of distribution the artists engage in through the various ways they promote and perform their art actions, which they playfully offer to us (the audience) as revivifying nourishment to be experienced and consumed. The art is being

packaged and distributed to us, delivered to our doorstep and to the doorstep of the museum, which the artists incorporate into their work, making the museum, which they supposedly reject, a part of it. The museum—like the milk factory, the magazine, the community at La Granja, ECLAC, the Galería Centro Imagen, and the city streets of Santiago—is the place where they exhibit their work. But they choose to exhibit it outside as opposed to in, a symbolic repudiation of insiderness and museum culture. The insiders of the museum are not the community they seek to make their audience, not the audience they wish to save from hunger in art. Instead it is the people in the street, the public.

The artists ask us to imagine, or re-imagine, a world wherein provisions of milk and art are made available to all in Chile. The allusion made at the end of the poem published in *Hoy*—the allusion to blank pages waiting to be filled—insinuates that a form of writing is waiting to take place and be actualized by the reader. It insinuates, via the structure of the last three lines, that this writing would emerge as a response to the situation readers are asked to imagine: that of the Chilean people being deprived of their milk. The poem, in other words, asks readers to imagine becoming the writers (or agents) of history, and to imagine this form of agency (symbolized by the latent potential of the blank page) spreading to all corners of Chile. Yet the expressive silence of the blank page is also, as Neustadt has explained, an allusion to state violence and fear (18, 31). Zurita himself was one of the thousands of Chileans kidnapped and tortured by the regime (though not one of the thousands murdered). His work, like his body—and the cheek he self-burned in a symbolic act of protest—bears the mark of that experience. The poem, in short, asks us to imagine two unimaginables: the disorienting pain of that life-shattering experience; and the possibility of acting, or even believing ourselves capable of acting, in the face of such violence. So the artwork intones (silently booming to the marrow) these, the torments of history, as well as this: *The beautiful in art is imagining it regardless. The beautiful in life is realizing it.*

In another art action titled “¡Ay Sudamérica!” (“Oh South America!”), realized on July 12th, 1981, CADA chartered six planes to fly in military formation over Santiago and scatter-drop 400,000 leaflets containing a message in which the artists propose for every single person “a vocation in happiness,” which they claim “is the only great collective aspiration / [mankind’s] only anguish [*desgarro*].” “We are artists,” they say, “but so too is each man who works for the expansion, even if only mental, of his life spaces.” The artists then declare “work in life [to be] the only creative form” and subsequently renunciate (while still identifying themselves as artists) “the fiction in fiction.” “We therefore say,” they conclude, “that the work of expanding the usual standards of life [*el trabajo de ampliación de los niveles habituales de vida*] is the only valid artistic montage / the only exhibition / the only work of art that lives.” CADA has been accused of (or celebrated for) attempting to collapse the distinction between art and life (Neustadt, 33, 35). Indeed, the artists appear to do so in the concluding words of the pamphlet, wherein they declare “life [to be] a creative act” and suggest that the construction of the work will be the application in life of this art-life mindset: “That is the art / the work / this is the vocation of art we propose.”

The statement itself is one that nominally seeks to work against the division of labor that separates artists from non-artists. This it does by suggesting a reconceptualization of the self from a new perspective, one that allows the subject to transcend the divisions and limiting perceptions of self created by the division of labor. “[T]oday we propose, to think of ourselves from another perspective,” the artists explain, “not only as technicians or scientists, not only as manual workers, not only as artists of the canvas or montage, not only as filmmakers, not only as

farmworkers,” but as artists whose artwork is the collaborative construction of not just a new life, but a new art-life work. The “vocation in happiness” they propose (“in happy [or prosperous] well-being,” as it might also be translated) is the means by which they imagine us being able to imagine our non-artist selves contributing the construction of this art-life work. If this were true, if what they propose were to become a reality, then all life after “¡Ay Sudamérica!” would itself become an expression of the artwork, a component of it. In ecstasy the artists imagine themselves modestly “participating in the greatest aspirations of all mankind,” as if what they weren’t imagining was themselves initiating the construction of the world’s greatest artwork. They then proceed to imagine, growing more and more excited as they do, the reader’s eyes “gliding [...] over these lines” (reading, in the words, the thing that will lead to the construction of that work), before then proclaiming, as if they were speaking to an entire continent, “Oh, South America[!]” This sudden moment of poetic apostrophe signals the orgasm-like climax of the poetic vision (i.e. the fiction) they claim to have repudiated, and it does so with a vision of the South American populace not just receiving their work, but imagining itself capable of producing the beautiful, utopian, artwork-like life they envision therein.

It has been said that the dropping of leaflets from planes flying over Santiago functions as a reference to the bombing of the presidential palace (La Moneda) on the day of the military coup, September 11th, 1973. Indeed, Eltit confirms that the artists “wanted to cite, to activate the memory of that bombing with these planes” (qtd. in Neustadt, 96). With the coup itself as an intertext, “¡Ay Sudamérica!” makes reference to the end of democracy in Chile, the end of the *vía Chilena* (i.e., the nonviolent road to socialism that Allende’s Popular Unity government was pioneering), and to the beginning of what historian Peter Winn calls “the darkest night of political violence in [Chile’s] history” (272). But what the artwork, with its pamphlet-art bombing, imagines is an alternative to violence. It attempts to serve, in the minds of its recipients (i.e., in the illusion-space of the artwork), as a boundary marker, one that marks the beginning of the end of the dictatorship, and the beginning of *la vita nuova*, the new art-life.

On December 24th, 1974, the three year anniversary of Asco’s “Stations of the Cross” and the two year anniversary of “Walking Mural,” Asco performed the “No Movie”²⁷ “First Supper (After a Major Riot).” In this “No Movie,” Asco ventured again into the public space of Whittier Blvd., except this time, instead of a procession, they performed a version of the Last Supper on a traffic island in the middle of the street during rush hour. In the photograph taken of the event, Valdez, Gronk, Herrón, and non-core member Humberto Sandoval²⁸ appear sitting around a small table. Valdez and Gronk have their faces painted white with blackened eye sockets and black lipstick while Herron and Sandoval wear masks (one *calavera* mask and one phantom of the opera-like half-mask). Though elegantly dressed, they appear somewhat macabre; and it has been suggested that they are supposed to be representations of death engaging in a *Día de*

²⁷ The “No Movie” is a photographic performance genre invented by the artists. It is designed to be a low-budget alternative to film. On the concept of the “No Movie,” Gamboa writes: “The purpose of the No Movie was to create photographic pseudodocumentary evidence to corroborate the actuality of the individuals and events framed within the context of reality. The image was an implicit fragment of a continuous action, similar to that of an individual frame of a movie. However, no preceding nor succeeding ‘actions’ accompanied the images contained within No Movie. The fluctuating propagandistic value of each No Movie depended on its venue of exhibition and/or publication as well as on the gullibility of its audience. The No Movie was fueled by concomitant text and dialogue that could change without prior notice” (82).

²⁸ Gamboa was behind the camera.

Muertos-like banquet.²⁹ Indeed, the artists appear to be enjoying themselves, as if they were celebrating. They're all positioned around the table so that none of their backs face the camera, a visual reference to da Vinci's *The Last Supper*. On the table is food wrapped in barbed wire and another small white mask. A naked doll lies on the floor before the table, and just behind it, leaning on the table, stands a rococo-style mirror facing the camera. Behind the artists, a large, stylized, mostly black-and-white painting of a mutilated and visually grotesque body (which might be a corpse) hangs beneath a large "Whittier Bl" road sign. On the ground, to the painting's left-hand side (camera right), is a limbless mannequin donning a painted-on skeleton while to the painting's right (camera left) rests an oversized papier-mâché head whose features resemble those of then-California Governor and soon-to-be U.S. President Ronald Reagan. Interestingly, the title of the painting that hangs on display in the background is "The Truth About the Terror in Chile." It was painted in 1973 by Gronk.³⁰

"First Supper (After a Major Riot)" commemorates, once again, the Chicano Moratorium. This time, however, the artists commemorate the military coup in Chile and its violent aftermath along with it. In commemorating these two events, the artwork aims (through its own aesthetic-illusion experience) to activate a form of memory and experience that is unavailable to the general populace in East L.A. and in urban areas across the world. Walter Benjamin, in the essay "On Some Motifs in Baudelaire" (year?), presents a theory on the nature of modern experience as a form of non-experience (*Erlebnis*). Following Freud, Benjamin understands this form of non-experience to mean an external shock experience from which the subject is shielded by consciousness. "The greater share of the shock factor in particular impressions," he writes, "the more constantly consciousness has to be alert as a screen against stimuli; the more efficiently it does so, the less do these impressions enter experience (*Erfahrung*), tending to remain in the sphere of a certain hour in one's life (*Erlebnis*)" (163). The function of consciousness, in other words, is to compartmentalize and dissociate the subject from the shock experience of modern life by transforming that experience into, or processing it as, information. Benjamin suggests this more explicitly in the lines that follow: "Perhaps the special achievement of shock defense may be seen in its function of assigning to an incident a precise point in time in consciousness at the cost of the integrity of its contents. This would be a peak achievement of the intellect; it would turn the incident into a moment that has been lived (*Erlebnis*)"—but *not* genuinely experienced (*Erfahrung*) (163). Benjamin's hypothesis, or the unstated assumption of his essay, is that mankind's ability to experience in the strict sense of the word (*Erfahrung*) is withering and that non-experience (*Erlebnis*) is becoming, or has already become, the predominant form of life-experience under capitalism.³¹

"First Supper (After a Major Riot)" attests to a version of the Benjaminian hypothesis by juxtaposing the city and its inhabitants with the performance. In the background, cars pass by

²⁹ See Wattolik, Eva. "Banquet and Heterotopia: Asco's *First Supper (After A Major Riot)* (1974)." *Public Art Dialogue*, vol. 8, no. 1, Jan. 2018, pp. 32–49.

³⁰ "The Truth About the Terror in Chile" is actually a diptych. What appears in the background of "First Supper" is but one half of that diptych. The other half features a mirror-like image of the same mutilated body, except the colors are inverted.

³¹ But what is experience (*Erfahrung*)? Benjamin describes it twice: "Experience is indeed a matter of tradition, in collective existence as well as private life. It is less the product of facts firmly anchored in memory than of a convergence in memory of accumulated and frequently unconscious data" (157); "Where there is experience in the strict sense of the word, certain contents of the individual past combine with the material of the collective past. The rituals with their ceremonies, their festivals [...] kept producing the amalgamation of these two elements of memory over and over again. They triggered recollection at certain times and remained handles of memory for a lifetime. In this way, voluntary and involuntary recollection lose their mutual exclusiveness" (159).

with people within, automatons mechanically moving through the city, the late twentieth-century version of the big-city crowd. With the performance stationed in the middle of the street, the artwork implies that something perhaps horrific has been hidden in plain sight. The performance itself attracts no crowd of spectators. Instead, the crowd streams by in the faceless form of traffic, indifferent to the bizarre spectacle presented by the work. In another artwork titled “100 Alibis” (1994),³² Gamboa writes the following:

never look into eyes of a million people on the opposing fast lane or your individualism will evaporate. you might drift into the center divider and lose your identity. you might skid menacingly into the emergency lane and hit a stray dog or an abandoned lover. always look straight ahead and speed as fast as you can until you reach your destination. never mind the flashing lights that illuminate your path out of the darkness.

The speaker of this “alibi” playfully mocks the city’s inhabitants. He delivers a number of injunctions that scornfully deride the mechanical behavior of big-city motorists, who are but a figure for the unthinking masses. Self-preservation is their primary concern—preservation of the individual self and of the self as an individual. Individualism is the ideology they cling to as if it were a matter of life and death. This, according to Marx, is one of the consequences of estranged labor. “[E]stranged labour,” he writes, “estranges the *species* from man. It turns for him the *life of the species* into a means of individual life [...] For in the first place labour, *life-activity, productive life* itself, appears to man merely as a *means* of satisfying a need—the need to maintain the physical existence” (emphases in original, 75).³³ The loss of this individualist mindset is ironically portrayed here as a catastrophe for the individual, who is but one amongst the multitude of isolated individuals (cars on the freeway) streaming headlong into the future clinging to their individual lives, terrified to think that if they look away, if take their eyes off the road for a second, they might crash, burn, and die in ruin. But the real catastrophe here is the isolation and estrangement that the unthinking individual (and so the mass) endures precisely because they refuse to look anywhere but ahead, imaginatively projecting only themselves arriving at their destination in the future (which, unbeknownst to them, was always already death and the living death of estranged labor). The mocking tone of this “alibi” becomes a plea: *For the love of god, please look away and contemplate something other than your own individualist self, start recognizing others in a non-oppositional way (make eye contact with them!) so that we can all escape this nightmare scenario.* The “alibi’s” end imagines an end to this state of darkness we all live in.

Asco’s street performance (“First Supper”) envisions itself as one of these “flashing lights” intended to help guide or “illuminate” one’s “path out of the darkness.” This it does by burrowing into the late twentieth-century version of non-experience (*Erlebnis*) so as to make it available as a genuine experience to be had, or impressed upon the individual and collective unconscious, (*Erfahrung*). This is a version of the argument Benjamin makes about Baudelaire’s poetry, which he claims does the exact same thing.³⁴ And as Benjamin says of Baudelaire, Asco

³² This artwork, an art installation piece which consists of one hundred epigram-like statements, will be discussed in greater detail in the dissertation’s fifth chapter.

³³ As a result, “Life itself appears only as a means to life”—though it is not actually the genuine form of living and communal existence characterized by free and spontaneous life-activity that Marx imagines humanity capable of achieving (emphasis in original, 76). This for Marx would be a true realization, or a true expression, of humanity’s essentially human character as a species.

³⁴ In the essay’s conclusion, he writes: “Of all the experiences which made his life what it was Baudelaire singled out his having been jostled by the crowd as the decisive, unique experience. The luster of a crowd with a motion and a soul of its own, the glitter that had bedazzled the *flâneur*, had dimmed for him. To impress the crowd’s meanness

battles the crowd “with the impotent rage of someone fighting the rain or the wind” (194). In “First Supper,” Asco presents the crowd with a distorted image of itself so that it might perceive the truth about its distorted view of reality. The artwork itself is like a mirror, one that attempts to confront the viewer with an image of its own indifference to real-world suffering. The crowd appears both in its real-world form (in the background as traffic) and in its exaggerated and visually grotesque form (in the foreground as the diners of a miserable supper, celebrating in the aftermath of a major riot). The artwork, in other words, is like the mirror that sits on the floor before the diners. It invites the viewer to gaze into it and see.

But the supper is also an unintended version, or performance, of the one César Vallejo describes in the poem “La cena miserable” (“The Miserable Supper”) (1918). It expresses the same sentiment, the same desperate desire for an end to the nonsensical suffering of this miserable, “mere-life” existence, and the same comical scorn for pointless, time-wasting banquets. Here is the full poem, presented without comment:

How long will we wait for what
is not owed us... And at what pass will
we rigidly extend our poor knees forever! How long until
the cross that sustains us stops restraining its oars.

How long will Doubt go on toasting to our honors
for having suffered...

 We’ve sat at the table
for so long already, with the bitterness of a child
who at midnight, cries from hunger, wide awake...

And when will we see ourselves with the others, at the brink
of an eternal morning, everyone breakfasted.
How long this vale of tears, where
I never asked to be led.

 On my elbows,
everything bathed in tears, downcast
and defeated I repeat: how long will this supper last?

There is someone who has drunk in abundance, and he mocks us,
and he extends and withdraws from us, like a black spoonful
of bitter human essence, the tomb...

 And even less does
this sinister one know how long this supper will last!³⁵

upon himself, he envisaged the day on which even the lost women, the outcasts, would be ready to advocate a well-ordered life, condemn libertinism, and reject everything except money. Having been betrayed by these last allies of his, Baudelaire battled the crowd—with the impotent rage of someone fighting the rain or the wind. This is the nature of something lived through (*Erlebnis*) to which Baudelaire has given the weight of an experience (*Erfahrung*). He indicated the price for which the sensation of the modern age may be had: the disintegration of the aura in the experience of shock. He paid dearly for consenting to this disintegration—but it is the law of his poetry, which shines in the sky of the Second Empire as ‘a star without atmosphere’” (193-194).

³⁵ Hasta cuándo estaremos esperando lo que
no se nos debe... Y en qué recodo estiraremos

In the immediate aftermath of “First Supper,” i.e., directly after the “No Movie” performance, Asco staged another performance on the same street titled “Instant Mural” (1974). This is the artwork Varda had used to introduce the group in her film. Gamboa describes it as follows: “Instead of serving dessert, Gronk taped Valdez and Sandoval to the exterior wall of a liquor store. *Instant Mural* challenged the fragility of social controls. Several anonymous individuals, concerned about their welfare, offered to help Valdez and Sandoval escape from the confines of low-tack masking tape. After an hour of entrapment, Valdez and Sandoval simply walked away from the visually intimidating, yet physically weak, lengths of tape” (80). While multiple photographs were taken of the event, one featuring Valdez standing taped against the wall has since become the most icon-like photographic representation of it. The photograph itself is, in other words, or has become, *the* representation of “Instant Mural.”³⁶ In it, Valdez stands in the center of the frame, posing with her back against a golden sand-colored wall (the same liquor store wall seen in the background of “First Supper”). Again, she looks away from the camera. This time, however, she is more clearly engaged in a deliberate performance. A wardrobe change must have occurred between this performance and “First Supper,” for she now dons fashionable urban clothing (jean shorts, a bright red jacket, and platform shoes). Lengths of white tape stretch across and visually dissect her body. One of her arms is raised in a gesture of helpless submission while the other clings to the wall at her side. She appears frozen, stuck, in time and space. Meanwhile, to her left (camera right) a motion-blurred and anonymous-looking figure, Gronk, can be seen from behind applying the tape. In another photograph taken of the event,

nuestra pobre rodilla para siempre! Hasta cuándo
la cruz que nos alienta no detendrá sus remos.

Hasta cuándo la Duda nos brindará blasones
por haber padecido!...

Ya nos hemos sentado
mucho a la mesa, con la amargura de un niño
que a media noche, llora de hambre, desvelado...

Y cuándo nos veremos con los demás, al borde
de una mañana eterna, desayunados todos!
Hasta cuándo este valle de lágrimas, a donde
yo nunca dije que me trajeran.

De codos
todo bañado en llanto, repito cabizbajo
y vencido: hasta cuándo la cena durará.

Hay alguien que ha bebido mucho, y se burla,
y acerca y aleja de nosotros, como negra cuchara
de amarga esencia humana, la tumba...

Y menos sabe
ese oscuro hasta cuándo la cena durará!

³⁶ In fact, I seem to recall seeing this artwork for the first time reproduced in large-scale on a museum wall at LACMA. If I remember correctly, that wall was the first thing the museum visitor would see upon entering the museum’s 2011 exhibit “Asco: Elite of the Obscure, A Retrospective, 1972-1987.” This was my first encounter with Asco’s art, and it was the first ever major art exhibition dedicated exclusively to Asco. It could perhaps be credited with bringing the group out of relative obscurity, bringing about a resurgence in their popularity among scholars and the public—although it is the case that they are still relatively obscure outside of Chicana/Latina circles. The argument here is that this photograph best captures the essence of the event and makes a mural-like artwork out of it. This is attested to by its reception history.

both Valdez and Sandoval can be seen plastered to the wall in heavy amounts of tape while two cars pass by in the image's foreground. The people inside those cars have their heads turned away from the camera and towards the two artists. In other words, they're intrigued.

For Varda, "Instant Mural" provides a visual and conceptual gateway into the daring performance she captures on film. In and throughout her film, murals are an expression of space and place, and they function as a counterpart to the advertising billboards scattered throughout the city. When Varda playfully asks "Do they [Asco] mean to challenge the idea of a mural and confront the wall itself, or enter into the wall and be part of it forever?" she asks an essential question: How serious is the group in their protest against muralism and the wall? Do they seriously mean to challenge these things, or are their tactics designed to inscribe themselves into the muralist tradition? Following this moment, the film's focus shifts to discuss the ephemeral nature of murals—the damage and decay they are subject to—which itself becomes an expression of life's ephemerality. The mural Varda ends her film with, Terry Schoonhoven's "Isle of California" (1972), depicts a post-apocalyptic scene. It presents the image of a freeway overpass that has been shattered by a catastrophic mega-earthquake, the one for which California is supposedly long overdue. Surrounding the freeway, which represents the ruins of our society, is the ocean, which laps against the base of those ruins. In the distant background are mountains and a clear blue sky populated by a handful white clouds. Varda, in her closing voiceover monologue, states the following:

Californians talk about the great earthquake all the time, even with their foreign friends. The huge fault follows a path laid out by seismologists that will separate California from the American continent. The furthest edges of Arizona will become beaches, and California will be an island, as in the title of this mural—but not a flowering and inhabited island. An island of ruins and silence, the ultimate failure of concrete. And this final mural, seen here between two mail trucks, murmurs its message: the future is perhaps a wave that will wash us away (1:20:35).

Varda's reading of the mural as a prophetic, murmuring sign of the inevitable collapse of our post-industrial capitalist society, the inevitable failure of concrete and technology to secure our civilizational existence, echoes, while projecting into the future, Asco's criticism of society in all the above mentioned artworks. "Instant Mural" imagines an escape-like flight away from the wall, which itself represents the high-pressure situation we're all in and from which we seem unable to escape. The artwork playfully mocks its audience by luring it into believing that the drama of the situation is something more than a mere illusion. Everything, according to the artwork, is perception and play. When asked in a 1976 interview "Do you have a wide audience for your No-Movies?" Gamboa once quipped: "A wide and captive audience that is freed only by the unshackling of the imagination whereupon they can set themselves forth against external restraints" (Gamboa and Gronk, 393). Gamboa's words here offer a version of what "Instant Mural" communicates. The performance seeks to model for its audience an imaginative escape from external restraints that are revealed to be mostly conceptual (materially weak and for the most part self-imposed). At the same time, the performance itself *captivates* its audience *via* the experience of the work. Gamboa's words play upon this double-meaning. The artwork seeks to set its audience free through an unshackling of the imagination; at the same time, the audience must free its own imagination from the artwork so that it might set itself forth against *real* external restraints. When Valdez and Sandoval step away from the wall, they remind us that the artwork was still merely an ephemeral illusion.

Speaking in an interview about Asco's "Death of Fashion," Gamboa explains the idea behind the work: "The idea was we were going to create all of Chicano history and burn it all, and we were just going to start brand new because it's been all messed up already. It's all fucked up. We're going to fix it by eliminating everything, just scorch it and then start brand new" (qtd. in Lerner, 210). Varda's filmic portrayal of "Death of Fashion" mimetically captures, perfectly, Asco's desire to accelerate time through a creative act of destruction. In *Five Faces of Modernity* (1977), Matei Călinescu rehearses the attitude towards time pertaining to those who consider themselves members of the political and cultural avant-gardes:

From the point of view of the doctrinaire revolutionary (who cannot help considering himself a member of the avant-garde) the arbitrary past is automatically doomed, because justice is bound to triumph in the long run; but, as the oppressive influence of tradition can extend itself over a long period of time, it is important to act against it immediately and suppress it as soon as possible—by urgently joining the avant-garde. Although nothing can save it in the broad perspective of history's evolution, the past and what the revolutionist assumes to be its perverse forms of survival take on an obsessive, diabolically threatening power. And so, hypnotized by his enemy—of whom he makes an infinitely cunning and terrifying monster—the avant-gardist often ends up forgetting about the future. The future, he seems to imply, can take care of itself when the demons of the past are exorcised. As we are primarily interested in aesthetics, let us note that the avant-garde's theoretical futurism is frequently little more than a mere justification for the most radical varieties of polemicism and for the widespread use of subversive or openly disruptive artistic techniques (95-96).

Călinescu heavily implies here that the avant-gardist is a delusional, hedonistic anarchist who is ultimately not seriously committed to the future establishment of utopia. Călinescu's criticism (which may not be representative of his actual views) becomes the veiled content of the criticisms that the political and artistic avant-gardes hurl towards one another. Călinescu describes the difference between these two avant-gardes as follows: "The main difference between the political and artistic avant-gardes of the last one hundred years consists in the latter's insistence on the *independently* revolutionary potential of art, while the former tend to justify the opposite idea, namely, that art should submit itself to the requirements and needs of the political revolutionists" (emphasis in original, 104). Călinescu turns to Shelley as a representative of "all the progressive-minded romantics [who] upheld the belief in the avant-garde role of poetry"³⁷ to elucidate his understanding of the artistic avant-garde's position on the role of art in social transformation:

A disciple of William Godwin—the author of the famous *Enquiry Concerning Political Justice* (1793)—Shelley was undoubtedly a liberal radical; but he thought, in his own words, that 'a Poet... would do ill to embody his own conceptions of right or wrong, which are usually those of his time and place, in his poetical creations, which participate in neither.' If poetry, whose essence is imagination, is to have a moral effect, this can be brought about only by an enlargement of the imagination: 'A man, to be greatly good, must imagine intensely and comprehensively.... Poetry enlarges the circumference of the

³⁷ "[E]ven if they did not use the term 'avant-garde' and even if they did not embrace a didactic-utilitarian philosophy of art," he further explains (105).

imagination.’ In other words, poetry has to play a great social role not because it can ‘popularize’ some idea or other, but simply because it stimulates the imagination (105).³⁸

But Shelley differs from others who insist, as Călinescu explains, that the imagination “[has] no real power without a ‘common impulsion and a ‘general idea’ [i.e., a program to fulfill]” in that he instead “[places] an almost exclusive emphasis on imagination *per se*, regarded as the highest moral quality” (106). Echoing in some ways Adorno, Călinescu then concludes: “Basically, the difference can be reduced to that between authoritarianism and libertarianism” (106).

“Death of Fashion” insists, in an almost Shelleyan way, upon the independent power of imagination by itself being a sort of montage-like performance, one that seeks to create a never before imagined scene via the incorporation of an array of reality and art fragments. The artwork produces a seemingly prophetic artistic babble in the hope (itself a risk and a wager) that such babble will function as a mode of producing the future in the form of something genuinely new. Destruction—and above all, the destruction of meaning—functions in the work as a way of imaginatively producing the new art-life. The fire, which is a most likely unintended figure for poetic imagination, feeds on the history it consumes and destroys. Interestingly, Călinescu offers the following insight on the avant-garde’s relation to novelty and crisis:

[F]ar from being interested in novelty as such, or in novelty in general, [the avant-garde] actually tries to discover or invent new forms, aspects, or possibilities of *crisis* [...] [A]rt is supposed to become an experience—deliberately conducted—of failure and crisis [...] As a culture of crisis, the avant-garde is consciously involved in furthering the ‘natural’ decay of traditional forms in our world of change, and does its best to intensify and dramatize all existing symptoms of decadence and exhaustion [...] [T]he ‘decadentism’ of the avant-garde is not only self-conscious but also openly ironical and self-ironical—and joyfully self-destructive (emphasis in original, 124).

The artwork indeed heralds the coming of crisis, which it speaks of as if it were already here: “Why is East L.A. burning? Why are Chicanos burning themselves? Why are we burning ourselves? We shall tend to go layer by layer and destroy our own history and create from the ashes.” Gamboa’s prophetic pronouncements might also be mere observations that only slightly exaggerate the state of the world upon which he comments. He essentially poses three questions on his puzzled audience’s behalf, questions that amount to meta-artistic references to the artists’ actions. They can be interpreted as follows: *Why are you doing this? Why are you burning things? Why this nonsense?* To this he responds with a description of the group’s creative-artistic method, described as a process that necessarily entails the meticulous destruction of Chicano history so as to produce the raw material—i.e., ruinous ash—from which the artists intend to shape, or make possible, the future. Within Varda’s filmic portrayal of the performance, this creative-artistic expression of a desire for a clean slate (itself a version of the blank page CADA artistically invokes) yields to, or is superseded by, the chaos of belligerent violence. The artists

³⁸ Perhaps Benjamin would say that poetry is a response to the crisis of modernity, which he reveals to be a crisis of imagination brought about, or exacerbated to the point of crisis, by technological achievements (such as photography and film) and most of all by the technique of mechanical reproduction. In summarizing the effect that photography and film have had on our ability to experience (*Erfahrung*), he writes: “The perpetual readiness of volitional, discursive memory, encouraged by the technique of mechanical reproduction, reduces the scope for the play of imagination. The latter may perhaps be defined as an ability to give expression to desires of a special kind, with ‘something beautiful’ thought of as their fulfillment” (186). This may, in fact, be the most clear and concrete definition he gives of experience (*Erfahrung*), and it seems to be coterminous, if not synonymous, with aesthetic-judgment experience.

“create” by creating a whirlwind of chaotic movement which lasts but an instant. Rather than being a triumphant symbol of human potentiality (the latent, but monumental potential of the blank page), paper emerges, in this performance, as nothing but trash—trash that the artists choose to play with for a while before discarding it themselves in the dumpster. Varda sees in this performance what the artwork itself discloses without judgment: the spiritual nihilism that drives our consumer culture. But even this, we might add, is a way of realizing the latent potential of the blank page. Which is to say, the artwork itself is, or becomes, a living monument (though only for as long as it continues to be brought to life by those who experience it).

The last sentence Varda utters in her voiceover discussion of Asco (“Everything ends up in dust and rubbish, ground up by mechanical means. Everything disappears, even certain murals...”) becomes a segue to her concluding reflection upon the ephemeral nature of most outdoor murals, which begins with a concrete analysis of the very real danger urban planning and real-estate development pose to such murals. Picking up and completing that sentence, she says: “...especially in Venice, where they [the city’s murals] are the prey of condo-with-a-view developers” (1:16:44). She then speaks of another Schoonhoven mural that was “disappeared” (i.e., obscured from view) when developers constructed a building right next to it. Her voiceover continues: “It [the mural] no longer shows, except on the face of the mime on duty... and the mural is only visible to cats and rats” (1:16:49). Here the crisis of our consumer culture, which is a crisis of imagination, or of Benjaminian experience (*Erfahrung*), is extremely felt. The same sense of tragic loss that pervades Benjamin’s analysis of Baudelaire, which derives from Baudelaire’s poetry itself, emerges here in Varda’s film. It is a sentiment perhaps best expressed by the desperate Parisian swan of Baudelaire’s “Le Cygne” (“The Swan”) who reproachfully pines for the missing, dried-up lake in the urban-desert environment: “*Eau, quand donc pleuvras-tu? quand tonneras-tu, foudre?*” (“Oh Water, when will you rain down? Lightning, when will you groan thunder?”). Or as Vallejo puts it, “How long will this supper last?” Schoonhoven himself appears in the film to remark upon the situation, which he actually embraces:

And the very ephemeral nature of the painting had a lot to do with wanting to do those pieces. In order to continue doing these murals, you have to accept that they fade, they get mutilated. That’s part of the beauty of the piece, the fact that it does change. It’s sort of a take it or leave it situation. It’s either that or go back to working within the system, doing kind of a gallery work again. If it could be collectible, so what? It was more important to produce a vital work of art in a functioning environment. It was more important to put the piece up (1:18:33).

As he speaks, Varda intercuts scenes of pedestrians responding to his “St. Charles Painting” mural (1979), a life-size *tromp l’oeil* of a nearby Venice-city street. Their responses are on the verge of being entirely vapid. “Well this is just a picture of this scene right up here,” one man states, indicating with his finger the mural and then the street (1:19:22). When it’s revealed to a pair of men that there are no people in the painting, they innocently respond: “I always thought that somebody was in it”; “Yeah, I never noticed that nobody was in it” (1:19:48). Then with a glimmering smirk, one of them states: “Yeah, I think this is Venice after the nuclear holocaust. Nobody left on earth. That’s what that’s all about” (1:19:55). His smirk reveals the insight he’s had, which is veiled behind his playful demeanor. His acquaintance laughs because he knows (or thinks he knows) he’s kidding. Schoonhoven then says the following which confirms the playfulness of his own painterly endeavor: “I don’t really have any abiding interest in any kind

of preaching apocalypse, or any kind of mystical, magical connection with the painting whatsoever...even though the murals have involved themes of prediction or apocalyptic visionary kinds of things” (1:20:08). In other words, he invites us to use our imaginations—our critical capacities for aesthetic (i.e., not objectively determined) judgment—and make of the painting what we will. “This is for you,” he seems to say, proclaiming himself in essence to be the smirking man’s ally in his nightmare-dreams of apocalypse.

In her closing voiceover monologue, which begins immediately after Schoonhoven utters the above, Varda references those nightmare-dreams, which pertain, in her reading, to the collective social body of Californians who “talk about the great earthquake all the time.” Varda’s reading of “Isle of California” is an expression of the repressed hopes and anxieties of millions. What is the great earthquake but a cataclysmic event that will bring an end to the crisis situation that some must endure more painfully than others and that some have the ability to ignore—aided as they are by the entertainments and pleasures (or luxuries and depravities) of consumerism? The great earthquake is an open-ended metaphor for the unimaginable end to modern existence that we nevertheless continue imagining as apocalypse, utopia, or both. Building upon Octavio Paz’s insights in *Los hijos del limo* (*Children of the Mire*) (1974), wherein Paz highlights the essentially Western character of “modernity” as a concept and its fundamental relation to Christianity’s singular conception of time as linear and irreversible, Călinescu writes the following about humanity’s “modern utopian spirit” or “drive”:

Born as a criticism of both Christian eternity and the present (insofar as the present is the product of the past, which it attempts to prolong), the utopian drive involves modern man in the adventure of the future. But, postulating the accessibility of a perfect state, the modern utopian spirit gets tangled in a dilemma that is at least as compelling as those posed by Christianity. On the one hand, the future is the only way out of the ‘nightmare of history,’ which in the eyes of the utopist makes the present essentially rotten and intolerable; but on the other hand, the future—the begetter of change and *difference*—is suppressed in the very attainment of perfection, which by definition cannot but repeat itself *ad infinitum*, negating the irreversible concept of time on which the whole of Western culture has been built (emphasis in original, 66).

He then proceeds to state the following:

“Modernity, rendered possible by the consciousness of an irreversible time (which critical reason has purified of all transcendent or sacred meaning), engenders the utopia of a radiant instant of invention that can suppress time by repeating itself endlessly—as the central element of a new and final tradition (no matter how antitraditionally conceived)” (68).

While it’s unclear whether Călinescu realizes it,³⁹ what he has described is the avant-gardist’s vision of utopia in the form of modernity’s ongoing “tradition of rupture.” Here utopia is *not* located in a future state of perfection, but is what emerges, or what can be glimpsed and brought about, in and through the process of perpetually disrupting the status quo of the present. It does not entail the suppression of the future in the attainment of a “perfect state,” nor does it entail the negating of the irreversible flow of time, but rather the imaginative production of the future as that which is genuinely new. The modern and avant-garde utopist understands that humanity’s

³⁹ While it’s possible he does, I would wager that he perhaps doesn’t, based on the parenthetical statements he inserts as a way of concluding the above passage, which reassert a notion of tradition as a way of resolving the aporia of which he speaks.

consciousness of the linear flow of time produces a false conception of history as progress in lieu of its actuality as accumulative repetition. This is the substance of Benjamin's historical-materialist understanding of history, which he famously describes in "Theses on the Philosophy of History" and which he powerfully presents via his iconic reading of Paul Klee's "Angelus Novus" (1920). In that reading, the "angel of history" appears with "[h]is face turned toward the past" which he fixedly contemplates with staring eyes, open mouth, and outspread wings. Benjamin then explains:

Where we perceive a chain of events, he sees one single catastrophe which keeps piling wreckage upon wreckage and hurls it in front of his feet. The angel would like to stay, awaken the dead, and make whole what has been smashed. But a storm is blowing from Paradise; it has got caught in his wings with such violence that the angel can no longer close them. This storm irresistibly propels him into the future to which his back is turned, while the pile of debris before him grows skyward. This storm is what we call progress (257-258).

Desire to redeem the past, born of a view of history as interminable catastrophe, is what hurls the angel of history backwards into the future. As he is hurled irresistibly through time, the monumental edifice of history and humanity's technological and civilizational achievements continues to grow skyward, but to him it is all still catastrophe. History, he would say, is a tower of babel formed of debris and destruction. Although he would like to resist, he cannot. The power of the storm that feeds humanity's destructive impulse and drives us blindly into the future and *away* from paradise is humanity's false conception of history as progress, which paradoxically has its source in a vision of paradise that may or may not be the same as the one that drives the angel of history towards a genuinely new future. The angel's vision of paradise, if it is any different, seems to be located in the past and in the direction opposite to our current one. Benjamin's reading of "Angelus Novus" collapses the distinction between history as it is (tragic and catastrophic) and history as the angel of history (who is but a figure for the historical materialist) views and approaches it—i.e., with a future-generating desire to redeem the past. Far from being naive, Benjamin insists upon a deeply pessimistic (or perhaps just reality-informed) optimism, upon the *weak* messianic power we all have.

Perhaps we might think of Asco and Gamboa's big-city motorist as a twentieth-century version, or anti-version, of the angel of history. Whereas the motorist, fearing death, clings to their own life, the angel of history desires so strongly to redeem the dead that he too wishes he could reside in the midst of the storm. And whereas the motorist chooses to remain blindly and lifelessly fixed on the road ahead, the angel looks back to see and feel all. As the edifice of history continues to grow skyward, helpless as we are to combat rain and wind, we can only continue to imagine, with hope, fear, and a seemingly playful smirk, its inevitable and final collapse.

And indeed it continues to grow. It's no coincidence that the names George Floyd and Breonna Taylor now vibrate in the air in the exact same way Salazar's name once leapt forth from the tongues of protestors. Justice never prevailed in the aftermath of his killing, which should, at minimum, have been considered involuntary manslaughter—a fact that the L.A. County Office's 2011 review of the incident all but openly admits.⁴⁰ And we know all too well

⁴⁰ Consider, for instance, when the reviewers label the actions of the officer who killed Salazar a "tactical blunder" (12) and when they state that "through the prism of current best police practices, it cannot be disputed that the deputies who responded to the Silver Dollar Café on August 29, 1970 employed poor tactics and made mistakes that

that justice, itself a beautiful ideal, is unlikely to prevail now, in the aftermath of these killings, unless we can convince others, the world, and perhaps even ourselves, to imagine it.

resulted in Mr. Salazar's death" (2). Indeed, the review goes on to refute the defense's argument that the use of the lethal tear-gas canister that killed Salazar was in any way an appropriate response to the situation, and so the reviewers arrive at an opinion that is contrary to what the police department's munitions expert had claimed and upheld in court (15).

Chapter 3

From the Border to the Sky: Poetic Inscription and Trans-Border Crises

This chapter looks to formal poetic experiment with the sky—and then to poetic experiment with the elemental image of the river—in order to transcend some of the conceptual and historical borders that paradoxically delimit the transnational and interdisciplinary field of Latinx literary studies. I will nonetheless be urgently maintaining the importance of recognizing the reality of immigrant-community struggles throughout the U.S. and at the real-world site of the U.S.-Mexico border. The chapter presents a comparative analysis of four poetic artworks in particular: the Peruvian poet César Vallejo’s “Pedro Rojas” poem, from his collection of Spanish Civil War poems titled *España, aparta de mí este cáliz* (*Spain, Take This Cup from Me*); Chilean poet Raúl Zurita’s poetic “happening” “La vida nueva” (“The New Life”); the recent 2020 U.S.-based artist intervention project *In Plain Sight*; and “Río Grande~Bravo” from Emmy Pérez’s extraordinary 2016 volume of poems *With the River on Our Face*. The comparative nature of my analysis builds upon the work of U.S.-Latinx scholars, such as José David Saldívar, who have called for an expanded U.S.-Latinx studies grounded in a “transnational, anti-national, and outernational” model of comparison. In other words, it conceives of Latinx literature as more than just U.S.-based and instead treats it as part of a hemispheric project situated in the geo-social space of the U.S. South and the Global South. The sky and then later the river appear in the above-mentioned artworks as a figure for the material but nonetheless fundamentally subjective dimensions of poetic experience, which the poet-artists involved engage as part of their aesthetic and political efforts to convey to their audiences the historical and contemporary urgency of three separate yet linked world-historical crises: the 1936-1939 Spanish Civil War; the brutal 1973 Chilean coup d’état and its long, nightmarish aftermath; and the Trump Administration-era humanitarian crisis at the U.S.-México border. By turning to formal experiment with the sky—and then, as we will see in Emmy Pérez’s work, to formal experiment with the river—each of the works in question attempts to register and attest to the horrific violence and human-rights abuses that each work treats in its dead-serious play with the materials of social history and poetic-artistic form. Through such play, the artworks re-articulate the materials of social history in ways that allow the works’ audiences to grasp more clearly the realities of the social problems at issue and to sense their critical capacities to intervene and enact the sort of change that the artworks invite them to imagine. In these and other ways, the poems and other artworks under study seek to construct living artistic monuments to the lives and vital spirits of the marginalized and politically oppressed, and to thereby activate—in line with this dissertation’s argued-for notion of *acción poética*—readers’ and audiences’ sense of critical and historical agency.

On July 4, 2020—in the midst of a global pandemic and one of the strongest waves in recent memory of Black-led protests in the U.S. against the extrajudicial killings of Black and Brown people by police—the words “NO ICE NO ICE NO ICE” appeared in the sky above the Mesa Verde Detention Center in Bakersfield, California. This was one of eighty sky-written messages that appeared on Fourth of July weekend throughout the U.S. above immigrant detention centers and other immigration-related sites. Some of the other messages included phrases like: “NO CAGES NO JAULAS,” “STOP CRIMMIGRATION NOW,” “ICE WILL MELT,” “CHINGA TU MIGRA,” “SUEÑOS NO PARAN,” and “ABOLITION NOW.” This particular art action,

titled *In Plain Sight*, was produced by a coalition of eighty artists, activists, poets, scholars, and nonprofit organizations being led by two in particular—the transgender artist Cassils and the queer Latinx artist Rafa Esparza. The artwork’s website describes it as a “project [...] in five parts,” one that involves “a precisely orchestrated, moving and poetic elegy on a national scale, an interactive website, an anthology docuseries, accessible actions for the public to take [...] and cultural partnerships producing arts-related education and engagement” (#XMAP).⁴¹ The website also includes a narrative description of the work that describes the dramatic effect it is intended to have upon its audiences:

[...] *In Plain Sight* launched the nation's skytyping fleets to spell out artist-generated messages in water vapor, legible for miles. These messages were typed in the sky over detention facilities, immigration courts, borders, and other sites of historic relevance. As the planes soared, they made visible in the sky what is too often unseen and unspoken on the ground: the appalling, profoundly immoral, imprisonment of immigrants. [...] *In Plain Sight* steers the gaze of those sheltered in place into the borderless sky [...] (#XMAP).

What is perhaps most interesting about the *In Plain Sight* project is its experimental character. As an artwork, *In Plain Sight* seeks to register, beyond our factual, objective, and sociological forms of knowledge, the more subjective aspects of the horror of the human rights abuses occurring not only at the U.S.-Mexico border, but in immigration detention centers throughout the U.S. The artwork plays with both history and form to open up what we might otherwise view as the already fixed and determined materials of social and aesthetic history.⁴² The artwork recalls a similar performance staged by the internationally renowned Chilean poet Raúl Zurita, who on June 2, 1982 had his Dantean poem “La vida nueva” inscribed in the sky above New York City—in “homage,” he writes, “to minority groups throughout the world and, more specifically, to the Spanish-speaking people of the United States” (“Introductory Note”). “I thought the sky,” Zurita further explains, “was precisely the place toward which the eyes of all communities have been directed, because they have hoped to find in it the signs of their destinies; therefore, the greatest ambition one could aspire to would be to have that same sky as a page where anyone could write” (“Introductory Note”).⁴³ Zurita conceptualizes this poetic performance as the conclusion of his poetry manuscript *Anteparáiso* (1982), which is the second installment of his Dantean “trilogy on the horrors of civilian life under Pinochet,” as Francine Masiello puts it (216). The poem consists of fifteen lines which provide fourteen definitions of God. It reads:

MI DIOS ES HAMBRE

MY GOD IS HUNGER

⁴¹ There is also an augmented reality app that allows users to view the sky-typed messages on site through their phone.

⁴² See Theodor W. Adorno’s *Aesthetic Theory* for a discussion of how aesthetic history or “form” itself is the sedimentation of social history, and how the history of literary-artistic form comes to operate as the transcript of otherwise unheard human suffering: “The unresolved antagonisms of reality return in artworks as immanent problems of form,” he writes (6); “[P]erhaps the most profound force of resistance stored in the cultural landscape is the expression of history that is compelling, aesthetically, because it is etched by the real suffering of the past. The figure of the constrained gives happiness because the force of constraint must not be forgotten; its images are a moment. The cultural landscape, which resembles a ruin even when the houses still stand, embodies a wailful lament that has since fallen mute” (64-65).

⁴³ In Zurita’s *Anteparáiso*, the sky-written poem is titled “La vida nueva.” This is not to be confused with his book of poetry with the same name.

MI DIOS ES NIEVE
 MI DIOS ES NO
 MI DIOS ES DESENGAÑO
 MI DIOS ES CARROÑA
 MI DIOS ES PARAISO
 MI DIOS ES PAMPA
 MI DIOS ES CHICANO
 MI DIOS ES CANCER
 MI DIOS ES VACIO
 MI DIOS ES HERIDA
 MI DIOS ES GHETTO
 MI DIOS ES DOLOR
 MI DIOS ES
 MI AMOR DE DIOS

MY GOD IS SNOW
 MY GOD IS NO
 MY GOD IS DISILLUSIONMENT
 MY GOD IS CARRION
 MY GOD IS PARADISE
 MY GOD IS PAMPA
 MY GOD IS CHICANO
 MY GOD IS CANCER
 MY GOD IS EMPTINESS
 MY GOD IS WOUND
 MY GOD IS GHETTO
 MY GOD IS PAIN
 MY GOD IS
 MY LOVE OF GOD (1-15)

The poem is an expression of inter-American solidarity between Zurita (a survivor of the Pinochet dictatorship's violent political repression of the Left in Chile following the 1973 U.S.-backed coup) and U.S.-Latinxs, whose God-like, unseen omnipresence is artistically invoked in the poem using the word "Chicano." The poem's anonymous speaker endeavors to define a notion of "God" (not just for himself, but for all of us) through a list of non sequiturs that map out feelings of pain and promise. "Love of God" is articulated in the poem as a profound feeling for and taking on of others' pain. By expressing love for concepts such as "hunger," "emptiness," "wound," and so forth, the poet figures himself as a sacrilegious deviant who loves what society regards as painful, deplorable, low, and profane. The poet thereby constructs himself in the image of a redeemer, one who literally inscribes his love for the lowly and profane on high.

As an art action, the poem treats the sky as a place for public art, though it differs from traditional sites of inscription in that the "marks" made upon its "surface" are essentially intangible and impermanent. The poem's ephemeral nature is thereby made one of its central features; and the sky becomes a space that facilitates the imagining of an inter-American solidarity movement, one whose substance—as the poem's play with form subtly suggests—has yet to be realized. That is to say, the poem's ephemeral nature as a sky-written performance is one that underscores the material, but fundamentally subjective nature of the experience that the poem offers; it thereby reminds its audience that the artistic vision of inter-American solidarity that it attempts to realize through poetic form is one that has yet to be substantially realized in the "real world." But the sky also functions here as an allusion to the Pinochet dictatorship's horrific practice of "disappearing" civilians and political dissidents by dropping them from helicopters into the Pacific Ocean and into the deserts and mountains of Chile.

César Vallejo, the great Peruvian *vanguardista* poet of the early twentieth century, similarly imagines the sky as a site of poetic inscription in the third poem of his posthumously published sequence of Spanish Civil War poems *España, aparta de mí este cáliz* (1939). His poetic figurations of skywriting practice constitute crucial contributions to the Left-activist traditions of formally experimental Latin American and Latinx art that concern us here. Like "La vida nueva," Vallejo also turns to the sky to very subtly reference the horrific violence of warfare being conducted in the air, and the aerial bombardment of Guernica in particular, which was undertaken by the air forces of Franco's fascist allies—Hitler and Mussolini—and was one of the

first of such bombings to involve the intentional targeting of civilians. Vallejo's poem is an elegy that memorializes the life and death of a fictional Republican soldier named Pedro Rojas, a man who's enshrined in the poem for the way he would often write his signature expression of human solidarity in the air: "Solía escribir con su dedo grande en el aire: / '¡Viban los compañeros! Pedro Rojas'" (He used to write with his big finger in the air: / 'Viban los compañeros! Pedro Rojas') (1-2). So begins the poem, with a memory-*cum*-lament. The speaker recalls Rojas' distinctive words and actions, and his misspelling of the word *vivan* in particular (which he spells with a *b* instead of a *v*). As critics have observed, Rojas' distinctive action of writing in the air is accompanied with a notable misspelling of the word *vivan*, which he spells with a *b* instead of a *v* and which seems to suggest Rojas' relatively uneducated status as a working-class member of the human collective. Indeed, he's identified as a railway worker in the poem. But despite his status as such, he is nonetheless celebrated throughout the poem as a hero and a martyr, and his death is regarded by the poem's speaker as both a grave injustice and urgent battlefield news:

Papel de viento, lo han matado: ¡pasa!
 Pluma de carne, lo han matado: ¡pasa!
 ¡Abisa a todos compañeros pronto!

Wind-made paper, they've killed him:
 pass!
 Flesh-made pen, they've killed him: pass!
 Advise all comrades quick! (6-8)

The speaker's words here play upon Rojas' misspelling of the word *vivan*. They express endearment for the soldier and draw our attention to the materiality of language in its written and oral dimensions (at the precise disjuncture between the written and the oral, which here seems to correspond with the social organization of a class-based society). Most interesting, however, is the way these lines envision the news of Rojas' death being communicated from person to person. The wind upon which the message travels is imagined to be a kind of paper, and the flesh of the human body that delivers it a kind of pen, one engaged in the writing of history. The urgent frontline communication of Rojas' death is itself conceived of as a poetic act, one that mirrors the poetic and political character of Rojas' distinctive mode of writing in the sky. In fact, it is fueled by the spiritual *qua* poetic character of Rojas' message of human solidarity, which drives the will to engage in battle and communicate the tragic loss of a comrade in arms and fellow human being.

Indeed, Rojas' humanity (his characterization as both human and humane) is what's emphasized above all throughout the poem. His execution at the hands of Nationalist forces is felt as an injustice in part because it indicates the tragic loss of the humanity which he represents. While critics have noted the way Rojas' words operate as a refrain in the poem, it has been seldom observed that the poem has two refrains that respond to one another, creating a feedback loop that amplifies the injustice of his killing and the spiritual vitality of his life and words. The other refrain is the coldly communicated phrase "lo han matado" (they've killed him), a phrase which simultaneously expresses outrage and dismay over the devastating loss of his life. But to the cold, hard fact of his death responds the memory of his words "Viban los compañeros!" (Long live all comrades!), a simple yet poetic expression which resounds forever in the wake of his loss. The goal of the poem is to immortalize those words—and thus the spirit of the being that expressed them—in all of their beautiful and tragic particularity. In this way, the poem envisions itself as both capable and tragically incapable (insofar as it is an ephemerally-experienced material object) of enacting the resurrection that occurs at the poem's end:

Pedro Rojas, así, después de muerto
 se levantó, besó su catafalco ensangrentado,
 lloró por España
 y volvió a escribir con el dedo en el aire:
 «¡Viban los compañeros! Pedro Rojas».
 Su cadáver estaba lleno de mundo.

Pedro Rojas, like so, after death,
 got up, kissed his bloodied catafalque,
 wept for Spain
 and recommenced writing with his finger
 in the air:
 “Viban los compañeros! Pedro Rojas.”
 His corpse was full of world (40-45).

The poem is also a monument to the thousands of people systematically killed by the Nationalist government in its takeover of Spain. As Julio Veléz and Antonio Merino were the first to suggest, it was inspired by a handwritten note that was discovered on the corpse of a man who had been beaten and murdered by the government.⁴⁴ The note sought to alert others to the brutality of the violence taking place:

Abisa a todos los compañeros y marchar
 pronto.
 Nos dan de palos brutalmente y nos matan.
 Como lo ben perdió no quieren sino la
 barbaridá.

Adbise all comrades and leave quick.
 They're beating us brutally and killing us.
 Since they view it as all lost they want
 only barbarism (Ruiz Vilaplana, 26).

The poem is, in other words, based on the details provided in Antonio Ruiz Vilaplana's firsthand account of the fascist takeover of Spain. Vallejo, in his poem, gives the unidentified man a name (Pedro Rojas), which serves as an empty signifier, one that points to all people. The spoon discovered in Rojas' jacket (“una cuchara muerte”) attests to Rojas' innocent character and its corruption through violence. The spoon is considered “dead” because the humble man who carried it with him (“despierto o bien cuando dormía, siempre”) is dead. (Rojas of course carries the spoon, both in life and in death, much like an antithetical scepter.) But the spoon is also brought back to life, transformed into a “cuchara muerte viva,” through the spiritually vitality of Rojas' reinvoked words: “¡Abisa a todos compañeros pronto! / ¡Viban los compañeros al pie de esta cuchara para siempre!” (Adbise all comrades quick! / Viban los compañeros at the base of this spoon forever!). This allows the spoon to persist in the poem as a sign of human dignity, despite the fact that it also attests to the horrific violence described in Vilaplana's report, which frequently explains that the spoons and forks from the prisons were victims were held were often found in the pockets of the deceased, who were often robbed of all other possessions.

Through its play with history and form, Vallejo's poem seeks to register the horror of the violence that occurred during the Spanish Civil War while also memorializing the lives and vital spirits of those who endeavored to write, through embodied acts of defiance, a more poetic and just history. The sky is imagined in the poem as a site where history might still be made and where individuals might imagine themselves becoming the writers, or agents, of history. Hope, in short, is what the sky as a realm of poetry represents—hope in the face of extreme violence in the air and on the ground.

⁴⁴ See Ruiz Vilaplana, Antonio. *Doy fé...: un año de actuación en la España nacionalista*. Guayaquil, Ecuador, 1937; Polar, Antonio Cornejo. *Writing in the Air: Heterogeneity and the Persistence of Oral Tradition in Andean Literatures*. Translated by Lynda J. Jentsch, Duke University Press, 2013; and Jade, Cathy L. “César Vallejo's ‘España, Aparta De Mí Este Cáliz’: The Struggle Between Two Modes Of Discourse.” *Hispanic Journal*, vol. 18, no. 1, Indiana University of Pennsylvania, 1997, pp. 127–36.

The final line of Vallejo's poem ("Su cadáver estaba lleno de mundo"; His corpse was full of world) expresses a version of what the *volta* in Shelley's "England in 1819" communicates when it heralds the coming of a "glorious Phantom" that might one day "burst" from the tragic "graves" of social history "to illumine our tempestuous day." Walter Benjamin transforms Shelley's sonnet into political theory when he writes, in the months preceding his own death, about the "*weak* Messianic power" which we all have (254).⁴⁵ Vallejo wrote his poem only three years before Benjamin wrote his essay, and in the last year of his life as well. Rojas, in this way, comes to stand in for the poet, who imagines his corpse—which is perhaps also a figure for his literary corpus—full of human potentiality. As Michelle Clayton observes, the poem's final line "marks at once an internationalist vision and a common humanity grounded in the body" (241). But it is also the case that the use of the word "world" here refers to the perhaps fertile soil that fill Rojas' body, a corpse that has been reanimated by the spirit of a world committed to redemptive justice. The poem, in other words, invites us to imagine—through an image that is both beautiful and grotesque—what a redemptive form of justice might look like for Rojas; and it suggests that such justice might involve an intertwined, back-and-forth move from sorrowful mourning to the redemptive re-articulation of Rojas' spirited actions and words: "Viban los compañeros! Pedro Rojas."

Much like Vallejo's poem and Zurita's *La vida nueva*, "In Plain Sight" plays with the idea of using the sky as a page to facilitate the imagining of a transnational—and in this case, intersectional—solidarity movement, one that the artwork actually attempts to realize through the formal composition of the very coalition of artists who participated in the work. "We wanted to create visibility around immigrant detention," Esparza explains in an interview. "In terms of the sheer amount of immigration detention centers—it's something that people feel distant from. People place them along the border, but they don't imagine them in every state" (qtd. in Small). Indeed, the map on the project's website reveals detention centers scattered across the U.S., though it also reveals how they cluster along the southern border. The artwork's move both away from and toward the border is guided by the artists' desire to create an intersectional work that centers a variety of immigrant experiences. The artwork itself is envisioned as an act of solidarity between subject-positions and groups. As explained in the project's press release:

IPS [In Plain Sight] artists depicting a vast array of ages, gender presentations and subjective lived experiences have been asked to focus their attention on the subject matter of immigrant detention and the culture of incarceration in an act of solidarity—from deconstructing the notions of whiteness in the U.S., to amplifying queer voices, to highlighting the violation of human rights that comes in tandem with ICE ("Press Release" 2).

In an interview with *The New York Times*, Cassils (one of the project's lead artists) suggests that this intersectional impulse is driven by what they identify as a particularly queer mode of artistic imagination: "We see a liberation for queer, migrant and Black communities as deeply bound together because they are all rooted in the issues of white supremacy and colonization. Our jobs as queer artists is to imagine the future" (qtd. in Small). The sky once again becomes the platform for the imagining of a utopian future, one with the power to unite diverse communities around multiple distinct, but interconnected struggles. The artwork attempts to

⁴⁵ Interestingly, the text under discussion, Benjamin's "Theses on the Philosophy of History" (1940), was itself scrawled on the backs of scrap pieces of envelope paper—a philosopher's version of the unidentified man's note to his comrades (footnote LARB article).

overcome the wounds of history by recognizing them as productive forces—à la Gloria Anzaldúa’s famous adage *the border is an open wound*. The sky is thus imagined *not* as an alternative to the border, but as a communicative artistic medium that is “able to migrate messages across borders,” as Esparza puts it (*NYT*). “When our message is skytyped above San Diego,” says Esparza, “the words will likely drift into Tijuana. And when our words are written above Los Angeles, they will have a shared orbital path, allowing phrases like ‘Abolition Now’ and ‘Stop Crimmigration Now’ to coalesce into a circular message” (qtd. in Small).

Esparza’s words here underscore the work’s aesthetic-illusion or semblance character (what Adorno and others would call its *Scheincharakter*). Even if located right on the border, there’s no guarantee that the sky-written words would remain intact were they to drift south into Tijuana. And what if they were to drift north, west, or east instead? Similarly, Esparza seems to suggest that some of the phrases written above Los Angeles will combine to produce a circle-shaped calligram in the sky. Yet a survey of the actual locations of those messages—one in the financial district, two above the Metropolitan Detention Center, and two above the Twin Towers Correctional Facility—reveals how unlikely this is. What Esparza is really doing here is imaginatively playing with the work’s features to show how they seek to embody the artistic dream of building real-world coalitions across social movements. When he imagines the “phrases ‘Abolition Now’ and ‘Stop Crimmigration Now’ [coalescing] into a circular message,” what he imagines is the formation of a coalition between the immigrants rights’ movement and the Black-led police abolition movement. Indeed, that’s what the work intends to realize though the coalition of artists that were brought together to produce it.

The work’s roster of participants includes Black artists, indigenous artists, Latinx artists, queer artists, transgender artists, Asian American and Pacific Islander artists, Indian American artists, Caribbean artists, Jewish artists, Arab artists, and more. With so many participants and messages involved, a Whitmanian mode of epic enumeration becomes one of the work’s formal features. With her message “CARE NOT CAGES” inscribed above the Twin Towers Correctional Facility in L.A., Patrisse Cullors, co-founder of the Black Lives Matter movement, seeks to “[denounce] racial capitalism” (“Patrisse Cullors”). Her message builds across immigrant rights and police abolition movements to envision a larger movement against the U.S. culture of incarceration. Ken Gonzales-Day, author of *Lynching in the West*, similarly inscribes his Angela Davis-inspired message “ABOLITION NOW” above the Los Angeles North Immigration Court in an effort to extend that message “to include ICE Detention Centers”—“which are,” he explains, “only the latest example of the ongoing expansion of the Prison Industrial Complex” (“Ken Gonzales-Day”). The artist Dread Scott inscribes “CARLOS ERNESTO ESCOBAR MEJIA”—the name of the first immigrant in U.S. detention to die from COVID—above the Statue of Liberty in New York. Scott initially wanted his phrase to be “USA KILLS US,” but the sky-typing company refused to write it; so he instead chose to write Escobar Mejía’s name to make the same point, that “to the leaders that run this country and those who implement its laws, immigrant lives do not matter.” Scott also seeks to memorialize Escobar Mejía’s name to “both [honor] him as [an] individual and [contribute] to [people’s] efforts to end the system that killed him” (“Dread Scott”).⁴⁶ ACLU staff attorney Chase Strangio seeks to do

⁴⁶ Scott is best known for having burned the U.S. flag on the steps of the U.S. Capitol building, an artistic event which then led to his involvement in the 1990 Supreme Court case *United States v. Eichman* (which then went on to declare flag-burning a constitutionally protected form of freedom of speech). Escobar Mejía lived in the U.S. for forty years before being incarcerated in an immigrant detention center. He was denied medical attention after contracting COVID, despite already being a high-risk patient with heart problems and diabetes and despite his family’s protests.

the same when he inscribes “WE FIGHT 4 LORENA” above the Varick St. Immigration Court in New York City. Lorena Borjas was a transgender and immigrant rights activist who died of COVID in March 2020. She was known as the mother of the trans-Latinx community in Queens.

Some of the messages seek to transcend the prison walls that separate the incarcerated from the public to reach the audience of prisoners (both immigrant and non-immigrant alike) inside. Salvadoran poet Javier Zamora—author of the poetry book *Unaccompanied*, which tells of his own immigration experiences at the age of nine—inscribes the message “ARRIBA EL ANIMO” above the U.S. Border Patrol Central Processing Center in McAllen, TX. “The message,” he explains, “is specifically for those on the inside—if they’re fortunate enough to be by a window, or if they’re outside when it is written [...] But it’s also for those on the outside, on both sides of the border, on both sides of ‘legality,’ to remind us to keep fighting for a better world” (“Javier Zamora”). Other messages are written in indigenous and non-Western languages such as K’iche’, Lakota, Urdu, and Haitian Creole. A group of Central American immigrant rights and health organizations chose to write the K’iche’ phrase for “We will not be afraid” (“MA KA QA XEIJ TA QIB”) above the Donna-Río Bravo International Bridge in Donna, Texas. “The use of this language,” they explain, “is a statement on the survival of Maya people [...] who are the majority of the indigenous immigrants from Central America in Los Angeles and in the United States” (“Carecen”). India-born artist Arshia Fatima Haq writes “Azadi” in Persian script (“آزادی”) above the Intake/Release Center for the Orange County Jail system in Santa Ana, CA. The word, she explains, means “freedom in Urdu, Farsi, Hindi, Kurdish, Pashto, Azeri, Balochi, Armenian, Kurdish, Punjabi, Bengali, and Kashmiri, amongst others”—using it, she says, “evokes a transnational understanding and solidarity around” the call for freedom while transgressing the norms of an Islamophobic society (“Arshia Fatima Haq”). The artwork thus plays with its prospective audiences’ fields of both knowledge and ignorance to galvanize a subjectively-experienced response, be it one of feelings of hope and recognition or feelings of affective displeasure that force those audience members to experience the necessary transgression of social norms.

A final example worth mentioning is the phrase inscribed by the lead artist of Tsuru for Solidarity Karen L. Ishizuka above the Santa Anita Racetrack in Arcadia, CA. Ishizuka inscribes “NO MORE CAMPS” above this site “to remind Americans that it once imprisoned over 18,000 Japanese Americans in converted horse stalls and 500 barracks during World War II” (“Karen L. Ishizuka”). “[T]he racetrack stands today—hidden in plain sight—as a symbol of injustice that forever defaced the democratic aspirations of this country,” she explains. Ishizuka’s words demonstrate how the artwork intertextually cites real-world moments of history through its use of site-specific locations that symbolically attest to the histories of injustice that the artwork invites us to recall. The artwork attempts to imaginatively transform those sites into historical monuments through its semblance character. Which is to say, the artwork seeks to shock us into recognizing the violent quotidian reality of the present moment by forcing us to acknowledge how these sites have begun to merge with their surroundings—how the history to which they attest seems to disappear through a collective act of cultural amnesia that makes everything everywhere a banal part of the reality we continue to accept. By inviting us to steer our gaze into the borderless sky, the artwork accuses us of a form of blindness. Why can’t we already see what is hidden before us in plain sight? Why do we need the apparatus of the artwork to correct our vision and produce a more amplified response? The democratic aspirations of this country are being defaced, the artwork tells us, vandalized by leaders who don’t seem to care and by a public too busy—or perhaps too overworked—to hold anyone accountable. The artwork itself is

urgently aimed at countering the triumphalist narrative of American exceptionalism (on Fourth of July weekend no less) while also seeking to inspire hope in the artistically imagined ideal of an intersectional and transnational solidarity movement.

Emmy Pérez's 2016 book *With the River on Our Face* expresses the same sense of urgency as *In Plain Sight*. Yet it differs in how it turns *not* to the sky, but to the Río Grande~Bravo (i.e., the elemental image of the river) to imagine the possibility of intercultural exchange and poetic healing—healing that is urgently called for and needed in the face of the harsh reality of the river's counter-image: the U.S.-Mexico border wall. Consider the poem "Río Grande~Bravo," in which the poem's speaker urgently observes:

We can't build poems faster
Than the wall's construction

Can't write anything
To halt the wall's construction (60-63).

As these lines express, the poem is a profound reflection upon the vexed interrelationship between poetic form and real-world experience of social history. The poem was written between 2009 and 2010, in response to Pérez's first encounter with the reality of the border wall's construction in Texas. As she recalls, "I went to the Hidalgo Pumphouse, a World Birding Center near the border and across from Reynosa, Mexico, and accidentally came upon the wall-building. I was expecting beauty as before and saw disaster. It was a devastating feeling" ("Poetry Against"). The poem tells too of the experience she had teaching students *at* the border wall:

The wall builders waved at us with sorry on their faces.
They are making our people build it, says a student, to keep our people out.
No time for elegant lines or teaching of form before pumpkin time.
The river rushes past, and people still possess the need to cross it. (Desire and need are different entities.) (176-180).

Pérez's parenthetical assertion here—about the difference between desire and need—is one asserts the difference between the pleasures of aesthetic experience and the difficulties and pains of the historical. In a related essay titled "Healing and the Poetic Line," Pérez observes: "(The wall is a line-break not to create desire but to halt it) If the line-break, if enjambment, creates desire, then the end-stopped concrete line is the concrete end where crosse[r]s must and will find openings further away in the desert" ("Healing" 185).⁴⁷ So she insists that the need to cross the border is one that persists in spite of the border wall. Such need is imaginatively embodied in the poem in the form of the river, which rushes past, marking the passage of time and the fleeting nature of existence with its flow. And just as the river continues flowing, so too do the people who cross it, driven on as they are by the need for safety and security, a need which, for many, becomes a dream. The poem thus underscores the futility of the attempt to stop global migration patterns with a rudimentary wall. "The wall," she writes, "is an abstraction for out-of-town haters" ("Healing" 185). At the same time, the poem seeks to help us grasp the violent reality

⁴⁷ "Healing and the Poetic Line" was written at the same time as the poem, and Pérez explicitly conceives of it as a companion piece.

that the wall—considered as both an abstraction and a concrete reality—creates. So the poem begins:

The ambiguity of life, the ambiguity of moments, the certainty
Of moments, the certainty of laws, the ambiguity of laws el
Río Grande~Bravo has an invisible line down its center
An invisible caesura
On water
Where I want to apply stitches
Like skin healing
Border
Into water
Again (5-14).

This opening to the poem imagines the Río Grande~Bravo itself as a poem, one divided by the “invisible line” that is the border. That line is an abstraction, but it is also a reality that is brought into being by the law that enforces it. And as the poem’s speaker endeavors to show us, that selfsame law is frighteningly ambiguous in light of what it allows to occur in the process of its enforcement. The speaker then interprets that ambiguity to be a certainty in terms of the way it allows the law to license the killing of foreign nationals and undocumented immigrants, no matter the cause.

Consider the example the poem itself provides when it reflects upon the killing of fifteen-year-old Mexican national Sergio Adrián Hernández-Güereca. Hernández was shot and killed by a border patrol agent on June 7, 2010, when he and his friends were caught crossing the border in an alleged attempt to enter the U.S. illegally—though his family asserts he was just playing a game with his friends to see who could touch the fence on the U.S. side. In its review of the incident, the U.S. Department of Justice “concluded that there [was] insufficient evidence to pursue prosecution” and that “the agent did not act inconsistently with CBP policy or training regarding use of force” (“Federal Officials”). The poem’s speaker offers her own account of what occurred:

In Ciudad Juárez
All the clarity of El Paso walls
Called fences, all the clarity
Of a young man caught walking across the river
Line, the river drained here in its concrete mold
Tattooed with words, images of justice

The youth’s friends run back to Juárez
Some throw rocks from the distance
All the permission of officers’ deeds
To use deadly force should circumstances warrant it

Should circumstances warrant
Detaining a youth running back home
Should circumstances warrant

Thrown rocks
Pulled hair, stay here,
Pulled trigger
To the distance (98-114).

Both here and in the poem's epigraph, the poem cites specific language from the U.S. Code of Federal Regulations that authorizes the use of deadly force by border patrol agents "should circumstances warrant it" (3-4). It thereby invites us to critically ask: What are the circumstances that warrant the killing of a fifteen-year-old body? Hernández, while playing a game, crossed an imaginary line; and when circumstances warranted that *he* flee and perhaps even throw rocks in self-defense (though video evidence contradicts the officer's claims that rocks were being hurled at him), that's when the law, in all its ambiguity, most clearly warranted his killing. The reality of the border is realized through an act of violence and the senseless death of a young Mexican man.

"We are not rocks" (116), the speaker declares in a gestural repudiation of poetic ambiguity, one that nonetheless insists upon the power of poetic language and metaphor to articulate graspable truths. That is to say, the claim "we are not rocks" is ultimately a way of asserting our common humanity, a way of repudiating the claim that Latinxs are anything less than equally "human." "Agents are not guns," the speaker also declares; they "have guns, use guns" (117-118), but they cannot be reduced to unthinking objects. So the speaker reminds us of the uncomfortable truth that border patrol agents are not just white men, but come from an assortment of backgrounds and subject-positions:

Agents are
Hispanic
White
Black
Asian
Native American
Men
Women (119-126).

The speaker's list of racial categories and gender identities is designed to unsettle us in the same way that Pérez's student was unsettled by the fact that Latinx workers were being employed to actually build the wall. "The wall builders waved at us with sorry on their faces," she recalls, "as if to say with guilt, so sorry, we need to eat too" ("Healing" 185). In her poem, the black-and-white reality of the border becomes a realm of moral ambiguity wherein the choices people make to participate in the process of constructing border walls (both imaginatively and literally) leads us to wonder what kind of "choice" it really is. Is it one made in exchange for wealth, security, and comfort, or perhaps one borne of necessity—of the need to work and provide for oneself and one's family (who just might reside on the other side of the border)? The most difficult reality to grasp is how the border itself is realized through the very reality it imposes on the lives of the people it drives to compete with one another. Put differently, the material reality of the border compels people to compete with one another for resources that are made either scarce or abundant by the reality that the border is designed to uphold. In asking us to probe the moral ambiguity of the situation the poem describes, what the poem really asks us

to consider is this: What are the options and resources being made available to people who would turn down such work? Or alternatively, what are the options and resources being actively withheld from them?

To these, the senseless realities of the border, Pérez's poem responds with a plea:

The river's middle
Line not ambiguous
When there's no water in the sandy Río
Grande and a few puddles
En el Río Bravo
Channel controlled
Young men are not rocks
Let them run
Let them keep running
Home
Please,
Let them (127-138).

The poem pleads with us to recognize the reality of the border as both an ecological and humanitarian disaster (one driven by capitalist consumption and wealth-accumulation processes, which have dried up the river) and to let the flow of youth run free like a river. This plea expresses a utopian dream that the speaker knows can't be realized through poetry alone. Poetry is not the form of healing that the speaker wishes it could be, though it is an attempt to imagine what such healing would look like and mean. Consider again some of the poem's opening lines:

[el] Río Grande~Bravo has an invisible line down its center
An invisible caesura
On water
Where I want to apply stitches
Like skin healing
Border
Into water
Again (6-14).

And to this she then adds:

Liquid cannot be stitched
Imagined by some Frankenstein doctor
Threading water (15-17).

As an Anzaldúan open wound, the border is a space where the speaker wishes she could apply poetic lines as stitches that would heal the wound that is figured here as not just an invisible line, but an invisible caesura—a break in the rhythmic structure of the poem and in the free-flowing river *as* poem. The poem expresses a desire to do away with the metrical constraints that would, for the sake of form alone, impede the flow of poetic thought. "Liquid cannot be stitched," the speaker insists. Which is also to say: this free-flowing river of thought is already a

poem; no need to butcher it like some Frankenstein doctor in an attempt to thread water. What we are witnessing and experiencing here is a formal choice being made in the poem that is also a repudiation of overly-produced poetic lines—lines that mechanically strain to embody the poetic maxim expressed by American poet Charles Wright, who claims that “Each line should be a station of the cross” (5). “I used to love crafting a poetic line that is like a ‘station of the cross,’” recalls Pérez, alluding to Wright and his poetics, “a line that takes time. A line that stands alone as a piece of the larger story” (“Poetry Against”). Then she explains:

I didn’t neglect the potential impact of single lines altogether in the writing of this book, but I also didn’t worry about it as part of actually writing the poems. These poems were drafted, line by line, faster than I was used to. And writing more overtly about state sanctioned violence was a choice I made knowing the poems would not make it into most literary magazines (“Poetry Against”).

Pérez turns here to a free-verse form of poetry to express a sense of urgency in response to the humanitarian crisis *at* the U.S.-Mexico border, but also in response to the border as the purveyor of crisis. The form itself facilitates the urgent writing of poetic thought, and it allows for the poetry to embody the river’s free-flowing form, so as to imagine that form being made more available to others—readers who perhaps remain unaware of how unavailable and increasingly inaccessible both it (the river) and its literary correlate (the poem as a river of thought) have become. So the poem’s speaker observes:

In the first decade of the new
Millennium, Washington
Cuts us off from our river
So folks who have never visited
And never plan to
Don’t think as much about the invisible
Crossers (18-24).

Here and throughout Pérez’s poem, the river represents the possibility of intercultural exchange and cross-cultural encounter; and the wall is its imaginary counterpart whose literal manifestation serves to further intensify the violent policing of life and thought that already occurs at the border, but also elsewhere throughout the nation.

In a 2016 interview, Pérez alludes to an essay by the poet Martín Espada as a way of gesturing towards her understanding of the river as a literary-poetic image. Espada’s essay, she says, “gifts me with essay-clarity each time I read it” while citing a moment from the essay directly: “Speaking of the unknown places means speaking of the people who live and die in those places” (“Poetry Against”). Espada’s essay is a reflection on the poet’s relation to social history, one that ascribes a specific role to the figure of the poet-as-artist: to speak of the unseen and the unspoken via an act of the imagination. “There are ‘unspoken’ places all around us,” he explains, “places we never see, or see but do not see [...] Sometimes, these places are ‘unspoken’ because the unspeakable happened or continues to happen there; sometimes, because the human beings dwelling in the land of the unspeakable find a way to resist, and their example is dangerous”—and then arrives the part that Pérez had cited—“Speaking of the unspoken places means speaking of the people who live and die in those places” (Espada). According to Espada, a poet is not just a person who speaks of such places, but is the person who “must speak, or enable

other voices to speak through the poems” (Espada). The rest of the essay features Espada turning to multiple examples to substantiate his claim, and he of course begins with Neruda. More specifically, he turns to Neruda’s famous epic poem *Las Alturas de Macchu Picchu* and to the poet-speaker’s triumphant declaration: “Yo vengo a hablar por vuestra boca muerta” (“I come to speak for your dead mouths”) (Neruda 12.28). Neruda provides the example for one particular kind of poetic voice that seeks to speak on behalf of the dead, who are at once the literal dead as well as a figure for the marginalized and oppressed, or the so-called “socially dead.” After discussing work by poets such as Sterling Brown, Claribel Alegría, Demetria Martínez, and Gary Soto, among others, Espada then concludes his essay with an analysis of the poem that the essay takes its title from, Langston Hughes’ “The Negro Speaks of Rivers” (Espada’s essay is titled “I’ve Known Rivers: Speaking of the Unspoken Places in Poetry”). Through his analysis of Hughes’ poem, the river becomes, for Espada, a metaphor for the imaginative poetic act of “delving beneath the surface,” so to speak—“beyond whatever we see or want to see, to envision suffering humanity,” he explains (Espada). Through such imagining, the poet then comes to act as a sort of redemptive historian of human suffering, one who battles (with the materials of history and form) the tragic effects cultural and historical forms of individual and collective amnesia.

We might then think of Pérez’s work as part of a transnational poetic tradition that turns to the image of the river to speak for, on behalf of, and through the mouths of the dead. Espada’s analysis of Hughes’ poem highlights how the poem subtly alludes to the specific history of the Mississippi River, which becomes a figure for the African-American experience of slavery in the U.S. Citing Hughes, Espada reminds us that “the poem came to Hughes as he was riding a train that crossed the Mississippi over a long bridge. In the poet’s words: ‘I began to think what that river, the old Mississippi, had meant to Negroes in the past—how to be sold down the river was the worst fate that could overtake a slave in bondage. Then I remembered reading how Abraham Lincoln had made a trip down the Mississippi on a raft [...] and had decided within himself that it should be removed from American life’” (Espada). On the basis of these and other thoughts, Espada concludes that Hughes’ poem is ultimately “a poem about all rivers, all submerged histories, all unspoken places, and the poets who alchemize the mud into gold” (Espada).

By utilizing the elemental image of the river, Hughes is able to imagine and re-imagine African-American historical experience in light of the inconceivably brutal displacements caused by the transatlantic slave trade. Through its subtle invocations of historical violence—as well as survival and resistance to it—the poem vies for a struggled-for vision of common humanity:

I’ve known rivers:

I’ve known rivers ancient as the world and older than the flow of human blood in human veins.

My soul has grown deep like the rivers.

I bathed in the Euphrates when dawns were young.

I built my hut near the Congo and it lulled me to sleep.

I looked upon the Nile and raised the pyramids above it.

I heard the singing of the Mississippi when Abe Lincoln went down to New Orleans, and

I’ve seen its muddy bosom turn all golden in the sunset.

I've known rivers:
Ancient, dusky rivers.

My soul has grown deep like the rivers (1-10).

The poem's refrain ("I've known rivers") continually asserts a basic claim that the speaker has firsthand knowledge of the many rivers he claims to have known. But the poem also complicates this straightforward claim in multiple ways. First, through the poem's title ("The Negro Speaks of Rivers"), which gives us our only indication of who the speaker might be. Immediately, from the title alone, we are left wondering who the speaker is. Is it an individual Black person speaking for his own self, or perhaps on behalf of his race? Or is it the voice of the entire race that speaks? (We might also wonder whether the term "negro" playfully stands in here for "poet" in some way.) Second, the poem complicates the speaker's claim through the actual list of rivers he claims to have known, which are all located in different places throughout the world and associated with different moments throughout human history such that it makes it seem very unlikely, if not impossible, for an individual to have actually experienced for himself all that the speaker claims to have known. The speaker begins his version of African-American history with the Euphrates river; "when dawns were young," he says. He begins, in other words, at the dawn of human civilization in the Fertile Crescent region where the Neolithic Revolution in agriculture took place and where some of the oldest known libraries ever existed. This moment is construed in the poem as both the dawn of human civilization and the dawn of Black life. By claiming to have bathed in the Euphrates river, the speaker alludes to a form of spiritual and bodily cleansing that becomes an image for the poetic form of healing that the poet attempts to imagine through his work of poetically speaking of rivers.

In his enumerative list of actions, places, and rivers he claims to have known, the speaker then moves (both himself and us) from the Euphrates to the Congo and then the Nile, through multiple regions of Africa. By claiming to have built a hut near the Congo River, the speaker seems to suggest he once bore a close relationship to the land; he lived not just near the river, but in a deep spiritual communion with it such that its murmurings lull him to sleep (as if it were a mother figure). The speaker then tells of how he went from constructing a simple hut near the Congo River to then participating in the raising of the pyramids near the Nile. The contrast between the hut and the pyramids indicates a great leap in architectural, technological, and civilizational achievement, and that leap is one that the speaker is attempting to claim as not just an achievement of the human race, but also of Black people in particular. It is an achievement that elevates his people insofar as his people are Black and human; and indeed the pyramids are considered one of the great architectural monuments throughout the world. Furthermore, we might observe that the rhythmic structure of the poem is designed to create the sort of lulling, song-like effect upon the reader that the speaker claims the sound and singing of the rivers (both the Congo and Mississippi) had on him.

By alluding to the Mississippi River, the speaker jumps from Africa to the Americas, and to U.S.-American history in particular and the even more local history of slavery in the U.S. As Espada and Hughes himself had explained, the allusion to Abraham Lincoln is an allusion to the issuing of the Emancipation Proclamation during the American Civil War and the river upon which Lincoln travels is a reference to the brutal nature of the institution of chattel slavery in the U.S. The river itself seems to sing its truth to the speaker and presumably to President Lincoln as

well. Its song seems to attest to the history to which it bore witness. But the river's singing also constitutes a spiritually uplifting moment for the speaker, and its association with the image of a beautiful sunset is one that casts our gaze upon the horizon, inviting us to imagine an end to this dark, "muddy" period of human history, and thus a new beginning full of human potential. The image of the river turning golden in the sunset is one that calls for and seeks to inspire hope.

The elemental image of the river also provides the speaker with a way of re-envisioning his own sense of cultural heritage and ancestry. Unlike the family tree, which grows deep roots in a particular historical location, the river constantly moves. It cuts a path across spaces, moves through national communities (bringing them together, helping them travel, and facilitating commerce), marks time with its presence, and sustains life. The image of the river provides the speaker with a particularly empowering way of speaking about the historical experience of displacement. It allows him to conjure up and make reference to the trans-generational forms of historical memory and knowledge that African Americans have on the basis of the traumas their people have endured, but also the things they've achieved. The poetic metaphor of the speaker's soul having grown deep like the rivers is one that alludes to the deep well of knowledge, wisdom, and experience that is borne out of the historical experience of forced migration and displacement. Beneath the surface of the speaker's claim to have "known rivers" is a moving claim to have a profound sense of resilience, one that emerges from the depths of the spiritual yearnings and physical sufferings which the speaker and his people have endured and to which his soul can attest.

Through the artistic imagining of a trans-generational and transhistorical form of poetic experience, the speaker constructs a powerful image of his own voice, which figures itself as capable of speaking across human history *à la* the poetry of Walt Whitman. Hughes stylistically invokes Whitman through the image of voice that he constructs. As George B. Hutchinson argues, "Hughes was the first African-American poet to sense the affinity between the inclusive 'I' of Whitman [...] and the 'I' of the blues and even of the spirituals" (21). Hughes' deep admiration for Whitman's poetry is evident throughout his work. In the poem "I, Too," for instance, the poem's speaker insistently proclaims "I, too, sing America" (1). He thereby presents an image of poetic voice that criticizes, through the claim it makes, the erasure of voice to which he, as a Black American, has been subject. In the seminal essay "Apostrophe," Jonathan Culler turns to Whitman to speak about the way in which the archetypal figure of the poet "makes himself a poetic presence through an image of voice" (63). Culler substantiates this claim by citing Whitman directly: "'I and mine'—which is to say strong poets [Culler adds]—'do not convince by arguments, similes, rhymes. We convince by our presence'" (qtd. in Culler, 63). This very same form of staking one's claim to be a poet—not by way of argument but way of poetic presence—is also made in Hughes' "The Negro Speaks," and it is the very notion or mode of poetic performance pioneered by Whitman (constituted by a form of Whitmanian plain speech as song and epic enumeration of local, historical moments that combine to produce something beyond the limits of the local or the national) that Hughes likewise begins to practice. Hughes of course expressed great admiration for Whitman, who he considered to be "Americas greatest poet" (qtd. in Hutchinson, 17). We might also conclude here by reflecting upon the relation Hughes' poem might bear to the period of the Great Migration in which he was writing, and thus the river-like flow of African-American people moving from the U.S. South to the cities of the north.⁴⁸

⁴⁸ It's also interesting to observe that Hughes wrote "The Negro Speaks of Rivers" while he was traveling to Mexico, and that one of the rivers he would cross on that trip would be the Rio Grande.

In addition to Hughes' poem, the second quintessential example to which we might turn for a "river poem" is Whitman's "Crossing Brooklyn Ferry" (also known as "Sun-Down Poem"). Whitman's poem is another kind of "river poem" that reflects upon transhistorical forms of poetic experience and historical forms of human migration. In "Crossing Brooklyn Ferry," the poem's speaker gazes down into the water of the river (the "East River" in New York) as he crosses it wherein he sees his own reflection. That reflection is one that allows him to imagine a face-to-face encounter with his future readers across time and space. Through a use of lyric address, the poem's speaker attempts to reach out across time to touch his audience;⁴⁹ and it is the image of the river—or better yet, the timeless image of people crossing the river—that allows him to poetically imagine his ability to reach across time to "touch" his audience, and thereby share with them in a communal form of intersubjective experience, one that is the very form and experience of the poem. "Flood-tide of the river, flow on! I watch you face to face!" (1) he begins (in later editions this becomes "Flood-tide below! I see you face to face!"). With these words, the speaker speaks both to himself, but also playfully to us. The experience of crossing the river surrounded by New York City crowds is what he imagines his future readers being able to share with him. Speaking to us directly, he states: "And you that shall cross from shore to shore years hence are more to me, and more in my meditations, than you might suppose" (4). In this moment, the crossing of the river becomes not just a reference to one particular form of experience, but also a metaphor for the experience of crossing through life. Life itself is imagined as a moment of crossing between two shores; and just as the poet is one among a multitude of people on the ferry, so too he imagines himself as a passenger in life who is among many who will be making—and are making—the same journey through life as he is:

Others will enter the gates of the ferry and cross from shore to shore,
 Others will watch the run of the flood-tide,
 Others will see the shipping of Manhattan north and west, and the heights of Brooklyn to
 the south and east,
 Others will see the islands large and small;
 Fifty years hence, others will see them as they cross, the sun half an hour high,
 A hundred years hence, or ever so many hundred years hence, others will see them,
 Will enjoy the sunset, the pouring-in of the flood-tide, the falling-back to the sea of the
 ebb-tide (13-19).

In response to these meditations upon the future "others" who will also cross the river, the speaker then makes his triumphant declaration: "It avails not, time nor place—distance avails not, / I am with you, you men and women of a generation, or ever so many generations hence" (20-21). Interestingly, the declaration the speaker makes here appears to be almost an inverse form of the one the poet-speaker of Neruda's *Las alturas* makes when he imagines his capacity to speak for and through the mouths of the dead. How, in other words, could the poet be with us across time and space? The implicit answer to such a question is not only that the poet-speaker wishes to reassure us that he's thinking of us in a gesture of solidarity (that he too has experienced the things we will experience, all of life's pains, pleasures, and displeasures), but that the poetic voice he has constructed for himself—the proud and liberated voice of a poet—is

⁴⁹ For more on lyric address, see Waters, William. *Poetry's Touch: On Lyric Address*. Cornell University Press, 2018.

one that is already available to us and exists within each of us as well. This is precisely what Hughes means when he declares “I, too.” In fact, there is an entire series of enumerative lines in Whitman’s poem that also begin “I too.” The speaker of Whitman’s poem, we might add, is in New York at a time when it was experiencing a wave of immigration, and he is reflecting upon not just his own historical experiences, but those of others as well. Through a profound reflection upon the particularity and specificity of his own historical experience her paradoxically arrives at something beyond it; and it is the image of the river that facilitates this artistic imagining of historical universality (or what we might more accurately refer to as “historical pluriversality”). The poem ends with another moment of lyric address, one that seems to be specifically addressed not just to other travelers, but to immigrants in particular, who the poet seeks to lovingly receive:

You have waited, you always wait, you dumb, beautiful ministers! you novices!
We receive you with free sense at last, and are insatiate henceforward,
Not you any more shall be able to foil us, or withhold yourselves from us,
We use you, and do not cast you aside—we plant you permanently within us,
We fathom you not—we love you—there is perfection in you also,
You furnish your parts toward eternity,
Great or small, you furnish your parts toward the soul (138-143).

Whitman turns to the image of the river to imagine not just a form of trans-generational and intersubjective experience (that is, the experience of the poem reaching across time to touch readers wherever they might be), but also to envision a future of loving and welcoming communion with people from all nations and communities across the globe. What he attempts to imagine here is a world and a life without literal and conceptual borders. Through its Whitmanian mode of epic enumeration and plain speech, the poem itself attempts to embody the democratic ideals of which it speaks so that its audience might sense, within its experiential encounter with the poem, the very sort of dissolution of borders that the poem invites its audience to aesthetically experience and imagine.

Pérez’s invocation of the image of the river differs from Hughes’ and Whitman’s in that she turns to the river to reflect upon ecological destruction and the damage that is being wreaked upon the interstitial space that the river as an image and a metaphor for a particular kind intersubjective form of poetic experience provides. Pérez’s river is one that is being disappeared, eroded, dried up, and hidden behind border walls. And it is also a river that is *de facto* being used to kill. Pérez closes her book with a poem titled “Not one more refugee death.” As she explains in the book’s endnotes, the poem “takes its title from a vigil held in McAllen Texas, on July 19, 2014, and makes reference to more than 60,000 unaccompanied minor refugees from Central America who crossed into the United States in 2014, including fifteen-year-old Gilberto Francisco Ramos Juárez, whose body was found on June 15, 2014, near La Joya, Texas” (95). The poem begins with an epigraph that comes from María Meléndez’s poem “Why Can’t We All Just Get Along?”:

A river killed a man I love
and I love that river still

Building on the epigraph's introduction, the poem itself introduces us to its topic of how the river kills:

Here, our river kills more crossers
than the sun, than the singular

heat of Arizona, than the ranchlands
near the Falfurrias checkpoint (4-7).

The river emerges here as not just a figure for poetic healing that bears an antithetical relation to literal and figurative border walls; rather, it appears as a harsh elemental force that is being used to deter immigrants from attempting to cross the border. Later in the poem, the speaker references a moment from the real-world vigil that inspired the poem:

Today at the vigil, the native singer
said we are all connected
by water, la sangre de la vida (23-25)

As a literary-poetic image, the river brings with it a dynamic tension between two qualities. On the one hand, the river appears as a figure for the interconnectedness and fluidity of water, as life-sustaining fluid, the very blood of life. On the other, the river is also that which figuratively and perhaps also literally spills blood. The river's presence seems to attest to the lives that are lost to the crises created by the border, i.e., the lives of those who tragically drown while attempting to cross. The river as an image is thus able to speak at once to the environmental damage being done to the region, the loss of life occurring at the border, and yet still the possibility of imagining beyond the current crisis. Pérez turns, in other words, to the image of the river to speak of the current crisis which she seems to equate with a form of murder. In this sense her poetry bears a connection with the work of the great poet and Holocaust survivor Paul Celan, whom she explicitly invites us to think about in relation to her work when she writes the poem "Dear Celan." One of Celan's most discussed poems of "difficulty of allusion" ("You lie in the great listening") is a river poem involving historical layers adhering to the figure of the murdered German revolutionary Rosa Luxemburg, who was thrown into the confluence of Berlin's Spree and Havel rivers by proto-fascist military assassins (Celan also drowned himself in Paris' Seine River in April 1970). The river appears explicitly in the poem when its speaker—who listens to the river's telling of history—states:

The Landwehr Canal will not roar.
Nothing
halts (12-14).⁵⁰

Interestingly, Hughes also has a poem that alludes to Luxemburg's death, the poem "Kids Who Die." Pérez's epistolary prose-poem "Dear Celan" begins with the speaker directing a question to Celan when she asks: "How do you move boulders like organs? With language?" (1). The speaker's question alludes to language from Celan's poem "What Occurred?" to ask essentially how he writes such moving poetry. Is it language alone that allows him to do so? In

⁵⁰ Translation modified.

Pérez's poem, the speaker tells of her own poetic turn towards a Celan-influenced poetics that uses strange and experimental imagery to reflect upon the sad absurdity of life and horrors of genocidal violence (for Celan, of course, that meant the industrial genocide that was the Holocaust). "For a time," she says, "I was moved by Lorca's *verde que te quiero verde* before border patrol youth reached for his gun at the Rio Rico Bluffs" (4-5). The shock of the violence to which she bears witness at the border drives her away from the erotic lines and rhythms and idyllic images of Lorca's poetry, which no longer seem to be enough to move her heavy, boulder-like heart. What instead appears to move her are her reflection upon the devastation that is occurring at the border, which she begins to probe at the poem's end when she asks: "When I starve the grass and starve the creatures of grass, even the chiggers, what becomes of me?" (7-8). The question she poses here is one that invites us to interrogate the effect that such destruction has upon each of us individually and collectively. It is also a question that meta-poetically refers to her own evolving poetics, which turns to desolate imagery *à la* Celan's imagery of rocks and boulders (which he uses to figure the aftermath-experience of the Holocaust) in order to convey the utter inadequacy of poetic imagery—and to thereby imagine the inability to imagine or truly ever grasp the brutality of the violence being enacted. "What becomes of me, the poet," she asks, "when I starve the grass?"—i.e., "when I depart from my felt affinity to the gorgeousness and richness of Lorca's poetic imagery to instead turn to the stark imagery of Celan?" This is a question that she not only asks of herself, but that she poses on behalf of us all. "I am deeply aware," she explains in an interview:

of how, in the last hundred or so years, the monte (brushlands) here in the Valley has been nearly all destroyed (at least 90% has been cleared) by the hands of hired laborers. Hard work to uproot mesquites. And here I am, fleeing to the remaining natural spaces I love that help heal me, or help me heal myself, while I am considering that 'violence happened here,' thinking about state sanctioned violence throughout history ("Poetry Against").

What Pérez's poetry makes clear is that even the natural spaces that she alludes to here—the ones to which she flees to escape the destruction—are themselves in danger. Recall that her first encounter with the border wall occurred when she was at the Hidalgo Pumphouse, a museum that also serves as a natural habitat for native bird species and butterflies. This is where she "was expecting beauty as before and saw disaster." Indeed, Pérez often speaks of the border crisis through the lens of nature. In the poem "Wildlife Refuge Poetics," Pérez utilizes her knowledge of the wildlife in the area to speak about the fact that even the wildlife is being threatened by the border crisis and having to seek refuge from the destruction taking place. "En El Valle / watch what / you say," the poem's speaker warns before then alluding to the black-throated magpie jay and how it was "smuggled from Huatulco" (20-25). One of the bird species alluded to in the poem, in other words, appears as a sort of immigrant seeking refuge. In another moment from the poem, the speaker flippantly observes:

The Montezuma
bald cypress unaware
of the Treaty of Guadalupe (26-28)

The reference being made here to the Treaty of Guadalupe (i.e. the treaty signed at the end of the Mexican-American War that ultimately established the border as a permanent fixture in the region) is one that seems to gesture towards the way that innocent living beings, human and

animal alike, are caught up in and experiencing the harmful effects of the longstanding border conflict. Building upon these ideas, the speaker then brings the poem to an end by turning to the image of the region's butterflies:

[...] Mariposa

cola de golondrina
mariposa de ala azul
mariposas cebras

don't sting. Two-
barred flashers
as caterpillars

feed on poisonous coyotillo.
They don't sting. Neither
do wasp posers. They are

just afraid of dying (33-43).

By artistically invoking the image of the region's butterflies, the poet-speaker alludes to the way butterflies act as a symbol for transnational and global migration patterns (specifically those between Mexico and the U.S.) and thus as an ecological symbol for international communion and unity. The reference to butterflies also functions as a subtle allusion to conservation efforts, which have recently come into conflict with the border wall's construction. The butterflies bring us back to an image of flight that perhaps allows us to imagine a form of migration across borders, but that also tragically ends in the fact that most butterflies can only fly so high and would not be able to fly over the wall. The speaker also playfully alludes to a particular moth species that has the appearance of a wasp. The speaker thus plays upon the meaning of "wasp" (as an acronym for White Anglo Saxon Protestant) to refer to border-crossing immigrants and the irrational fear that U.S. citizens have of the people making their way up from the south. The poem's end, in other words, constitutes another plea for readers to recognize the wave of migrants coming from the south not as the dangerous threat they might believe them to be, but instead as people who are only trying to survive, people fleeing other forms of violence and economic hardship. The speaker thereby insists that such people, or "moths," don't mean any harm, "they're just afraid of dying."

We return here, at the end of Pérez's poem, to encounter another image of the sky, of a form of violence taking place in the air, and of "flight" in the dual sense of aerial flight and imaginative flight from historical violence. By turning to the natural landscape and environment (including the sky), the poets and artists discussed throughout this chapter are able to imagine a vision of the world beyond the harsh reality and violence of social history while also—in a non-escapist but deeply imaginative manner—working up the elemental images of sky and river in altered ways that both register the realities of the crises that drove them to write and simultaneously offer expanded versions of those images that suggest a social dispensation of *not* dominated by current oppressive relations of power. We might ultimately think of the free and

open sense of international and interstitial movement that both the sky and the river ultimately come to represent in these works as a figure for artistic form's own "law of movement" (Adorno), which seeks to constantly move or push past the historical impositions and border-like limitations of coercively imposed, deterministic concepts that the majority have had no say in promulgating. Through these works' artistic play with the materials of social history, we (the artworks' recipients) are invited and enabled to grasp more clearly and urgently the realities of the social problems at issue in each; and through such play we are equally invited to sense our capacities to intervene and enact the sort of change that these artworks urgently invite us to imagine. Once again, form has invited us to perform; and the result is our own activation in the very experience of poetry: *acción poética*.

Chapter 4

Epigrams, Aphorisms, and Alibis: Violence, Art, and the Law (of Poetic Freedom)

They shut me up in Prose—
as when a little Girl
They put me in a Closet—
Because they liked me “still”—

Still! Could themselves have peeped—
And seen my Brain—go round—
They might as wise have lodged a Bird
For Treason—in the Pound—

Himself has but to will
And easy as a Star
Abolish his Captivity—
And laugh—No more have I—

Emily Dickinson’s epigrammatic, short-form poem “They shut me up in Prose” serves here to introduce this chapter’s multiple topics: the liberating, imaginative experience of poetic art; the dynamics, experience, and work of epigrammatic form; and the prison-house of a world of deadening, “prose”-like thought (a world to which we must all regretfully return, as, finally, does the speaker of Dickinson’s poem).⁵¹ While Dickinson’s poetry will not be the focus of this chapter, it signals for us the beginning (and possible future directions) of our inquiry into poetry and epigrammatic form’s relation to not just historical experience, but also to progressive modes of sociopolitical and/or Marxian praxis.⁵² This chapter looks to poetic-artistic experiment with epigrammatic form in three poet-artists’ work: former core member of the Chicana art collective Asco Harry Gamboa Jr.; the Peruvian poet, critic, and activist César Vallejo; and Nicaraguan priest-poet and activist (who from 1979 through 1987 served as Minister of Culture for the revolutionary, Sandinista-led government of Nicaragua) Ernesto Cardenal. More specifically, I analyze Gamboa’s experiments with epigrammatic form in his 1994 installation artwork *100 Alibis*; Vallejo’s posthumously published series of poetic aphorisms; and Ernesto Cardenal’s *Epigramas (Epigrams)* (1961). Each of these artists turns to the epigrammatic form and its satirizing turn of thought to critique their political and artistic opponents while utilizing the experience of the artwork to imaginatively emancipate their audiences from the various forms of policing of both life and thought that the artists historically encounter in life, but also represent in their art. Ultimately, these poets take up epigrammatic form with the aim of realizing, or critically imagining, a realm of poetic experience that is in excess of (and in that sense, “autonomous” from) the conceptual determinations of sociopolitical history. This provisional

⁵¹ We might alternatively use as another point-of-departure one of Mina Loy’s poetic aphorisms, from her series *Aphorisms on Futurism*: “To your blushing we shout the obscenities, we scream the blasphemies, that you, being weak, whisper alone in the dark” (152).

⁵² An extended version of this chapter might go on to further analyze Dickinson’s work alongside the work of Mina Loy. It might also examine Theodor W. Adorno’s experiments with epigrammatic thought in *Minima Moralia* and even Bertolt Brecht’s experiments with the epigrammatic form.

experience of aesthetic autonomy from the ruling concepts that govern life allows them to artistically imagine—and thereafter seek to realize concretely in the world of political action—a more radiant and just future, a future free from the brutality of state violence and the at once materially- and spiritually-crushing character of a life determined by the concept and practice of exchange-value.⁵³ The chapter, furthermore, is an experiment in comparative analysis that seeks to reveal the resources of an underlying poetic history of epigrammatic form that Gamboa revives to ask difficult political questions about both his own artistic practice and where (twenty or so years after the fact) the spirit of the Chicano Moratorium of 1970 and Gamboa’s own leftist, avant-gardist Chicano allies within the Chicano Movement have gone. In this way, the chapter shows how the artists in question turn to epigrammatic form—as perhaps the most distilled sub-genre of the already self-consciously condensed form of literary art that is lyric poetry—to ask foundational questions about what lyric art can offer to critical-reflective thought and to the possibilities of an informed critical activity that might help transform a world in much need of transformation. If aesthetic and then particularly lyric form is literature’s way of most intensely registering, for cognition and subjectivity alike, our sense capacity for critical-reflective experience, then epigrammatic form stands, in this chapter, as the most intensified micro-form of a semblance-based dynamic that seeks (as we first encountered it in the work of Sor Juana Inés de la Cruz and Phillis Wheatley) to inscribe such possibility into ourselves and, by extension, into the world.

“[T]his isn’t political. this isn’t art. this isn’t literature. this isn’t.” So reads the seventy-sixth “alibi” in Harry Gamboa Jr.’s installation artwork *100 Alibis* (1994). *100 Alibis* is a written work composed of one hundred aphorism-like statements individually printed on blank white sheets of paper and then collectively displayed on a museum wall.⁵⁴ As a written work, the artwork is epic in its scope and dimension. It begins with Alibi 1, which introduces us to the invented genre of the “alibi,” a poetic kind, or mode, that playfully reimagines the artistic slogan that the editor of Gamboa’s book of collected writings, Chon A. Noriega, attaches to Gamboa’s work when he dramatically proclaims that “Harry Gamboa Jr. has no alibis” (1).⁵⁵ Alibi 1 reads:

i was standing on the curb when it occurred to me that the rest of the city had vanished. somehow my consciousness floated away on the erratic heat waves. my memory was shredded by broken glass and broken hearts that resembled rubber erasers. i never heard the gunfire. i never saw the victim. i stared into the asphalt and was aware of a familiar refraction.

100 Alibis thereby begins with a subject in the urban space of Los Angeles experiencing the numbed “shock experience” of urban capitalist modernity, which the subject experiences as a kind of Benjaminian “non-experience.”⁵⁶ What the subject of Gamboa’s Alibi experiences, in

⁵³ Here I refer to the commodity form—i.e., the form that is forced on economic activities and its products by the pre-set algorithm of comparative labor-time.

⁵⁴ It was first displayed in 1994 at Cal State Los Angeles for Gamboa’s solo exhibition “The Urban Desert.” Currently, the work is viewable in manuscript form at Stanford in the special collections library, which contains the Harry Gamboa, Jr. papers. Interestingly, it was not included in the 1998 publication of Gamboa’s collected writings, *Urban Exile: Collected Writings of Harry Gamboa Jr.*

⁵⁵ What Noriega seems to mean here is that Gamboa is unapologetic in his life and work.

⁵⁶ See Walter Benjamin’s “On Some Motifs in Baudelaire” for more on the topic of what Benjamin describes as the numbed “shock experience, or “non-experience,” of urban capitalist modernity. See Chapter two of this dissertation

other words, is his own sudden awareness a profound experiential deficit, an experiential blindness that makes him paradoxically aware, but only vaguely so, of the reality of the violence occurring around him. Much like the speaker, who claims he “never heard the gunfire” and “never saw the victim,” we too are left wondering: What happened? Who is the victim? Who is the perpetrator? Is this an instance of gang violence? A police shooting? The only thing we can be sure of is that a nameless sort of violence fills the air of the speaker’s world.

Gamboa’s anticipatory 1992 short story “No Alibi” gives us a sense of the violent cultural environment he seeks to describe. The story begins with the narrator recalling the words he had said to a police officer while the officer was aggressively searching him for the can of spray paint the narrator had used to paint a nearby wall: “Sometimes, spontaneous intuitive creative behavior is in society’s best interest,” he tells the cop, who of course doesn’t listen and instead violently twists his arm (458). The mural the narrator had tagged on the wall displayed the message “YANQUIS DEPORTED! EUROPE SINKS!” flanked by two grinning skulls. While describing what thereafter happened between him and the police, the narrator proceeds to suggest he’s lucky to be alive after his violent encounter with the law: “There were several officers who were intent on dumping my body into the dry concrete bed of the L.A. River,” he recalls, “but an emergency call requesting all units at the scene of a nearby multiple murder put a quick end to their entertainment” (459). The urban space of Los Angeles is the Dantean hellscape and the Baudelairean cityscape (the one that Brecht and Benjamin had compared to Shelley’s great line “Hell is a city much like London”) through which Gamboa wanders in his work, imaginatively evading violent encounters with the law, which seems to stalk him wherever he goes.

In *100 Alibis* the law looms everywhere like an invisible presence. “[W]hy bother go into exile when you can go to jail,” the speaker of Alibi 85 facetiously ponders, “they will beat you and abuse you but you’ll be out of the way and yet be very close to home.” This is the speaker’s tongue-in-cheek way of criticizing the nihilistic belief systems, or attitudes, that lead some to accept policing—and over-policing in particular—as an inevitable fact of life, and others to pointlessly land themselves in jail. Why bother do anything, the speaker asks, why bother protest or risk exile, when you can just go to jail? The nihilistic attitude that the alibi satirically expresses is one that registers some of the deeply traumatic effects that over-policing has upon a community. Those effects are felt throughout the *Alibis*. In Alibi 5, for instance, the speaker tells of a massive police raid and its aftereffects:

i must have been sleeping when they came into my neighborhood and arrested all of the children, stole their documents, and destroyed every photograph. parents have no proof that they have been robbed of their meaning for living. some adults walk into the supermarkets holding dolls in their arms as they buy ice cream and candy. a man cries loudly from inside the shopping cart as his wife strolls him through the cookie section. somewhere, profits for rare enzymes and experimental drugs make other men and women very happy.

Here the speaker constructs the incredibly tragic and surreal image of a community of adults reduced to behaving like children in the aftermath of a raid. The effect that such over-policing

for a more in-depth discussion of Benjamin; also see Theodor W. Adorno’s essay “On Lyric Poetry and Society” for an example of how Adorno would proceed to elaborate on Benjamin’s theory in his own work. Robert Kaufman’s essay “Lyric Commodity Critique, Benjamin Adorno Marx, Baudelaire Baudelaire Baudelaire” (2008) also provides a helpful introduction to and analysis of Benjamin’s theory.

has upon a community is registered through the brilliance of a perversely constructed fiction, one that reveals how a community turns to destructive forms of seemingly infantile consumerism to cope with the loss of its children, and to mask the pain of having been robbed of everything. (The loss of children itself is a figure for the loss of meaning in life, as the speaker's play upon the idiomatic phrase "means for living" implies.) The speaker then presents us with an image of people perversely enjoying the lives of luxury that the capitalist market provides them with. In other words, he presents us with an image of the nefarious smile that the wealthy display as they passively accept the reality upon which their happiness is built.

Alibi 6 alludes to what we might recognize as intra-communal forms of violence, so-called "gang violence," in Black and Brown communities:

if only they would change their targets from the random to the specific. they would be cultural heroes instead of common criminals. if only they could see how absurd and limited their lives are. instead, it could be you or me who has the misfortune to cross their path. if i see you coming my way i'll assume that you are unarmed and lost. don't turn your back because the temptation to take vengeance is greater than both of us.

In this Alibi, the speaker laments the fact that low-income youth are driven towards seemingly random acts of violence instead of channeling their feelings of rage and frustration towards more politically conscious activities that would perhaps more genuinely, or efficaciously, confront the situation of economic exploitation and systemically-racist over-policing that the speaker anatomizes throughout the *Alibis*. "[I]f only they would change their targets from the random to the specific," he says while expressing his dream of revolutionary heroism. "[I]f only they could see how absurd and limited their lives are," he adds, revealing to us the moralistic—and perhaps even ignorant—perspective he is now satirically reasoning from. "[I]nstead it could be you or me who has the misfortune to cross their path." Suddenly, the question of who this artwork's audience is becomes central to the work. Through an ambiguous use of lyric address, the artwork plays with the idea that it might be written for an audience of outsiders who fear Black and Brown youth or, alternatively, for an audience of Black and Brown community members who might also fear intra-communal forms of violence.⁵⁷ It thereby subtly invokes Los Angeles' history of racial segregation, community displacement, gentrification, and red-lining practices, a history which metonymically stands in for a much broader history of conquest and colonization in the Americas. "[I]f I see you coming my way I'll assume that you are unarmed and lost," the speaker reassures his audience before then pivoting to offer a warning: "don't turn your back because the temptation to take vengeance is greater than both of us." Suddenly, the speaker seems to suggest that the violence he decried as pointlessly random is, in fact, the more targeted form of vengeance-taking that he imagined might be more effective; and he puts the reader in the position imagining what he or she might have done to earn the ire of the aggrieved.

In Alibi 2, the speaker seems to mock the members of his own community who dream of social justice:

they were the ones who were always talking about doing something that would bring about social justice. they robbed several liquor stores and got drunk for six months. after a four-month long hangover, they returned to the world of politics and their desire to

⁵⁷ See William Water's *Poetry's Touch: On Lyric Address* (2018) for more on the topic of lyric address.

kidnap a major politician. their livers exploded in ecstasy. their bodies melted into the urbanscape. the politician continued to rob much more than liquor stores.

Much like Alibi 5, Alibi 2 is a profound reflection upon the ways that a community copes with the reality of an exploitative—and racially divided—economic system that legitimizes theft. But it is also a critique of the community members who dream intoxicating dreams of social justice. “[T]hey were the ones who were always talking about doing something,” the speaker observes. Yet all that they really end up doing is engage in petty forms of theft that allow them to get literally drunk; and then they get even more drunk on extravagant ideas of subversive political action—ideas that are figured here as masturbatory and self-indulgent. The speaker underscores the tragic and consolatory nature of their dreams when he highlights the bitter irony that in spite of their small acts of defiance, and perhaps even because of them, the politician nevertheless has free reign to continue robbing the community. The alibi, in this sense, constitutes a plea for the community to stop numbing itself and wake up, or to stop partaking of the intellectual narcotic or “opium” that is the false ideological belief that self-destructive forms of petty rebellion constitute political acts of resistance.

César Vallejo's writes, in his collection of posthumously published aphorisms, “Los intelectuales son rebeldes, pero no revolucionarios” (“Intellectuals are rebels, not revolutionaries”) (18).⁵⁸ This aphorism expresses, in condensed poetic form, the criticism Vallejo has of the European Surrealists, whom he criticizes for being what he deems overly intellectual in their expressed commitment to Marxist ideals of social revolution. In the short essay “Autopsy on Surrealism” (an essay whose starting-point is the idea that the once-living movement is now dead), Vallejo accuses the Surrealists—Breton and others—of being “incurable anarchist intellectuals” (8).⁵⁹ “The surrealists,” he writes, “evading the law governing the essential shape of things to come, made their famous moral and intellectual crisis academic and were powerless to overcome and go beyond it with truly revolutionary forms, that is to say, destructive/constructive forms” (8).⁶⁰ Vallejo dwells, in his aphorisms, upon the question of art’s relation to politics; and at times he seems obsessed with the problem of what form or shape a truly revolutionary work should take. In one aphorism, he writes:

Los surrealistas y Larrea buscan la liberación del espíritu anterior a la abolición de las condiciones de clase de la burguesía y hasta independientemente de ella.

The surrealists and Larrea seek the spirit’s liberation before the abolition of the class conditions of the bourgeoisie and even independent of it (16).

The aphorism, with its implied sense of bewilderment, seems to suggest that the spirit’s liberation in art would essentially be meaningless were it to come before and/or without the

⁵⁸ It’s worth noting that Vallejo never called these statements aphorisms. They were originally published in a collection of prose writings that he attempted to publish while living, but that were nevertheless only published posthumously—the collection *Contra el secreto profesional* (1937).

⁵⁹ “intelectuales anarquistas incurables” (417).

⁶⁰ “Los superrealistas, burlando la ley del devenir vital, se academizaron, repito, en su famosa crisis moral e intelectual y fueron impotentes para excederla y superarla con formas realmente revolucionarias, es decir, destructivo-constructivas” (417). C.f. José Carlos Mariátegui’s writings on the topic of Surrealism, as well as those of Walter Benjamin, each of which has an arguably much more balanced view of Surrealism than does Vallejo.

abolition of real-world class conditions, which dominate and oppress the spirit. Yet the aphorism itself—much like its sister poem “Un hombre pasa...”—is an expression of the spirit seeking liberation in art, one that paradoxically insists upon the need for more than just the individual spirit’s liberation. What the aphorism seeks to imagine is an even greater form of spiritual liberation, one that does not rest, or consider itself truly liberated, until the lives and vital spirits of the entire human collective have been likewise liberated from the material conditions that oppress them. This aphorism’s speaker experientially enjoys a form of aesthetically imagined liberation that calls upon us to recognize how our spirits too might be oppressed by the fact that others have yet to experience—and are in fact denied the experience of—such freedom. This is precisely what the speaker of Gamboa’s *100 Alibis* invites to reflect upon, acknowledge, and experience when he juxtaposes the lives of those who enjoy lives of luxury in the capitalist marketplace with those who are condemned to endure economic exploitation and *de facto* forms of political oppression such as over-policing. The image that Gamboa presents us with of people perversely enjoying their lives of luxury in the face of human suffering is one that offers us the same critique of individualist intellectualism.⁶¹

In another aphorism, Vallejo playfully articulates what he understands to be the law of spiritual freedom in poetic art:

La aviación en el aire, en el agua y en el espíritu. Sus leyes en los tres casos son diversas. El espíritu vuela cuando pesa y se hunde más en sí mismo. Más grávido es un espíritu, más alto y más lejos vuela.

Aviation in air, in water and spirit. Its laws are different in all three cases. The spirit soars the more it weighs and sinks into itself. The heavier the spirit, the higher and farther it flies (50).

Vallejo, or this aphorism’s speaker, essentially contends that freedom in art defies the deterministic laws of the natural world. At the same time, he offers us insight into one particular way that art in general—and his art specifically—might allow us to reach or enact our own sensing of spiritual freedom: through the articulation of a profound sense of tragic pessimism, one that dialectically attempts to produce, *via negativa*, a radiant image of a more hopeful and hopefully just future.

Gamboa’s Alibi 11 expresses the same sense of tragic, but dialectically hopeful, pessimism. In Alibi 11, the speaker tells of two strangers who walk side by side, tragically experiencing a symptomatic failure of individualist culture:

they failed to recognize each other as they walked side by side on the sidewalk. they were soon joined by a mob of strangers who looted and burned everything in sight. they failed to recognize that they had both been stabbed repeatedly and that they were nude. they were soon joined by a mob of flies and worms.

The alibi presents us with the image of a riot, which is a metonymic macro-expression of the failure these two individuals experience in their ability to recognize one another as members of

⁶¹ That critique emerges most powerfully in the final line of Vallejo’s “Un hombre pasa...” when the speaker poetically laments: “¿Cómo hablar del no-yó sin dar un grito?” (26). That *grito* is of course a figure for the poet’s own song.

the same community of living beings. The mob of strangers who join them to then burn and loot the community is nothing more than a mass of what the two individuals had already become when they failed to recognize one another. It is the logical expression of that failure on a mass scale. What the individuals and the mob are experiencing, and thus expressing in their riotous behavior, are the isolating, alienating, and enraging effects of commodity fetishism and estranged labor. Indeed, one of the devastating effects of the regime of commodity valuation (as it has been theorized from Marx through the Frankfurt School and beyond) is the subject's coming to experience their own self only as an object tragically incapable of sensing their own critical subjectivity and unable to genuinely imagine or sense the solidarity of intersubjectivity.⁶²

In the aftermath of the riot, the strangers ironically fail to recognize, in a way that mirrors their initial failure, the damage that has been done to them and that they may have even done to their own selves. The alibi thereby offers us a satirical portrait of the 1992 L.A. riots; and it does so by offering us one final image of the mob reconstituted as a mob of flies and worms, feasting on the corpses of those who were violently killed and stripped of their belongings. The mob's seething energy—goaded on by years of repressive policing and brought to expression with the acquittal of the men who had brutally beaten Rodney King—lives on in the aftermath of the riot in the grotesque image of fly- and worm-ridden corpses. Those corpses recall for us the very same image that Charles Baudelaire had experimented with in his poem "Une charogne" ("A Carcass"). Just as in Gamboa's alibi, the flies and worms in Baudelaire's poem signify a death that is nonetheless filled with life. In Baudelaire, the seething, ocean-like movement of the in this case maggot-infested corpse is such that it makes the corpse appear to breathe with life and bloom like a grotesque flower ("And God in heaven gazed upon this splendid corpse, / Luxuriating like a flower" [13-14]).⁶³ The corpse, which becomes a figure for poetry's critical act of social revelation in Baudelaire, satirically but also seriously attests to the beauty of the speaker's beloved, who the speaker directly addresses, saying: "This is what you'll be, O queen of every grace, / After the last sacraments" (41-42).⁶⁴ He then gives her an injunction:

Then, O my beautiful, repeat this to the worm
Whose kisses eat your face away:
That I preserve the sacred essence and the form
Of all my loves as they decay! (45-48).⁶⁵

The corpse becomes a meta-poetic reference to what art-beauty looks like in the modern era. Despite its grotesque appearance, it blooms with the horrific beauty of a flower; and its form is what the speaker artistically utilizes to preserve and reveal the essence of his love. The poem constructs the corpse into a poetic image, one that allows the both speaker and the poem's readers, in their critical engagements with the image, to counteract the oblivion of time and death and to preserve, in form, satirically grotesque images of modern life.

⁶² See Marx's "Alienated Labor" (1843) as well as the Benjamin and Adorno texts cited and discussed in Robert Kaufman's "Nothing if Not Determined: Marxian Criticism in History."

⁶³ "Et le ciel regardait la carcasse superbe / Comme une fleur s'épanouir" (13-14).

⁶⁴ "telle que vous serez, ô la reine des grâces, / Après les derniers sacraments" (41-42).

⁶⁵ Alors, ô ma beauté! dites à la vermine
Qui vous mangera de baisers,
Que j'ai gardé la forme et l'essence divine
De mes amours décomposés! (45-48).

Alibi 11 permits us to more critically apprehend the socially grotesque, everyday reality of end-of-the-century modern life in Los Angeles—and in the particular aftermath of the 1992 L.A. riots. The Alibi in effect prophesies—with the artistic image of a fly-infested corpse—how even more riotous convulsions of violence await modern society if no action is take to transform the situation.

In his “No Introduction” to Gamboa’s book of collected writings, Chon Noriega provocatively poses the question of what it means to present Gamboa as an avant-garde Chicano artist. “What does the avant-garde look and sound like when it blooms outside the hothouse of the bourgeoisie?” he asks, “What does social protest against racism look and sound like when articulated outside a realist code?” (3-4). In response to these questions, he provides a kind of non-answer: “It looks like both and neither; and it sounds the same, but different” (4). His considerations of the question nevertheless lead to a discussion, initiated elsewhere (in Max Benavidez’s “Latino Dada” [1986]), regarding Gamboa’s artistic relation to the Baudelairean figure of the flaneur: “[Gamboa’s] urban peregrinations (both literal and literary) across Los Angeles suggests the Baudelarian [*sic*] flaneur or nineteenth-century stroller, whose ‘object of inquiry is modernity itself,’” he writes (4). Noriega, however, seeks to disassociate Gamboa’s work from Baudelaire’s by staking the claim that “Gamboa owes less to an intellectual tradition and more to an urban environment that makes *flânerie* obsolete in the face of random acts of violence” (4). Noriega seems to fear what he thinks would be the belittling effect of promoting such an association: “Gamboa was not schooled into a modernist patrimony,” he writes, “nor, upon closer examination, do aesthetic homologues do more than validate the antecedent (as precedent) and destroy the latter’s context (as irrelevant)” (4). Ironically, Noriega nonetheless proceeds to posit Gamboa’s work as a modernist break from tradition, one that inadvertently re-inscribes it within the very tradition of rupture from which he seeks to separate Gamboa’s work (perhaps as a way of better selling it).

In any case, Noriega ironically misunderstands Gamboa’s relation to the Baudelairean figure of the flaneur entirely, due to his secondhand reading of Walter Benjamin’s work on Baudelaire, which he takes from Susan Buck-Morss. He seems to not realize that the passage he cites from Benjamin (which again he gets from Buck-Morss) originates from Benjamin’s first essay on Baudelaire, “The Paris of the Second Empire in Baudelaire,” which was an unfinished essay that Benjamin would later choose to rewrite and reconsider after vigorous debates with his colleague and friend Theodor W. Adorno. Adorno pushed Benjamin to consider in his analysis of Baudelaire’s work how Baudelaire’s poetry was not just enmeshed in and expressive of a world of commodity fetishism, but also how it came to offer, via art, a critique of commodity experience. Benjamin went on, in short, to suggest in “On Some Motifs in Baudelaire” that Baudelaire’s poetry doesn’t just express commodity fetishism, but that it expresses it so as to help activate a modern subject’s sense of critical subjectivity.⁶⁶

We encounter a version of this argument in Noriega’s own attempt to dissociate Gamboa from Baudelaire, when he argues (while citing Benjamin’s first Baudelaire essay) that unlike “the flaneur-cum-intellection [who] ‘goes to the marketplace, supposedly to take a look at it, but already in reality to find a buyer’”—that Gamboa instead “has no option but to replace *flânerie* with the freeway—his writings have no marketplace” (5). While his reading of Gamboa’s invocative use of the image of the freeway is both compelling and accurate (indeed, he proceeds

⁶⁶ See again Robert Kaufman’s “Lyric Commodity Critique” and “Nothing if Not Determined” for a more thorough discussion of Benjamin’s essays on Baudelaire.

to claim that “[t]he freeway [in Gamboa’s work] becomes a lived metaphor for writing that takes an ironic stance toward the marketplace” [5]), his rejection of Baudelaire nonetheless misses a key point that a comparative reading of Gamboa’s and Baudelaire’s work might yield—which is that both sought to identify and critique through poetic art the isolating and estranging effects of commodity fetishism and the individualistic and nihilistic culture it produces.⁶⁷ The flâneur is a figure that deludes himself into believing that he exists outside of and detached from the realities of the capitalist marketplace, that he is an individual amongst the grotesque machinery of the big-city crowd. That Benjamin did not interpret Baudelaire’s work to be the expressive product of someone who, like the flâneur, goes to the market to find a buyer is attested to by the fact that he ultimately arrives (in his second essay) at the conclusion that Baudelaire “was no *flâneur*” and that “[t]he luster of a crowd with a motion and a soul of its own, the glitter that had bedazzled the *flâneur*, had dimmed for him” (193). Baudelaire had rejected, in other words, the experientially empty, but intoxicating form of individualism that the figure of the flâneur came to represent. Baudelaire’s poetry expressed a desire to hold out for a more genuine form of freedom and experience.

Barbara Herrnstein Smith’s book *Poetic Closure: A Study of How Poems End* (1968) offers an account of the epigrammatic form with which Gamboa’s *100 Alibis* seems to play. It aids us, in other words, in the attempt to understand the significance of Gamboa’s virtuosic invention of what amounts to a new genre, or sub-genre, that works with and adds to both epigram and aphorism. Many of Gamboa’s alibis display the characteristic sense of wit and “pointedness” that, as Smith notes, defines the more satirical strain of epigrammatic form (which is sometimes contrasted with the more “lyrical” strain of the genre).⁶⁸ The epigram has its generic roots in Ancient Greek and Roman poetry, more specifically in the practice of carving short inscriptions onto gravestones, statues, and other buildings or monuments. The term “epigram” itself derives from the Greek word for “inscription,” *epigramma* (ἐπίγραμμα). Epigram as form also bears an association with other short-form instances of lyric, including the aphorism, proverb, maxim, and adage (all of which have often been considered sub-genres of the epigram). Likewise, the sonnet is considered to have at least partly evolved from the epigram, and its characteristic turn of thought (otherwise known as the *volta*) is said to be a derivative element of epigrammatic form’s concluding turn of thought. In her discussion of epigrammatic, Smith evaluates the form’s function and design in relation to how it was initially used to memorialize people and objects: “engraved on tombs, statues, public buildings, or wherever an inscription was wanted to identify or characterize something both briefly and permanently, the epigram would stand, for all time, to all readers, as the ultimately appropriate statement thereupon” (196). Smith observes how the epigram’s brief, short-form character relates, in a very practical way, to that history of use: “since it was impractical to carve, for example, a man’s entire biography on his tombstone, the few markings that would remain as his most permanent testament would have to be entirely ‘to the point.’” (197). The form itself bears a deep historical relation to the notion of “poetic closure” that Smith seeks to analyze in her book, and indeed she recognizes that it’s a form that originally sought to have (or be) “the last word on its subject” (196). The form itself, in other words, seeks to embody the very notion of “closure.” Smith thereby comes to define the form as

⁶⁷ For more on Gamboa’s *100 Alibis*, Benjamin, Baudelaire, and the late twentieth-century image of the freeway, see the second chapter of this dissertation.

⁶⁸ See the entry on “Epigram” in *The Princeton Encyclopedia of Poetry and Poetics* for more; also see Alastair Fowler’s *Kinds of Literature: An Introduction to the Theory of Genres and Modes* (1982).

one that seeks to have or produce a sense of “maximal closure” (197).⁶⁹ Smith’s notion of “poetic closure,” however, is one that seeks to describe an experiential poetic effect, one that expressively opens up meaning possibilities rather than seek to merely fix and close them. “[A]s the metaphor suggests,” she writes, “the ending of a poem is a gesture of exit, and like all gestures it has expressive value” (196).

Smith describes epigram’s formal structure as consisting of two main parts: a set-up and a conclusion. “The set-up,” she writes, “is the part of the epigram which, in turn, will be the locus of particularly strong closural forces” (199). Smith then expands this definition to account for epigrams that are longer than just two lines, or two small parts, but that instead incrementally build tension before arriving at the “turn”: “We may think of the characteristic structure of the epigram [...] as a thematic sequence which reaches a point of maximal instability and then turns to the business of completing itself” (199). Smith thinks of the epigram, in other words, as a form that calls for the illusion of closure, a form that seeks to create the experiential illusion that the conclusion it arrives at had been logically determined by what came before. Crucial then are Smith’s reflections upon the performative nature of the form itself and what it means to compose epigrams. “To epigrammatize an experience,” she says, “is to strip it down, to cut away irrelevance, to eliminate local, specific, and descriptive detail, to reduce it to and fix it in its most permanent and stable aspect, to sew it up for eternity” (208). She likewise offers an account of what the activity of composing epigrams says about the person who composes them: “The epigrammatist is proud: he does not wish to endear or ingratiate himself to the reader. Nor is he intimate. He holds the reader at a distance, addressing him directly, but not inviting him to share experiences. (To a reader who says he does not like an epigram, the epigrammatist is likely to reply, ‘You are not supposed to.’)” (208). The epigrammatist, in other words, seems view his audience with an air of haughty indifference. His or her goal is not to produce an object of extravagant pleasure, but instead produce a more serious (but still playful and poetic) statement that will transcend the fashion of the moment and endure through time. In the aesthetic illusion-experience of the epigram itself, the epigrammatist fictionally appears as a kind of sculptor, one who chisels away at the poetic object to reveal the stripped-bare essence, or form, of its subject matter for audiences to experience, observe, and enjoy throughout time.⁷⁰

What would it mean to begin to grasp the “alibi” genre or form as an extension of epigrammatic form? First and foremost, it suggests that the poet-speaker stands accused of a crime and that the alibi itself functions as a defense insofar as it is a proclamation of innocence.⁷¹ An alibi is a defense that relies upon a notion of “elsewhere,” as the term’s etymological root-word *alibi* (Latin for “elsewhere”) suggests (“Alibi”). The alibi cited at the opening of this chapter (Alibi 76) provides us with a hint of what the “crime” the speaker stands accused of

⁶⁹ “[T]he more closely we look,” she says, “the more evident it becomes that what we usually mean by epigrammatic is something like ‘having maximal closure’” (197).

⁷⁰ The rest of Smith’s chapter proceeds to discuss modern poetry’s tendency towards non-statement, anti-climax, and what she calls “anti-closure.” While it might be interesting to analyze her examples of “anti-closure” in relation to the Gamboa’s *Alibis*, it’s also the case that her survey of modern poetry’s anti-closural forces is perhaps too broad to be of use to us here, especially since her analysis seems to focus on non-epigrammatic forms of modern poetry.

⁷¹ We might consider two great, predecessor epigrammatic statements, one truly “real world” and a literal defense in the sense that it occurred during one of the modern world’s most famous political and criminal trials; and the other eponymously used as a title for the great poet Pablo Neruda’s bestselling, posthumous memoir *Confieso que he vivido* (1974). In the first instance, we refer of course to Fidel Castro’s words when acting as his own lawyer in a Havana courtroom on October 16, 1953, while being tried for treason against the state (specifically for his leadership in attempting to overthrow the U.S.-backed Batista dictatorship): “La historia me absolverá.”

might have been: “this isn’t political. this isn’t art. this isn’t literature. this isn’t.” The criminal accusation that the speaker defends himself against, in other words, is the crime of having produced an artwork that is sure to be criticized for being too “political,” too “artistic,” and/or too “literary” for its audiences’ particular tastes (or, alternatively, not “political,” “artistic,” or “literary” enough). The alibi itself is then an anticipatory defense against the kind of generic criticisms to which the politically motivated artist surely be subjected. It attempts to locate the artwork in the “elsewhere” that is aesthetic illusion-space. In doing so, the alibi playfully transgresses the conceptual laws that its would-be critics seek to impose upon it with their predetermined forms of judgment about what an artwork could or should be; and it thereby attacks the notion that it must be “political,” “artistic,” and/or “literary” in some predetermined, already-known, and recognizable way. The alibi essentially declares its own autonomy, its right to not have to be or offer anything in particular;⁷² and so it playfully declares that it simply “isn’t”—that it doesn’t exist as an identifiable “something,” and that it is nothing more than a literary-poetic fiction. By declaring its own non-existence, the alibi playfully alludes to its own semblance character precisely at the moment that the epigrammatic form calls for an expansive sense of closure by way of a satirical turn of thought, one that places us in the alibi-like “elsewhere” that is the realm of literary-poetic experience.

By declaring his own innocence, the alibi’s speaker playfully implicates himself in the crime of having produced a genuinely subversive artwork, one that transgresses the laws of objectively fixed conceptuality. That the speaker considers himself guilty of this crime is attested to by the fact that Alibi 76 is immediately followed by Alibi 77, which takes the form of a playful confession (one that recalls Neruda’s epigrammatic alibi-confession *Confieso que he vivo*): “i don’t have an alibi.” In this moment, the artwork as a whole attempts to shatter, or push beyond, the epigrammatic form by creating what is essentially another turn of thought that can only be experienced in the space in-between individual alibis and in the context of the work as a whole. Indeed, the speaker’s sudden declaration that he has no alibi, within the context of a work whose title is *100 Alibis*, reveals that Alibi 77 is itself to unsettle the audience’s sense of what it is they are experiencing, or being asked to experience. Alibi 91 pushes this even further by explicitly telling its audience:

don’t expect me to make sense or to explain myself. i don’t expect that from you. by the way, have you noticed how we all disregard everything that doesn’t pertain to our understanding of reality? do you really intend to deconstruct a head-on collision? what is the matter with letting sleeping rabid dogs lie?

Here the alibi satirically mocks its audience by attempting to remind them of the degree to which significant numbers of people are already ideologically blinded by the particular lens through which they seek to view and interpret the world and, by extension, the artwork. “[D]o you really intend to deconstruct a head-on collision?” it derisively asks, alluding to the head-on collision-like impact it seeks to have on its audience, the shock experience of modernity, and the laughably futile attempt anyone might make to deconstruct those experiences. With his final play upon the idiomatic phrase “let sleeping dogs lie” (which the speaker transforms into “[let] sleeping rabid dogs lie”), the alibi speaker figures himself, the artist, as a dangerous rabid dog whose dreams and lies might, if provoked, suddenly attack.

⁷² In doing so, the only law it seeks to obey is what Adorno calls art’s law of movement: “Art acquires its specificity by separating itself from what it developed out of; its law of movement is its law of form” (3).

Vallejo's aphorisms provide additional insight into politically-motivated artistic experiment with epigrammatic form and thus into the dynamically evolving nature of Vallejo's own poetic practice, which appears to be frequently galvanized by the sense of conflict and tension between his competing commitments—or better yet, responsibilities—to forma experiment in the realm of art and Marxian political practice in life. One of his aphorisms reads as follows:

<p>El bolchevismo es el humanismo en acción. Lo mismo puede decirse del revolucionarismo o comunismo, que son humanismos en acción; es decir, la idea y el sentimiento humanista y el ideal humanista, completado por la acción humanista y técnica para que ese ideal se haga carne.</p>	<p>Bolshevism is humanism in action. The same can be said of revolutionism or communism, that they're humanisms in action; that is, the humanist idea and sentiment and the humanist ideal, fulfilled by humanist action and technics in order that that ideal may be made flesh (12).</p>
---	--

Here Vallejo casts Marxist-Leninist Bolshevism as a form of “humanism in action,” that is, as an attempt to realize in the world, through action, the imagined humanist ideal of a truly equal society. The historical character of Bolshevism aside, what Vallejo (or this aphorism's speaker) aims to do here is underscore the humanist, poetic quality that Marxist political practice has in the sense that it is—much like the writing of poetry itself—a form of action that attempts to realize a poetically imagined ideal. By the time we arrive at the aphorism's end, Vallejo speaks only of the essential notion of “humanist action” (so no longer of a specific political philosophy or ideological position) and its ability to realize, or fulfill, the ideal.

In another aphorism, Vallejo writes:

<p>Las artes (pintura, poesía, etc.) no son sólo éstas. Artes son también comer, beber, caminar: todo acto es un arte. Resbalón hacia el dadaísmo.</p>	<p>The arts (painting, poetry, etc.) are not just these. Eating, drinking, walking are also arts; every act is an art. The slippery slope toward dadaism (60).</p>
--	--

Here Vallejo offers his readers, or perhaps just himself, a warning: to not fall victim to the fallacious line of thinking that leads to “dadaism,” which he provocatively and pejoratively posits as a kind of aestheticism, a form of art practice that is overly intellectual (i.e., formulaic) and only superficially concerned with the humanisms of which it speaks.⁷³ Vallejo takes up epigrammatic form and its turn of thought to acknowledge, on the one hand, the truth that every act carries with it the possibility for poetic meaning and significance; but he also reminds us, on the other hand, that art-acts are qualitatively different forms of action that take place in another realm of experience, and that we should be careful not to delude ourselves into believing that every act, once formulaically labeled “art,” is truly capable of locating us in that experiential realm of critical subjectivity. Vallejo, in other words, warns us of the dangers to which such a truth might lead when taken and used as a formula for art-making.

⁷³ My use of the term “aestheticism” here is not meant to refer to any particular literary movement or style but rather to the caricature of “aestheticist art” that the historical avant-gardes use to mythologize their own art practice; see Peter Bürger's *Theory of the Avant-Garde* (1974) for more on “aestheticism” and the avant-garde.

At times in his aphorisms, Vallejo attempts to map out his competing commitments to experimental art and sociopolitical life in geo-social terms. In other words, he attempts to think historically about what formal experimentation in art might performatively mean within the particular context of modern world history. Thus he observes:

Hay la revolución en literatura (que no es necesariamente revolución en política: Proust, Giraudoux, Morand, Stravinsky, Picasso) y hay la revolución la literatura (que es necesariamente revolución en política: Prokofiev, Barbusse, Diego Rivera). Esta última revolución es de temas y, a veces, va acompañada de técnica. La primera es de técnica y, a veces, va acompañada de temas. En Rusia sólo se tiene en cuenta o, al menos, se prefiere, la revolución temática. En Paris, la revolución técnica.

There is revolution in literature (which is not necessarily revolution in politics: Proust, Giraudoux, Morand, Stravinsky, Picasso) and there is revolution in literature (which is necessarily revolution in politics: Prokofiev, Barbusse, Diego Rivera). The latter revolution is thematic and, at times, is accompanied by technique. The former is technical and, at times, is accompanied by themes. In Russia the only thing that counts or, at least, is preferred, is thematic revolution. In Paris, technical revolution (26).

Here Vallejo merely records what appears as an intriguing crossing: that there are two kinds of “revolution in literature,” one kind which he associates with Paris and formal technique or experiment, and another that he associates with Soviet Russia and the inclusion (or mimetic representation) of revolutionary themes and socio-political content. He notes that each is more or less preferred by the literary cultures of each geo-social metropole and that those preferences seem to align with the social conflict between capitalist nations and socialist ones. (He also subtly acknowledges that thematic and technical modes of literary revolution are not mutually exclusive in either culture; instead they are only preferred.) In some aphorisms, Vallejo expresses a clear affinity for the literary culture of Soviet Russia. For instance, he defends Russia and its artists from the charge that their art is too political by highlighting the hypocritical nature of those claims:

Se le reprocha a Rusia el hacer que sus artistas hagan arte político. Pues bien: Francia daba medallas de oro a las artistas del Salón que se habían distinguido en las trincheras. Alemania, Inglaterra e Italia hicieron idéntico.

Russia is reproached for the fact that its artists make political art. All right then: France gave gold medals to Salon artists who had distinguished themselves in the trenches. Germany, England and Italy did the same (14).

In other aphorisms, however, Vallejo nonetheless shows that he remains committed to poetic experimentalism in the seemingly abstract realm of art, and that he therefore has an equally intense affinity for the literary culture of Western Europe. In one aphorism, he dreams of a new mode of Picassian poetic practice:

Una nueva poética: transportar al poema la

A new poetics: carry over to the poem

estética de Picasso. Es decir: no atender sino a las bellezas estrictamente poéticas, sin lógica ni coherencia, ni razón. Como cuando Picasso pinta a un hombre y, por razones de armonía de líneas o de colores, en vez de hacerle una nariz, hace en su lugar una caja o escalera o vaso o naranja.

Picasso's esthetic. That is: attend to nothing but strictly poetic beauties, with neither logic nor coherence nor reason. As when Picasso paints a human figure and, for purposes of harmony of line or color, instead of giving it a nose, puts in its place a box or a ladder or a glass or an orange (40).

Vallejo seems to perhaps inadvertently describe his own form of experimental poetics, which he aligns here with a Picassian aesthetic of abstract figuration and which we might most clearly recognize in his intensely experimental volume of *vanguardista* poetry *Trilce* (1922). The aphorism, in this sense, seems to justify as necessary and beautiful the existence of his own technique-driven work.⁷⁴ At the same time, one cannot help but recall Picasso's alignment—in life rather than doctrinally within his own art—with Marxism and his decision to join the French Communist Party after World War II.

Vallejo sought to constantly bring artistic technique into dynamic, life-giving tension with socio-political content. In another aphorism, Vallejo turns to the work of Soviet filmmaker Dziga Vertov to imagine yet another new aesthetic, or a new way of formulating the ongoing project at issue:

Una estética nueva: poemas cortos, multiformes, sobre momentos evocativos o anticipaciones, como “L’Opérateur” en cinema de Vertof.

A new esthetic: short, multiform poems, on evocative moments or presentiments, like “L’Opérateur” in Vertof’s film (76).

Due to the way this aphorism mirrors, or corresponds to, the structure and form of his aphorism on Picassian aesthetics, we might regard it as a response to those reflections (or, alternatively, we might regard those reflections as a response to this aphorism). In any case, Vallejo turns here to an experimental documentary filmmaker to imagine a new mode of experimental poetics, one that would perhaps attempt to construct in poetry's own language and forms a mimesis of documentary film's ability to register, record, and represent the material conditions of sociopolitical life, but that would also experiment with the formalist technique of fast-cutting, artistic montage.⁷⁵

Vallejo continues to pursue the path opened up in the aphorism on Picassian aesthetics when he writes:

⁷⁴ The aphorism recalls two poems in particular, the thirty-sixth poem in *Trilce* (which tells its audience to refuse “to set foot on the double security of Harmony” [20-21]) and the poem *Los trescientos estados de mujer...*, posthumously published in *Poemas humanos*.

⁷⁵ See Walter Benjamin's “Art in the Age of Mechanical Reproduction” for an interesting discussion on the role of photography and film in twentieth-century art and its relation to global politics. Vallejo's poem “Un hombre pasa...” might also be interesting to consider in relation to this aphorism, since it might provide us with an example of what that technique looks like in poetry. On the other hand, Benjamin's celebration of mechanical life—and of the working class's Leninist goal of “owning” its own mechanical character—is not only at odds with the position Benjamin, in dialogue with Adorno, moves to in “On Some Motifs in Baudelaire”; it's likewise a position that much of Vallejo's own poetic art would be hard to square with artistically.

La mecánica es un medio o disciplina para realizar la vida, pero no es la vida misma. Esa debe llevarnos a la vida misma, que está en el juego de sentimientos o sea en la sensibilidad. Walt Whitman, Vallejo.

Mechanics is a means or discipline for the realization of life, but not life itself. It ought to carry us to life itself, which is at play in feelings, or sensitivity. Walt Whitman, Vallejo (52).

In this aphorism, Vallejo seems to push back against his own impulse to pursue a purely mechanics-driven art. What he pushes back against is the impulse to arrive at a formula that would allow him to mechanically reproduce a particular kind of poetic art (be it labeled “Picassian,” “Vertovian,” “Soviet,” “European,” “Peruvian,” “modernist,” “avant-gardist,” “political,” etc.). Instead, he reminds himself that formal experiment is a technical means for the realization “of life,” by which he means: the living, breathing nature of poetic thought in (i.e., occurring in dynamic, living relation to) the substance, or meaning, of real-world life itself. Poetic form itself must seek to embody the meaning (or dynamic, living quality) of life, he seems to claim, which he then reveals is a matter of poetic feeling or sentiment.⁷⁶ We might otherwise think of this as the affective, subjective dimension of life-experience, which poetic art seeks to register and express. (“I love plants for the root, not for the flower,” he says in another aphorism.)⁷⁷ Vallejo references Walt Whitman and his poetics here to offer a sense of what he means by a kind of poetic practice that makes form a mere but nonetheless essential tool for the realization of life. Whitman makes this line of thinking the very foundation of his poetic practice; and by invoking Whitman’s name and juxtaposing it with his own, Vallejo suggests that he too will make this particular line of thought an essential part of his own poetic practice while also updating it and giving it a new name. We are meant to sense the tension between the two names and what they seem to represent in terms of the posture each poet affects before his audience and the figure he casts of himself as a poet-persona. Whitman, for instance, is the great American bard whose voice and bodily presence transcends the great expanse of time and space to reassure his audience of the value of life, to provide them with that same empowered sense of fatherly calm. Vallejo, however, is the poet of pain and suffering who is so overwhelmed by the powerful “blows in life” that he can only respond with silence and bewilderment; he tells us that he lacks the language to even describe how difficult and painful life can be. The tensions between these two figures of poetic voice is precisely what we are supposed to sense in a poem like Vallejo’s “Voy a hablar de la esperanza” (“I’m Going to Speak of Hope”), which begins with a series of statements that speak of the pain of life in the same transcendental poetic mode that allows Whitman to reach across time and touch his audience: “I don’t suffer this pain as César Vallejo. I do not ache now as an artist, as a man or even as a simple living being. I do not suffer this pain as a Catholic, as a Mohammedan or as an atheist. Today I simply suffer” (343).⁷⁸ The abiding point in all this is that Vallejo’s political commitments coexist but rarely map onto, and are often in real tension with, the non-deterministic way he conceives of and produces poetic art.

⁷⁶ We might otherwise think of this as the affective, subjective dimension of life-experience, which poetic art seeks to register and express.

⁷⁷ “Yo amo a las plantas por la raíz y no por la flor” (54).

⁷⁸ “Yo no sufro este dolor como César Vallejo. Yo no me duelo ahora como artista, como hombre ni como simple ser vivo siquiera. Yo no sufro este dolor como católico, como mahometano ni como ateo. Hoy sufro solamente” (342). This is also a poem that seeks to realize or play with the law of spiritual flight that Vallejo articulates in his aphorism about “Aviation in air, water and spirit.” See my earlier discussion of that aphorism within this chapter.

Epigrammatic form itself is what facilitates the critical kind of poetic thought that Vallejo's aphorisms and Gamboa's *Alibis* experiment with and express. Both make use of epigrammatic form's satirical turn of thought to criticize their opponents (who they imagine to be on both the Left and the Right) while justifying, though without needing to explain, their own positions on matters pertaining to art and politics.⁷⁹ (Recall the quip from Gamboa's Alibi 91: "don't expect me to make sense or to explain myself. i don't expect that from you.") But the form also allows Gamboa and Vallejo to experiment with modalities of anti-climax that nonetheless works to unsettle the "set-up" through the very meta-artistic turn of thought that is the anti-climactic form of closure. Consider Alibi 62, which ends with a seemingly apathetic call to "wake up" from dreams of social revolution:

public executions. save money. something to do on weekends. always looks good on the news. start with celebrities then move onto more serious types (like generals, congressmen, ceo's). it'll never happen. dreams of revolutions. time to wake up.

Here the speaker seems to become, or offer, a form of muttered disillusion, one that allows him to glimpse the truth that his dreams of violent social revolution are a fantasy driven as much by boredom and the desire for entertainment as by a desire for justice. He perversely imagines the public execution of celebrities, politicians, generals, and the wealthy in the form of a violent, but happy revolution that would, in fact, be televised. Then he laments the fact that it will never happen and seems to suggest not only that he's now willing to accept the reality of social life for what it is and no longer dream, but that we should too.

The alibi, of course, is itself a poetic dream, a fiction that requires us to wake up and ask ourselves what was real and not real, or to what extent a seemingly apathetic call to "wake up" is a playful one designed to subjectively influence us to wake up to the reality around us. Interestingly, the alibi that immediately precedes it, Alibi 61, is one that attempts to directly confront us with that reality, or wake us up to it:

deny children their education. deny emergency assistance. deny their humanness.
deny that you'll pay more for a burger. deny that you'll mow your own lawn. deny that it is a vicious act.

The *Alibis* as a whole are an attempt to confront us with the reality of what it means to be dreaming someone (or something) else's dream about social reality and what it would mean to then forge a path into really "waking up" to our own needs to think and imagine our own chosen thoughts and dreams about social change. They confront us with a question about what it would mean to really confront the reality we seek to change, and what it mean to do so without losing ourselves in the kind of intoxicating dreams that function more to console us rather than generate within us a real sense of agency. When the speaker of Alibi 62 tells himself and us that it's "time to wake up," what he's telling us to do is wake up and grasp the true scope of the horror that surrounds us and the true nature of the challenge before us. Rather than seek to prescribe a form of action for us to take, the alibi instead invites us to ask and thereby start imagining what it

⁷⁹ Through their aphorisms and alibis, Vallejo and Gamboa work through what it means for them to produce art under the weight of social history.

would mean to truly confront the situation before us and what would be the best strategy for doing so. It invites us to determine that for ourselves and to be the authors of our own history.

Throughout Gamboa's *Alibis*, the speaker seems to be haunted by an image of what could have been. In Alibi 4, for example, he articulates his sense of having been betrayed and abandoned by others, people who were presumably his allies:

we were all in this together, or at least i thought so. eventually they all disappeared. i began to think that i was all alone until i heard a voice. then i remembered that psychosis begins with the hearing of voices so i pretended not to hear. eventually the voice went away. i began to see things that were not there but i ignored all of the hallucinations. eventually i was declared normal. i got a job making molotov cocktails (the pay was much better than recycling old bottles). we were all in this together until i lit the match.

It's possible that these sorts of reflections serve an allegorical purpose. It could, for example, be Gamboa alluding to the bitter dissolution of the avant-garde art collective Asco that he was a crucial part of (which disbanded after an internal disagreement between the group's core members),⁸⁰ or it could be a reference to the political activism Gamboa was heavily involved in throughout the 60s, 70s, and 80s—or indeed both. Gamboa, in the 90s, is writing in the aftermath of the Chicano Civil Rights Movement and the cultural renaissance that flourished alongside it—and that may have also “died,” or been “defanged” thereafter, as Gamboa seems to argue in a 1989 essay, “Serpents in the City of Angels: After Twenty Years of Political Activism, Has L.A. Chicano Art Been Defanged?” In that essay, he seems to suggest that mainstream acceptance of Chicano art has created a situation that affects the post-1980s artist, making it more difficult for him or her to maintain a sense of autonomy from the market:

After nearly twenty years of activity and growth by Chicano artists in Los Angeles, the tempo and tonality today have a decidedly different orientation. The Chicano artist was once viewed as a social anomaly who resisted ready-made stereotypes. Many Chicano artists are now seen as the creators of culture by their own community and are increasingly viewed as the providers of commodities that can cross over into multi-cultural markets. Many artists have had to deal with the personal contradiction of altering the intent of their works so that it will conform with the will of the buyer. The political content of the works has been affected by the introduction of Chicano artworks into the mainstream (70).

In Alibi 20, we are presented with the allegorical image of a meteor about to crash into the earth. The meteor itself may represent the political and artistic energies of the Chicano Movement, which appear on the verge of completely dissipating, or disappearing:

a meteor disintegrated above my head. it appeared to be enormous. i saw flames swirling around it as chunks of debris scattered to form a tail. i heard a tremendous

⁸⁰ Gamboa alludes to the event that caused the group to disband in his essay “In the City of Angels, Chameleons, and Phantoms: Asco, a Case Study of Chicano Art in Urban Tones (or, Asco Was a Four-Member Word)” (1991), included in *Urban Exile: Collected Writings of Harry Gamboa Jr.* “Asco ceased to exist,” he writes, “as a functioning group during the misperformance of *Ismania* at LACE on March 28, 1987. Then in a footnote he alludes to the letter he wrote to the rest of the group formally announcing the group's dissolution; that letter is viewable in the Harry Gamboa, Jr. papers at Stanford.

sound of crackling winds as the object became larger and brighter. i was walking across a deserted parking lot in the middle of the night. i was certain that the world was coming to an end. the meteor disappeared in an instant followed by absolute silence. i fell to the ground and cried because i knew that no one would believe me.

Could it perhaps be that the *Alibis* are Gamboa's artistic attempt to relight the match? Is his seemingly normal job as an "artist" the job of producing artistic molotov cocktails that he might one day, once again, use to demolish our established meaning systems, and thereby reopen the latent possibility of agency-driven political action?

As a poetic sequence of experimental lyric, the *Alibis* frequently play with the idea of who's speaking. Alibis 21 through 30 all begin with a different pronoun, each of which suggests that the speaker embodies the notion of that pronoun. Alibi 24, for instance, begins with a "we":

we: we've all decided to agree to disagree. we are sophisticated. we are civilized. we all have loaded 9mm pistols in our pockets. we are an order set apart from everyone else because we have paid our dues. we meet every day of every year. we can relate to each other. we can distinguish between right and wrong. we've decided that it is necessary to make small sacrifices out of innocent bystanders. we appreciate the opportunity to eliminate unknowns.

The "we" that speaks is American civil society, which reveals itself to be incredibly hypocritical in its espousal of civil speech and behavior. The alibi's use of the pronoun "we" positions the reader as an outsider who subtly experiences the threat that the "we" poses to anyone who is excluded from that gun-carrying group that fears, and so desires to eliminate, uncertainties and unknowns (including unknown people). The "we" in this alibi demands conformity despite presenting itself as "civil" and welcoming of disagreement.

Alibi 29 presents us, alternatively, with a "they" that positions the audience against another (or perhaps the same) "we":

they: we voted against you. we want all of you out of here. if only there was a way to revoke citizenship of all of you who were born here. you should go back. didn't you know we were serious when we started shooting rubber bullets into community events as a form of crowd control. didn't you feel unwanted when we wanted to prevent your unborn fetus from receiving any nutrition. we'll weed you out. never mind that we smile amongst ourselves.

The alibi satirically describes the experience of anti-Latinx racism in the U.S. by ventriloquizing the attitudes and beliefs that U.S.-Americans express when they vote in support of anti-Latinx measures or against the social welfare programs that would support Latinx communities; and when they passively (through non-action) or actively endorse police violence and the over-policing of Black and Brown communities. In fact, the alibi seems to reference events like the Chicano Moratorium and the violent forms of "crowd control" that the police employ when Latinxs organize a social protest event. Once again, like in Alibi 5, we encounter the nefarious smile of the dominant social group that hides behind a veil of plausible deniability (which this alibi and the others seeks to unmask).

Alibis 41-51 and 56-60 constitute another sequence of alibis that experiment with poetic persona—in this case, the persona of the so-called “nonperson.” More than just a reference to subaltern subjects (like the homeless in L.A.), the nonpersons in Gamboa’s *Alibis* include working-class subjects who sacrifice their lives in order to survive within the capitalist system—people, in other words, who experience an intense alienation from their own life-activity due to the damaging effects of estranged labor. In Alibi 41, those effects begin the moment that a nonperson awakens, and they fully settle in as soon as the nonperson walks out the door on the way to work:

nonperson: i wake up in the morning. i brush my teeth. i piss. i read the newspaper. i look out the window. i take a shower. i get dressed. i smile once into the mirror (for practice). i go out the door. i disappear.

Labor’s estrangement, and perhaps a larger collective estrangement, is experienced here as disappearance, a complete loss of the self.⁸¹

Alibi 3 pessimistically shows us what one seemingly undesirable alternative to a life of estranged labor would be with the grotesque image of a homeless man who delusionally believes he’s a Hollywood movie star:

he believed that he was being followed. not by strangers but by fans. he was totally wrong. it was his shadow making a desperate (yet futile) attempt to escape. he continued to pose when no one was looking. one day, he discovered that he was eating discarded food from trash cans in affluent neighborhoods. he wondered why his breath smelled like rotten flesh. he posed handsomely with crumbs on his lips.

Alibi 49 introduces us to another “nonperson,” one that speaks of the American education system and how it historically coerced students (and Latinx youth in particular) into assimilating to European-American culture:

nonperson: assimilate until it doesn’t hurt anymore. that’s why i failed school. they’re forcing kids into complete conformity which guarantees social deformity. public school uniforms! i would have taken the school down brick by brick and made a narrow road towards the nearest riot.

The alibi appears written from the perspective of the author himself (Gamboa), who often speaks of the traumatic childhood experiences he had in the American educational system—particularly, and notably, he often speaks of how he was forced to wear a dunce cap in elementary school for speaking Spanish.⁸² The alibi alludes to the pain of those experiences and how assimilation and conformity seems to be the only option for those don’t want to risk failing. The speaker’s own failure is figured here as the form of social deformity that he not only warns of, but threatens as a necessary response to the violence of education.

⁸¹ C.f. Alibi 43: “nonperson: i’ve been sitting at my desk all day. i can’t see the sky or the street below. i’ve got a replica of the golden gate bridge which i’ve constructed out of used paper clips. sure i’ve got an imagination and talent but i need the status and the regular paycheck. one of these days i’ll jump off the roof in a golden parachute” (*100 Alibis*).

⁸² See, for example, Gamboa’s “Nosebleed on Blacktop” (2021), published online by *Arts Everywhere*, <https://artseverywhere.ca/nosebleed-on-blacktop/>, accessed 6 May, 2021.

In Alibi 19, we encounter a speaker likewise deeply troubled by the extent to which people are pressured into conforming to the norms of American culture and society. The speaker asks:

what are we going to do when they ask us to bow our heads so that they may place the muzzle of their weapons to the base of our heads? will we bow slowly or in a nervous quirky jerk? will any of us refuse to comply? of course this is a hypothetical situation that will never occur. a more likely scenario is that you will close your eyes just at the moment when you should remain alert. the lights will change. the medication is in the other bottle. the on-ramp is an off-ramp. the condom is broken. bow wow.

The alibi once again makes reference to the situation of over-policing in Black and Brown communities in the U.S. (but also perhaps throughout the world)—a situation which the alibi facetiously poses as being merely hypothetical. The speaker then invites us to consider the incredible balancing act that we are all engaged in daily and how close people are to personal tragedy due to the precarity that they live in. The speaker’s final statement (“bow wow”) is one that creatively and spontaneously plays upon the notion of “bowing” (a reference to the submissive bowing that we are constantly expected to engage in in order to survive) and the bark of a dog (which we might consider to be a meta-artistic reference to the satirically nonsensical, creative, comic, and spontaneous voice of the poet-artist).

Like Gamboa’s *Alibis* and Vallejo’s aphorisms, Nicaraguan poet Ernesto Cardenal’s *Epigramas (Epigrams)* (1961) also engages epigrammatic form to deeply reflect upon the relationship between lyric expression (as the very distilled core of poetic activity) and sociopolitical life. Cardenal was a priest, poet, liberation theologian, and a revolutionary member of the Sandinista National Liberation Front (FSLN), one who participated in an attack upon the Presidential Palace in Nicaragua and founded an artists’ colony in the Solentiname islands that had close ties with the FSLN; and he would later serve as Nicaragua’s Minister of Culture. Cardenal’s *Epigramas* are notably erotic and satirical. Many are addressed to specific women whom Cardenal apparently knew in life. The opening series of epigrams refer, for example, to a woman named Claudia, who the speaker addresses in the first epigram:

Te doy, Claudia, estos versos, porque tú eres su dueña.	I give you these verses, Claudia, because you are their owner.
Los he escrito sencillos para que tú los entiendas.	I’ve written them simple so that you might understand them.
Son para ti solamente, pero si a ti no te interesan,	They’re just for you, but if you don’t find them interesting,
un día se divulgarán tal vez por toda Hispanoamérica...	then perhaps one day they’ll spread across all of Latin America...
Y si al amor que los dictó, tú también lo desprecias,	And if the love that produced them is scorned by you as well,
otras soñarán con este amor que no fue para ellas.	then others will dream with this love that wasn’t meant for them.
Y tal vez verás, Claudia, que estos poemas, (escritos para que conquistarte a ti) despiertan	And maybe then you’ll see, Claudia, how these poems, (written to conquer you) awaken

en otras parejas enamoradas que los lean
los besos que en ti no despertó el poeta.

in other lovestruck couples who read them
the kisses that the poet could not awaken
in you (1-10).

The epigram plays with the idea of being an intimate confession addressed to a specific person (the beloved Claudia) with the power, but also the fear that it might not be able, to awaken in others the deep feelings of love that it expresses. The epigram fearfully imagines that the specific person to whom it is addressed (Claudia) might not accept it or find it sufficiently moving; but it also imagines itself being read and circulated throughout all of Latin America. It imagines, in other words, its ability to inspire love on a mass scale, and it playfully alludes to both the poet's hope (that these verses will be read throughout Latin America) and his fear (that his verses might be spurned by readers). The figure of Claudia is at once the beloved Latin American reader that the poet hopes to reach and the subject of satirical ridicule, who the poet playfully scorns for being unmoved by his work.⁸³

In the third epigram the speaker juxtaposes the ephemeral nature of modern life with the eternal realm of human history in which his poems exist (or so he imagines):

De estos cines, Claudia, de estas fiestas,
de estas carreras de caballos,
no quedará nada para la posteridad
sino los versos de Ernesto Cardenal para
Claudia (si acaso)
y el nombre de Claudia que yo puse en esos
versos
y los de mis rivales, si es que yo decido
rescatarlos
del olvido, y los incluyo también en mis
versos
para ridiculizarlos.

Of these theaters, Claudia, these
festivities,
these horse races,
nothing will remain for posterity
save the verses written by Ernesto
Cardenal for Claudia (if at all)
and the name Claudia which I've put in
these verses
and those of my rivals, if I decide to save
them
from oblivion, and I include them as well
in my verses
to make a mockery them (1-8).

What the poet imagines here is another realm of human action, one that transcends the follies of the present moment to provide a form of justice that exists within that imaginative realm that is the future. He imagines the future and its understanding of history as a kind of heaven and/or hell to which he can condemn (through his own form of poetic judgment) both his lovers and his enemies, saving them from the secular oblivion of time. "Hell," the poem intones, "is the torment of history seeing you for what you are." We see the poet practice this form of judgment when he writes in another epigram: "Tú no mereces siquiera un epigrama" ("You don't even deserve an epigram" [1]). The subject of lyric address (i.e., the epigram's "you") is presumably a person that the poet sought to condemn to the hell of not even being worthy enough of having their name and/or spirit preserved in even a short-form poem like the epigram. Paradoxically, this becomes a way of satirically preserving that person's spirit for all to see and derisively laugh at in the form of this very epigram. But the "you" might also be the reader, who the epigrammatist seeks to

⁸³ The notion of *versos sencillos* written to move all of Latin America of course recalls the work of José Martí, whose work did indeed, in a series of Cuban-Revolution afterlives, reach and move Latin America and the world.

confront by forcing them to critically examine their own self worth, to ask to what extent they are worthy of having an epigram written about them—and then what kind of epigram? One that celebrates them for their beauty (physical, spiritual, or perhaps even the beauty of their moral character)? Or one critically mocks them?

In another epigram, the poet-speaker writes about the Nicaraguan dictator Anastasio Somoza Debayle, whom he likewise seeks to transform into a subject of ridicule and contempt:

*Somoza desvila la estatua de Somoza en el
estadio Somoza*

No es que yo crea que el pueblo me erigió
esta estatua
porque yo sé mejor que vosotros que la
ordené yo mismo.
Ni tampoco que pretenda pasa con ella a la
posteridad
porque yo sé que el pueblo la derribará un
día.
Ni que haya querido erigirme a mí mismo
en vida
el monumento que muerto no me erigiréis
vosotros:
sino que erigí esta estatua porque sé que la
odiáis.

*Somoza unveils the statue of Somoza at the
Somoza stadium*

It's not that I believe the people raised this
statue to me
because I know better than you that
ordered it myself.
Nor do I have any illusions about passing
with it into posterity because
I know the people will one day tear it
down.
Nor have I wished to erect to myself in life
the monument that you'll not erect to me
in death:
Rather, I put up this statue just because I
know that you'll hate it (1-7).

The epigram casts the dictator as a petty, spiteful, and vain enemy of the people. It seeks to unveil his tyrannical personality for all to see by playfully revealing how the dictator's unveiling of the statue he had built in his likeness shamefully attests to the despicable nature of his self-centered moral character. (Indeed, the epigram's title seeks mimetically to reveal Somoza's self-centered character by playfully repeating and overemphasizing his name.) The epigram seeks to confront us with the reality of what it means to be governed by such a human being, one who erects a statue of himself to remind the people of his contempt for them and for democracy. It thereby seeks to galvanize its audience into imagining in art, and then realizing in life, the dictator's fall. It urgently pushes its audience, in other words, to imagine with certainty the hopeful possibility of one day tearing down that statue.⁸⁴

The epigrammatic form itself is meta-artistically imagined in Cardenal's *Epigramas* as the democratic anti-version of the dictator's statue. In one epigram, the poet-speaker imagines his epigrams circulating in manuscript form among the common people (as the *Epigramas*, prior to being published, really did in life):

Nuestros poemas no se pueden publicar

Our poems cannot be published still.

⁸⁴ The epigram of course recalls Shelley's "Ozymandias" in the way it imagines a colossal statue built by a colossally narcissistic dictator to memorialize himself. History turns that memorialization into the memory of how time and people's actions in history defeat tyranny and its pretensions.

todavía.
 Circulan de mano en mano, manuscritos,
 o copiados en mimeógrafo. Pero un día
 se olvidará el nombre del dictador
 contra el que fueron escritos,
 y seguirán siendo leídos.

Handwritten, they pass from hand to hand
 or in mimeographed copies. But one day
 the name of the dictator against whom
 they were written will be forgotten,
 and they will continue being read (1-6).

The secret intimacy that the poet-speaker alludes to here (in the clandestine passing of handwritten copies of the poems from hand to hand) is similar to confessional mode of poetic intimacy that he writes into his love poems (like in those addressed to Claudia). The love poems' confessional mode coincides with the reality of writing under the violent, watchful, and censoring eye of the dictatorial state. The clandestine circulation of the poems suggests or attests to their ability not just to endure throughout time, but to outlast the life and spiritual afterlife (or legacy) of dictatorship. Indeed, the epigram prophesies—in a way that echoes Shelley's great sonnet "Ozymandias"—that both will be lost and forgotten, or cast into the oblivion of historical time, while the poems themselves—and the love of democracy to which they attest—will go on living in the hearts and minds of future readers. The time of love, literature, and human imagination is imagined here and throughout the *Epigramas* as a counter to the hell to which dictatorial state power seeks to condemn us; it is imagined as a power with the ability to transcend the particularities, limitations, and follies of historical time (or the time of the present) and envision an alternative future, one that will truly see the dictatorship for what it is and cast it into the hell of derisive scorn and oblivion. Salvation in the image of a radiant and just future, free from the oppressive power of the state, is what the *Epigramas* seek to imagine. The reading, writing, and sharing of poetry is thereby presented here as a form of poetic action, as the construction of a relatively humble artistic monument that registers, reveals, and ridicules the tragic realities of the present moment, and attests to a vision of freedom, love, and truth.

The erotic image of love and happiness that the poet constructs in the *Epigramas* is bound to the imagined (yet-to-be-realized) fall of the dictator, which the poet equally yearns for. Poetically imagined and articulated love is envisioned as a counter to the empty, facade-like image of a happiness built on money and power:

Tal vez nos casemos este año,
 amor mío, y tengamos una casita.
 Y tal vez se publique mi libro,
 o nos vayamos los dos al extranjero.
 Tal vez caiga Somoza, amor mío.

Maybe we'll marry this year,
 my love, and own a little house.
 And perhaps my book will be published,
 or we'll travel abroad together.
 Maybe Somoza will fall, my love (1-5).

That facade appears mimetically represented in another epigram, where it takes the form and figure of the newspaper, which seeks to manipulate the people through language and lies (a point reinforced by the fact that the periodical's Spanish-language title reduces the "news" to mere *novedades*, i.e., "novelties"):

¿No has leído, amor mío, en *Novedades*:
 CENTINELA DE LA PAZ, GENIO DEL
 TRABAJO

Have you not read, my love, in
Novedades:
 SENTINEL OF PEACE, GENIUS OF

PALADÍN DE LA DEMOCRACIA EN
 AMÉRICA
 DEFENSOR DEL CATOLICISMO EN
 AMÉRICA
 EL PROTECTOR DEL PUEBLO
 EL BENEFACTOR ...?
 Le saquean al pueblo su lenguaje.
 Y falsifican las palabras del pueblo.
 (Exactamente como el dinero del pueblo.)
 Por eso los poetas pulimos tanto un poema.
 Y por eso son importantes mis poemas de
 amor.

LABOR
 PALADIN OF DEMOCRACY IN
 AMERICA
 DEFENDER OF CATHOLICISM IN
 AMERICA
 PROTECTOR OF THE PEOPLE
 THE BENEFACTOR ...?
 They rob the people of their language.
 And falsify the people's words.
 (Just like the people's money.)
 Hence why we poets so lavishly polish a
 poem.
 And hence why my love poems are
 important (1-11).

The newspaper reduced to “novelties” of the dictator’s choosing inevitably becomes the tool that facilitates the dictator’s deception and robbery of the people. The epigram seeks to show us how a nefariously mechanical misuse of language can be used to justify, or hide behind a veil of so-called “justice” or truth, licentious behavior and social theft. Language is presented as the medium here through which we have, or *should have*, access to truth; and the power-driven lies of the newspaper that acts as an organ of a dictatorial state are presented as the means by which the people’s truth becomes corrupted. In this sense, the poet figures his own activity of polishing a poem as a way of democratically purifying and thereby reclaiming language and the light of truth therein for and on behalf himself and his beloved (who is but a figure for the people). Poetry is ultimately figured in the *Epigramas* as a vital kind of performative and poetic action, an activity that the poet-speaker chooses to engage in as a way of gesturally repudiating, or imaginatively escaping from, a megalomaniac-filled world of power and money:

Otros podrán ganar mucho dinero
 pero yo he sacrificado ese dinero
 por escribirte estos cantos a ti
 o a otra que cantaré en vez de ti
 o a nadie.

Others will make a lot of money
 but I have sacrificed that money
 by writing these songs for you
 or for another I’ll sing to instead of you
 or for nobody (1-5).

As a way of concluding, let us consider Gamboa’s final alibi, Alibi 100, which gives us our “final notice”:

final notice: the place is surrounded. come out with your heads up. be assertive. you have fifteen minutes. that is all that you have. what can you do with so much time on your hands? how about exchanging it for something better? Be quick about it before the fuse runs out. you’ve got to make quick decisions if you want to live in the fast lane.

Alibi 100 plays with devastating brilliance upon the authoritative language and voice of the law to stage a police raid that serves us with our “final notice”: an urgently posed demanding that we genuinely take in the artwork’s critical dynamics, which involve us deeply reflecting upon the artwork but also (as a part of that process) leaving it, or moving beyond it, to return to the

real world. The artwork both seriously and playfully treats us as criminals in need of an “alibi” for having experientially left the high-pressure world of quick decisions, where we are forced to conform to social standards and make efficient use of our time if we want to survive, make a living, and not be labeled or treated as the criminal non-members of society. Gamboa’s *Alibis*, by seeking to lay bare this situation for what it is, encourages us to approach it from an empowered perspective. It urges us to exit the experience of the artwork with our empowered heads (rather than our submissive hands) raised up. It lets us know that we can and should be genuinely assertive (while mocking the merely conformist, platitudinal assertion that we need to be assertive in order to get ahead) and that we will have to be prepared to make quick-witted decisions if we want to live, thrive, and survive in the “fast lane” of modern life; and the one decision it encourages us to make is to exchange our precious little time for something better than the brutal whims of a life governed by the mechanically-determined exigencies of the commodity form’s self-defining notion of “exchange-value.” It encourages us, in other words, to relinquish our lives of passive acceptance and instead take up a critically transformed and transformative life of poetic thought and, ultimately, poetic action.

Conclusion

Telling the Time of History: Poetry's Reactivation of the Light

Midway through his seminal essay “On Lyric Poetry and Society” (1957), Theodor W. Adorno self-consciously pauses to remind his readers of, and offer an important clarification about, his approach to reading the social content of lyric poems and other artworks: “Permit me to repeat that we are not concerned with the poet as a private person, not with his psychology or his so-called social perspective, but with *the poem as a philosophical sundial telling the time of history*” (emphasis added, 46). Adorno’s reminder articulates one of the guiding principles of this dissertation’s attempt to likewise read the social content embedded within poetic experimentation with poetic-artistic form. This dissertation has endeavored to approach each of the poetic artworks under study as though they were, in part because they are, Adornian sundials telling historical time: what that historical time has meant for human subjectivity—individual and collective—that has lived it existentially, economically, sociopolitically, and culturally. As Adornian sundials, each artwork and/or poem can be situated via our own reading practice within a particular historical location, one that allows us to read the illuminating shadow that the poem casts on that moment and that thereby reveals the moment’s objective, but also *subjective* (in the sense of being lived, experienced, engaged, and interpreted by human beings) content. Adorno suggests that the poem works and moves as does a sundial: it can be dispersively relocated to other moments and places in history, and yet it will still produce a “correct,” site-specific reading of the history that it’s engaging with the light of human reason and imagination that shines radiantly upon it—a reactivation of the light embedded deeply within it. For Adorno, such a light doesn’t shine mechanically or deterministically, but via the imaginative agency and activity that can make reason “critical” rather than merely instrumental. The poem is a record of the movements of engaged feeling and interpretive thought that produced it, and the “sedimented” social content or material that, as Adorno famously puts it at the start of *Aesthetic Theory*, is what aesthetic form has formed into art, and which the art itself can then crucially tell us more about (5).

The poem both registers and explosively releases such critical thought-experience, including via the thematic content of the language and the meaning of its words, but also through the performative gestures that have been made in the poem and cast as part of its very form: a casting that is “re-cast,” so to speak—remade, reconstructed, reinvented in each unfolding, newly-located reading. The lyric work is a compendium of thought-opening conceptual indeterminacies, meaning-possibilities that allow us to sense (to feel intensively activated by and into) our own critical capacity for imaginative, inventive thought; and imaginative, inventive thought is what a poem allows to emerge and unfold throughout time. In short, Adorno approaches the lyric poem as, to use Paz’s term, a “trans-historical potentiality,” an act waiting to happen.

Adorno further insists that it is “only by virtue of” the interpenetration of both formal and thematic elements in a work “that the lyric poem actually captures the historical moment within its bounds” (46). This dissertation has viewed formal experimentation itself as meaningful content that is in mediated dialogue with social history, a social history whose meaning-content we access via the literary-artistic history that form’s work has yielded. Taken together, form and thematic content provides us, in our experience of the poetic artwork, with a lived sense of what

it means to imaginatively engage with the agency-generating experience of art, which is also to say, with materials of history and society that might well otherwise go unheard or unseen by what even our most valuable existing objective tools (our existing concepts) can reach. “[T]he substance of a poem is not merely an expression of individual impulses and experiences,” Adorno reminds us, “[t]hose become a matter of art only when they come to participate in something universal by virtue of the specificity they acquire in being given aesthetic form” (38). The conceptual indeterminacy of poetry’s aesthetic form is what transforms the individual’s subjectively lived experiences into a collective call (in the largest version of an emancipatory collective, this would be an un-coerced, lower-case “u” universal call) for freedom and, as perhaps part of that freedom, a dialectical critique of sociopolitical *unfreedom*. The universality towards which Adorno gestures is not the universality of univocal meaning, not the universality of fixed, determined, and determinative concepts or laws coercively imposed. As he explains, “[the lyric poem’s] universality is no *volonté de tous*, not the universality of simply communicating what others are unable to communicate” (38). Rather, it is the universality of a subjectively-lived experience that has not yet been determined by concepts or subsumed by conceptual knowledge; it is the universality of the subjective nature of the experience that the artwork provides when it seeks to push past and beyond that which we already know about the world. Thus Adorno writes: “[I]mmersion in what has taken individual form elevates the lyric poem to the status of something universal by making manifest something not distorted, not grasped, not yet subsumed [...] The lyric work hopes to attain universality through unrestrained individuation” (38).

In chapter one, I have shown how Sor Juana Inés de la Cruz and Phillis Wheatley both turned to the poetic dream vision and that genre’s narrative framing device, not just to register oppression but also to articulate agency-activating critiques of the racist and heterosexist ideologies shaping their worlds. I have also shown how their poems allegorically mobilize the very notion of imaginative dream vision as aesthetic form to articulate meta-poetic theories that cast such experience as the construction and inhabiting of a realm that allows one to better come to know—and perhaps begin to know how to alter—harsh political reality itself. Wheatley and Sor Juana turn to poetic art to artistically and performatively reclaim what amounts to, and what their poems meta-poetically articulate as, a human right to imaginative, poetic expression—a right to exercise the capacity to produce and eventually act on new forms of thought beyond the confines of what was allowed either by the church or even the racist institution of chattel slavery. Their poems do this by meta-poetically referencing and self-critically reflecting on precisely what Adorno describes when he writes about the ways that “poetic subjectivity is itself indebted to privilege” and how those who have been “degraded to objects of history, have the same right, or a greater right, to grope for the sounds in which suffering and dreams are welded” (45).

Chapter two begins to demonstrate how and where those modes of critical thought and experience meta-poetically described in Wheatley’s and Sor Juana’s dream vision poems (in terms of what poetry in the largest sense can do) reemerge in the history of twentieth- and twenty-first century poetic art in the Americas. Chapter two shows how the Chicax art collective Asco and the Chilean art collective CADA each made invocative use of avant-garde art practices to register distinct but related critiques of state violence, museum culture, and the spiritual nihilism driving late twentieth-century consumer culture. The chapter also demonstrates what the seldom-discussed collaboration between Asco and the great French New Wave filmmaker Agnès Varda might mean for us today, in light of the recent fiftieth anniversary of the

Chicano Moratorium Against the Vietnam War. In particular, I highlight the ways that Asco's and Varda's avant-garde experiments performatively set forth a Benjaminian approach to history and time, one that calls upon us to recognize the redemptive meaning that justice for today's victims of police violence would have in light of the Moratorium and what tragically happened with and in the aftermath of award-winning Chicano journalist Rubén Salazar's killing at the hands of police.

If chapter two set us firmly in the historical moments and aftermaths of both the 1970 Chicano Moratorium and the 1973 coup d'état in Chile, then chapter three moves ahead, first by situating us in the contemporary moment of the Trump Administration-era humanitarian crisis at the U.S.-Mexico Border. It then provides us with critical readings and a probing historical overview of some of the poetic-art practices to which U.S.-Latinxs (namely Emmy Pérez, Rafa Esparza, and the artists involved in the *In Plain Sight* project) have recently turned in order to begin imagining how and where their art might begin to intervene in history by allowing us to not only more intensely feel the urgency of the historical moment, but also better sense and grasp our own capacity to act and intervene in history outside the experience of the artwork. The chapter demonstrates how poets and artists in the Americas (from Whitman to Hughes and from Vallejo to Zurita, all the way to those U.S.-Latinx artists mentioned above) have turned to the poetic and elemental images of sky and river to register the brutal, harsh, and violent historical realities of the crises that drove them to write and produce poetic art. Significantly, it presents the ways each of these artists (explicitly, and/or by more indirect allusion) appear to make work that asks us to hear how those earlier works have helped *form* and generate their own works' present efforts—and, in the Adornian sense, their works' present ability to tell a time of history now informed by prior, related efforts. The invocative uses of both sky and river have allowed the poets treated in this chapter to urgently and artistically imagine—and call for the ultimate realization of—transnational solidarity movements that symbolically and literally oppose the construction and violent imposition of both conceptual borders and real-world border walls. I've furthermore shown how the sense of free and open movement imagined in their artworks (through the transnational, international, and interstitial spaces of sky and river) is mimetically represented and/or registered in their artworks and also figured through the experimental movement of form's construction, which seeks to constantly move or push past the historical impositions and border-like limitations of coercively imposed, deterministic concepts that the majority have had no say in promulgating.

Chapter four, finally, demonstrates how three poet-artists (Harry Gamboa Jr., César Vallejo, and Ernesto Cardenal) make performative use of epigrammatic form (i.e., of what is perhaps the most distilled sub-genre of the already self-consciously condensed form or mode of literary art that lyric poetry *is*) to critically imagine a realm of poetic experience that is fundamentally in excess of the conceptual determinations of sociopolitical history. Yet in this specific set of engagements, we approach a realm of lyric hyper-distillation that appears to aim for the most compressed aesthetic form possible, in which we get a combined reflection on historical reality, and on poetry's ability to spark such reflection. In other words, epigrammatic form in the work of each poet occasions, in a supercharged fashion, an at once micro-compressed and exponentially raised challenge of considering the need and importance of critical reflection and of the role that poetry plays in generating it. This is to say that such intense self-critique tempers or tests the related work of artistically imagining a more radiant and just future. For each of these poet-artists, epigrammatic form itself induces both an externally-directed, sociopolitically satirizing turn of thought and the further turn that facilitates a process of deep self-reflection on

assumptions about the interrelationships among practice and performance in and across art and politics. The chapter's treatments of these poets find that if aesthetic and then particularly lyric form is literature's way of most intensely registering, for cognition and subjectivity alike, our sense capacity for critical-reflective experience, then epigrammatic form stands as the most intensified micro-form of a semblance-based dynamic that seeks to inscribe such possibility into ourselves and, by extension, into the world.

“Forma, lo performativo, acción poética” has itself been an experiment, one that has attempted to set forth a preliminary mapping of the story of poetic art's formal and substantive contestations of power in the Americas, and one that has sought to realize new modes of trans-American comparative criticism. Throughout the dissertation, I have sought to elucidate the ways that some key poet-artists across the history of the Americas have turned to distinct forms of experimental artistic practice, not just to thematically highlight, but also formally to construct, for the purpose of thereby allowing us to experientially encounter the unique role that aesthetic-poetic experience can play in empowering us, individually and collectively, to sense our capacity to generate meaningful, agency-driven critique of the systems of power that shape the modern world. This begins with a sensing of our own capacity to imaginatively push past the historical impositions and border-like limitations of coercively imposed, deterministic concepts that establish and sustain existing systems of exploitation and oppression. Poetic form, ultimately, is a kind of *acción poética*, a performative thought-action both waiting to happen and feeling as if it already has happened—a form of thought-action waiting to be taken up by us readers to be performatively reinvented in the reading and then actualized in life. As the great Chicano poet Alfred Arteaga once said: “A poem is set into motion by my act, in all the particulars of my social and personal contexts, and it is set off outward to sing, to dance, to break bones, in the world beyond me” (5). Arteaga, in other words, in a Pazian way that conceives of the poem as a trans-historical potentiality, poetically re-articulates for us the very notions of *forma, lo performativo, acción poética* that we have sought to elaborate throughout this dissertation. And much like Arteaga's poem, so too does this dissertation, set into motion by my act, set off outward into the world beyond me.

Bibliography

- #XMAP *In Plain Sight*. In Plain Sight, <https://xmap.us>. Accessed 21 Apr. 2021.
- Addison, Joseph. "On Taste." *Essays Moral and Humorous: Also Essays on Imagination and Taste*. W. and R. Chambers, 1850, pp. 111-112.
- . "On the Imagination." *Essays Moral and Humorous: Also Essays on Imagination and Taste*. W. and R. Chambers, 1850, pp. 112-122.
- Adorno, Theodor W. *Aesthetic Theory*. Translated by Robert Hullot-Kentor, University of Minnesota Press, 1997.
- . "Commitment." *Notes to Literature*, edited by Rolf Tiedemann, translated by Shierry Weber Nicholson, vol. 2, Columbia University Press, 1992, pp. 75-94.
- . "On Lyric Poetry and Society." *Notes to Literature*, edited by Rolf Tiedemann, translated by Shierry Weber Nicholson, vol. 1, Columbia University Press, 1991, pp. 37-54.
- "Alibi, n., adv., and adj." *OED Online*, Oxford University Press, March 2021, oed.com/view/Entry/4978. Accessed 6 May 2021.
- Akenside, Mark. *The Poetical Works of Mark Akenside*. Edited by Robin Dix, Fairleigh Dickinson University Press, 1996.
- "Arshia Fatima Haq." #XMAP *In Plain Sight*. In Plain Sight, <https://xmap.us/artists/arshia-fatima-haq/>. Accessed 21 Apr. 2021.
- Arteaga, Alfred. *Chicano Poetics: Heterotexts and Hybridities*. Cambridge University Press, 1997.
- ASCO Interviews*. Directed by Alvaro Parra, Nottingham Contemporary, 2013.
- Baudelaire, Charles. "Une charogne." *The Flowers of Evil and Paris Spleen*, translated by William H. Crosby, BOA Editions, Ltd., 1991, pp. 64-68.
- Benavídez, Max. *Gronk*. Los Angeles, UCLA Chicano Studies Research Center Press, 2007.
- . "The Post-Chicano Aesthetic: Making Sense of the World." In *Post-Chicano Generation in Art: "Breaking Boundaries."* Exh. cat., Phoenix, AZ: MARS Artspace, 1990.
- Benjamin, Walter. "On Some Motifs in Baudelaire." *Illuminations*, edited by Hannah Arendt, translated by Harry Zohn, Schocken Books, 1969, pp. 155-200.
- . "Theses on the Philosophy of History." *Illuminations*, edited by Hannah Arendt, translated by Harry Zohn, Schocken Books, 1969, pp. 253-264.
- Brooks, J. "Our Phillis, Ourselves." *American Literature*, vol. 82, no. 1, Jan. 2010, pp. 1-28.
- Bürger, Peter. *Theory of the Avant-Garde*. Translated by Michael Shaw, University of Minnesota Press, 1984.
- Calinescu, Matei. *Five Faces of Modernity: Modernism, Avant-Garde, Decadence, Kitsch, Postmodernism*. Duke University Press, 1987.
- Cardenal, Ernesto. "De estos cines, Claudia." *Poesía completa*. Tomo I., Universidad Veracruzana, 2007, pp. 15-16.
- . "¿No has leído, amor mío." *Poesía completa*. Tomo I., Universidad Veracruzana, 2007, pp. 26-27.
- . "Nuestros poemas no se pueden publicar." *Poesía completa*. Tomo I., Universidad Veracruzana, 2007, pp. 25.
- . "Otros podrán ganar mucho dinero." *Poesía completa*. Tomo I., Universidad Veracruzana, 2007, pp. 16.
- . "Somoza desvila la estatua de Somoza en el estadio Somoza." *Poesía completa*. Tomo I., Universidad Veracruzana, 2007, pp. 23-24.
- . "Tal vez nos casemos." *Poesía completa* Tomo I., Universidad Veracruzana, 2007, pp. 25.

- . “Te doy, Claudia.” *Poesía completa*. Tomo I., Universidad Veracruzana, 2007, pp. 15.
- . “Tú no mereces.” *Poesía completa*. Tomo I., Universidad Veracruzana, 2007, pp. 19.
- “Carecen + Ndlon + Clinica Romero + El Rescate + Mayavision + Carpi + Salef.” #XMAP In Plain Sight. In Plain Sight, <https://xmap.us/artists/carecen-ndlon-clinica-romero-el-rescate-mayavision-carpi-salef/>. Accessed 21 Apr. 2021.
- Carretta, Vincent. “Introduction.” [*Phillis Wheatley*:] *Complete Writings*, edited by Vincent Carretta, Penguin, 2001, pp. xiii-xxxvii.
- . *Phillis Wheatley: Biography of a Genius in Bondage*. University of Georgia Press, 2011.
- Casanova, Pascale. *The World Republic of Letters*. Translated by M. B. DeBevoise, Harvard University Press, 2007.
- Celan, Paul. “In the great listening you lie.” *Poems of Paul Celan*, translated by Michael Hamburger, Persea Books, 2002.
- Clayton, Michelle. *Poetry in Pieces: Cesar Vallejo and Lyric Modernity*. University of California Press, 2011.
- Culler, Jonathan. “Apostrophe.” *Diacritics*, vol. 7, no. 4, Winter 1977, pp. 59–69.
- Dickinson, Emily. “They shut me up in Prose.” *The Complete Poems of Emily Dickinson*, edited by Thomas H. Johnson, Little, Brown and Company, 1961, pp. 302
- “Dread Scott.” #XMAP In Plain Sight. In Plain Sight, <https://xmap.us/artists/dread-scott/>. Accessed 21 Apr. 2021.
- Engell, James. *The Creative Imagination: Enlightenment to Romanticism*. Harvard University Press, 1981.
- Espada, Martín. “I’ve Known Rivers: Speaking of the Unspoken Places in Poetry.” *Southward*, online issue 17, Dec 2010, Southward Editions, https://www.munsterlit.ie/Southward/Issues/17/Reviews/espada_essay.html. Accessed 21 Apr. 2021.
- “Federal Officials Close Investigation into the Death of Sergio Hernandez-Guereca.” *The United States Department of Justice*, Office of Public Affairs, 27 Apr. 2012, <https://www.justice.gov/opa/pr/federal-officials-close-investigation-death-sergio-hernandez-guereca>. Accessed 21 Apr. 2021.
- Fiol-Matta, Licia. “Visions of Gender: Sor Juana and the First Dream.” *Nepantla: Views from South*, vol. 4, no. 2, July 2003, pp. 345–74.
- Fowler, Alastair. *Kinds of Literature: An Introduction to the Theory of Genres and Modes*. Harvard University Press, 1982.
- Gamboa, Harry, Jr. “100 Alibis.” Gamboa (Harry, Jr.) papers, Series 1: Original Manuscripts by Gamboa, Stanford U Special Collections Library, M0753, box 1, folders 3-4.
- . “In the City of Angels, Chameleons, and Phantoms: Asco, a Case Study of Chicano Art in Urban Tones (or, Asco Was a Four-Member Word) (1991).” *Urban Exile: Collected Writings of Harry Gamboa Jr.*, edited by Chon A. Noriega, University of Minnesota Press, pp. 71-87.
- . “No Alibi.” *Urban Exile: Collected Writings of Harry Gamboa Jr.*, edited by Chon A. Noriega, University of Minnesota Press, 1998, pp. 458-461.
- . “Serpents in the City of Angels: After Twenty Years of Political Activism, Has L.A. Chicano Art Been Defanged?” *Urban Exile: Collected Writings of Harry Gamboa Jr.*, edited by Chon A. Noriega, University of Minnesota Press, 1998, pp. 64-70.
- Gamboa, Harry, Jr. and Gronk. “Interview: Gronk and Gamboa.” Fall 1976, *Chismearte 1. Asco: Elite of the Obscure: a Retrospective, 1972-1987*, edited by C. Odine Chavoya and Rita

- Gonzalez, Williams College Museum of Art and Los Angeles County Museum of Art, 2011, pp. 392-395
- Gates Jr., Henry Louis. *The Trials of Phillis Wheatley*. Basic Civitas Books, 2003.
- Greene, Logan Dale. *The Discourse of Hysteria: The Topoi of Humility, Physicality, and Authority in Women's Rhetoric*. The Edwin Mellen Press, 2009.
- . *The Discourse of Hysteria: The Topoi of Humility, Physicality, and Authority in Women's Rhetoric*. University of New Mexico Press, 2004.
- Hughes, Langston. "I, Too." *The Collected Poems of Langston Hughes*, edited by Arnold Rampersad and David Roessel, Vintage Classics, 1994, pp. 46.
- . "I've Known Rivers." *The Collected Poems of Langston Hughes*, edited by Arnold Rampersad and David Roessel, Vintage Classics, 1994, pp. 23.
- Hutchinson, George B. "Langston Hughes and the 'Other' Whitman." *The Continuing Presence of Walt Whitman*, edited by Robert K. Martin, University of Iowa Press, 1992, pp. 16–27.
- Inés de la Cruz, Sor Juana. *El Precipicio de Faetón: Edición y Comento de "Primer Sueño" de Sor Juana Inés de La Cruz*. Edited by Alberto Pérez Amador Adam; Universidad Autónoma Metropolitana, 2015.
- "Javier Zamora." #XMAP In Plain Sight. In Plain Sight, <https://xmap.us/artists/javier-zamora/>. Accessed 21 Apr. 2021.
- Kant, Immanuel. *Critique of Judgment*. Translated by J. H. Bernard, New York, Hafner Publishing Company, 1951.
- "Karen L. Ishizuka, Lead Artist for Tsuru for Solidarity." #XMAP In Plain Sight. In Plain Sight, <https://xmap.us/artists/karen-ishizuka-lead-artist-for-tsuru-for-solidarity/>. Accessed 21 Apr. 2021.
- Kaufman, Robert. "Lyric Commodity Critique, Benjamin Adorno Marx, Baudelaire Baudelaire Baudelaire." *PMLA*, vol. 123, no. 1, 2008, pp. 207–15.
- . "Nothing If Not Determined: Marxian Criticism in History." *A Companion to Literary Theory*, edited by David H. Richter, Wiley & Sons Ltd., 2018, pp. 205-217.
- "Ken Gonzales-Day." #XMAP In Plain Sight. In Plain Sight, <https://xmap.us/artists/ken-gonzales-day/>. Accessed 21 Apr. 2021.
- Lerner, Jesse. "Asco's Super-8 Cinema and the Specter of Muralism." *Alternative Projections: Experimental Film in Los Angeles*, edited by David E. James and Adam Hyman, Indiana University Press, 2015, pp. 203-213.
- Masiello, Francine. *The Senses of Democracy: Perception, Politics, and Culture in Latin America*. 1st ed., University of Texas Press, 2018.
- Marx, Karl. "Economic and Philosophic Manuscripts of 1844." *The Marx-Engels Reader*, edited by Robert C. Tucker, translated by Martin Milligan, 2nd ed., W. W. Norton & Company, 1972, pp. 66-125.
- McKenna, Susan M. "Rational Thought and Female Poetics in Sor Juana's 'Primer Sueño': The Circumvention of Two Traditions." *Hispanic Review*, vol. 68, no. 1, 2000, pp. 37–52.
- Merrim, Stephanie. "Toward a Feminist Reading of Sor Juana Inés de la Cruz: Past, Present, and Future Directions in Sor Juana Criticism." *Feminist Perspectives on Sor Juana Inés de La Cruz*, edited by Stephanie Merrim, Wayne State University, 1991, pp. 11-37.
- Miller, Frank Justus, translator. Ovid: *Metamorphoses*. Harvard University Press, 1951.
- Mur Murs*. Directed by Agnès Varda, Ciné-Tamaris, 1980.
- Neruda, Pablo. *Alturas de Macchu Picchu / The Heights of Macchu Picchu*. Translated by Nathaniel Tarn, 1st American ed., Farrar, Straus & Giroux, 1966.

- Neustadt, Robert. *CADA DÍA: la creación de un arte social*. Santiago de Chile, Editorial Cuarto Propio, 2001.
- Noriega, Chon A. "No Introduction." *Urban Exile: Collected Writings of Harry Gamboa Jr.* University of Minnesota Press, 1998, pp. 1-22.
- "Patrisse Cullors." #XMAP In Plain Sight. In Plain Sight, <https://xmap.us/artists/patrisse-cullors/>. Accessed 21 Apr. 2021.
- Paul, Carlos. "Cumple Acción poética 20 años y crece de manera exponencial." *La Jornada*, 26 May 2016, p. 3.
- Paz, Octavio. *Children of the Mire: Modern Poetry from Romanticism to the Avant-Garde*. Translated by Rachel Phillips, Harvard University Press, 1974.
- . "Marcel Duchamp, or The Castle of Purity." *Marcel Duchamp: Appearance Stripped Bare*, translated by Rachel Phillips and Donald Gardner, Arcade Publishing, 1990, pp. 1-90.
- . *Sor Juana or, The Traps of Faith*. Translated by Margaret Sayers Pedie, Harvard University Press, 1988.
- Pérez, Emmy. "Dear Celan." *With the River on Our Face*, University of Arizona Press, 2016, pp. 78.
- . "Healing and the Poetic Line." *A Broken Thing: Poets on the Line*, edited by Emily Rosko and Anton Vander Zee. University of Iowa Press, 2011.
- . "Not one more refugee death." *With the River on Our Face*, University of Arizona Press, 2016, pp. 88-90.
- . "Río Grande~Bravo." *With the River on Our Face*, University of Arizona Press, 2016, pp. 39-51.
- . "Wildlife Refuge Poetics." *With the River on Face*, University of Arizona Press, 2016, pp. 74-75.
- "Poetry Against the Border Wall: Aracelis Girmay and Emmy Pérez in Conversation." *Literary Hub*, 26 July, 2017. <https://lithub.com/poetry-against-the-border-wall/>. Accessed 21 Apr. 2021.
- "Press Release." #XMAP In Plain Sight, <https://xmap.us/assets/cms/xmap-in-plain-sight-press-release.pdf>. Press release, PDF download.
- Rodríguez López, Ana. "Veinte años de Acción Poética: Un diálogo con Armando Alanís Pulido." *Wall Street International Magazine*, 9 Dec. 2016, <https://wsimag.com/es/arte/22414-veinte-anos-de-accion-poetica>. Accessed 14 May 2021.
- Ruiz Vilaplana, Antonio. *Doy fé...: un año de actuación en la España nacionalista*. Ediciones Españolas, 1937.
- Sabat-Rivers, Georgina. "A Feminist Reading of Sor Juana's *Dream*." *Feminist Perspectives on Sor Juana Inés de La Cruz*, edited by Stephanie Merrim, Wayne State University Press, 1991, pp. 142-161.
- Shelley, Percy Bysshe. "A Defence of Poetry." *English Romantic Writers*, edited by David Perkins, 2nd ed., Thomson/Wadsworth, 1995, pp. 1131-1146.
- Shields, John C. *Phillis Wheatley and the Romantics*. University of Tennessee Press, 2010.
- Slauter, Eric Thomas. "Neoclassical Culture in a Society with Slaves: Race and Rights in the Age of Wheatley." *Early American Studies: An Interdisciplinary Journal*, vol. 2, no. 1, 2004, pp. 81-122.
- Small, Zachary. "Protesting U.S. Immigration Policies, Artists Aim for the Sky." *The New York Times*, 3 July, 2020. <https://www.nytimes.com/2020/07/03/arts/design/july-4-skytyping-skywriting-immigration.html>. Accessed 21 April 2021.

- Smith, Barbara Hernstein. *Poetic Closure: A Study of How Poems End*. University of Chicago Press, 1982.
- Stewart, Susan. *Poetry and the Fate of the Senses*. University of Chicago Press, 2002.
- Vallejo, César. *Aphorisms*. Translated by Stephen Kessler, Green Integer, 2002.
- . *Autopsy on Surrealism*. Translated by Richard Schaaf, Curbstone Press, 1982.
- . “La cena miserable.” *The Complete Poetry: César Vallejo: a Bilingual Edition*, edited and translated by Clayton Eshleman, University of California Press, 2007, pp. 122.
- . “Solía escribir...” *The Complete Poetry: César Vallejo: a Bilingual Edition*, edited and translated by Clayton Eshleman, University of California Press, 2007, pp. 586.
- . “Voy a hablar de la esperanza.” *The Complete Poetry: César Vallejo: a Bilingual Edition*, edited and translated by Clayton Eshleman, University of California Press, 2007, pp. 343.
- Waters, William. “Apostrophe.” *The Princeton Encyclopedia of Poetry and Poetics*, 4th ed., 2012.
- Waters, William. *Poetry’s Touch: On Lyric Address*. Cornell University Press, 2018.
- Wheatley, Phillis. *Complete Writings*, edited by Vincent Carretta, Penguin, 2001.
- Wright, Charles. “Improvisations on Form and Measure.” *Halflife: Improvisations and Interviews, 1977-87*, University of Michigan Press, 1989.
- Zurita, Raúl. “Introductory Note.” *Anteparadise: A Bilingual Edition*, translated by Jack Schmitt, University of California Press, 1986.
- . “The New Life.” *Anteparadise: A Bilingual Edition*, translated by Jack Schmitt, University of California Press, 1986, pp. 1.